

Determination: Traveling the Long Road

The skillful quality of determination is characterized by the effort we make to practice the dharma over a period of time. Developing determination, we make ongoing, persistent effort. In breath meditation. During retreats. During the course of our days as we maintain mindfulness of the breath. During the long journey, the span of days, weeks, months, years, as we seek to abandon the unskillful and cultivate the skillful. We keep going. We stay with it.

Determination is an elemental skillful quality because dharma practice, by its nature, requires that we make effort over the long haul. Dharma practice is a gradual undertaking. It's a process that unfolds, usually pretty slowly, over time. As one teacher puts it, as we follow the path we experience a "gradual awakening." The Buddha compared the way the path unfolds, the way we evolve, the way our skills develop, to the way the ocean floor slopes: gradually, gradually, gradually.

Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch, in the same way this Doctrine and Discipline has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with a penetration to gnosis only after a long stretch. (Ud 5.5)

Generally speaking, we make slow progress. This is important to understand and to accept. If we expect to get on a fast track, we'll be setting ourselves up for struggle; we'll get bogged down by disappointment and frustration and self-doubt, and we'll inhibit our capacity to move forward. In the end, we won't get very far at all. The fact is, it's going to take a while to change the habits of a lifetime. Most of us are lugging heavy parcels of karma, all the consequences of our past actions, our tendencies for acting unskillfully, our deeply grooved patterns. It's going to take time. It's going to take time to develop skillfulness, train the mind, end suffering, find true happiness. It's a long road. Understanding this, we develop determination.

Cultivating the skillful quality of determination, we keep going, day after day, week after week, year after year. Realizing it's going to take an ongoing effort, we keep making effort. We keep at it. Skillfully. Joyfully.

It's a long road. And there will be times, undoubtedly many times, when you'll veer off the road. You'll veer off while practicing breath meditation. You'll lose purchase on the breath, veer off into daydreams, fantasies, planning, reminiscing. You'll be in your apartment in Brooklyn, meditating, but in your mind you'll be lying on a beach somewhere in Spain. In the middle of July, you'll be sitting on your meditation cushion, deeply involved in planning for Thanksgiving dinner.

As the months and years go on, there will be times when you'll lose the path. There will be times when you'll be detoured by the affairs of your householder's life, your work, your relationships. There will be times when you'll be sidetracked by your desire to follow the ways of the world, to seek after sense pleasure, gain, status, praise. There will be times when you'll stagger down the painful roads of depression, despair, grief, stress, anger, resentment, desire. There will be times when you'll find it difficult to put effort into developing skillful qualities

(there will be times, almost certainly, when you'll put a concerted effort into developing unskillful qualities). There will be times when you'll have a hard time getting to the proverbial cushion, when you'll struggle to maintain your meditation practice. There will be times when you'll lose interest in the path. There will be times when you'll lose faith.

All of this is normal.

The fact is, everybody veers. The dharma student who has developed determination isn't somebody who doesn't veer; rather, he's someone who veers but then gets back on the path. This is how we cultivate determination: we veer but then, realizing we've veered, we make an effort to get back to the path.

We cultivate determination by making the effort, again and again, to regain the path.

As we practice breath meditation, we develop the quality of determination. The mind wanders incessantly. But we keep coming back, returning our attention to the breath. Again and again, we return.

In practicing the dharma over the course of weeks, months, years, we do the same thing. We keep coming back. When we veer off, we return to the path. We keep returning.

We cultivate determination by being mindful, by paying attention to what we're doing, where we're going. We notice when we've veered off. We're truthful about it.

Acknowledging that we've turned down a side road, we might take some time to reflect, to ask some simple but pointed questions.

What am I doing?

Where am I?

Where am I going?

Is this the most useful course to be taking?

Am I acting out of love and compassion for myself in following this road?

What's my most heartfelt wish for myself?

How can I most skillfully, most happily, take care of myself?

What's my intention for practicing the dharma?

The questions guide us. When we veer off the path, they re-orient us. They help us recognize, or re-recognize, where we want to go and why we want to go there. We ask the questions, but don't answer. Instead, we let the questions resound, move in gentle waves through the body. We foster embodied knowing, felt wisdom. When we live in the questions, as the poet Rilke advises, we begin to know, in the heart, what we've got to do.

After veering off the Buddha's road, we should reflect on our purpose, our intention for practicing the dharma. This is a crucial step in regaining the road. We should remind ourselves of why we practice. We should remind ourselves that we follow the path out of compassion for ourselves.

The bottom line is we make an effort to follow the path, we stay with it, day after day, year after year, because we suffer, because we want to come to the end of suffering. As we strive to regain the road we should remember that there's suffering in our lives and that we have a wish to find freedom from it. We should, in returning, connect to the heart, to the quality of compassion. Compassion for ourselves. Compassion is the heart's response to suffering. Compassion drives us, motivates us to practice the dharma in an effort to end our suffering. Compassion informs our journey toward true happiness. It empowers our intention.

Re-finding the path, you should establish clear intention: to practice the dharma out of compassion for yourself. If you don't develop skillful intention, you'll return, in all likelihood, influenced by an unskillful mental factor. You'll return, perhaps begrudgingly, like a kid who's

been apprehended by the truant officer. You'll come back weighed down by self-judgment. You'll be stricken with regret or guilt or shame. You'll be afflicted with self-doubt.

After you've veered off the path, you might judge yourself. Self-judgment, it's critical to remember, is a major obstacle to moving forward in dharma practice. If you allow yourself to wander into self-judgment, it will be more difficult for you to get back on the path. As you make a determined effort to return to the path, you have to watch out for self-judgment. You have to make it a point to put aside thinking imbued with this kind of unskillful judgment. You have to replace self-judgment with compassion for yourself. In light of the fact that you've drifted from the road, you should have compassion for yourself. Compassion is the appropriate response.

As we travel the long road we'll find ourselves again and again confronted with the choice of following the Buddha's path or the world's path, the path of sense pleasure, gain, status, praise. We might face that choice every morning, as we consider whether to meditate or switch on the TV and watch the news. As we continue forward in dharma practice we acquire a deeper understanding of our choices. We begin to understand that the choice of which road to follow isn't much of a choice at all.

Gradually, we come to see with greater clarity that the Buddha's path offers the more beneficial option. Gradually, we veer less. We gain conviction in the path.

The path is often difficult, but as we move forward we realize that we don't have much choice but to follow it. What else are we going to do? Are we going to turn around and head back to where we were? Are we going to go back to the sort of life we had before? Gradually, we realize that it's a no-brainer. We know what we've got to do. And we do it. We keep at it. We keep going.

From The Skill of Living

Copyright © 2013 Peter Doobinin