

Vows

October, 2002 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

When you read Ajaan Lee's autobiography, you notice the number of times he made vows: vowing to sit all night, vowing to meditate so many hours, vowing to do this, vowing to do without that. The word for vow in Thai is "*adhithaan*," which is also translated as determination. You make up your mind, you're determined to do something. Making determinations like this gives strength to your practice. Otherwise you just sit and meditate for a while and when the going gets tough — "Well, that's enough for today." You don't push your limits. As a result you don't get a taste of what lies outside the limits of your expectations.

As the Buddha said, the purpose of the practice is to see what you've never seen before, realize what you've never realized before, and many of these things you've never seen or realized lie outside the limits of your imagination. In order to see them, you have to learn how to push yourself more than you might imagine. But this has to be done with skill. That's why the Buddha said that a good determination involves four qualities: discernment, truth, relinquishment, and peace.

Discernment here means two things. To begin with, it means setting wise goals: learning how to recognize a useful vow, one that aims at something really worthwhile, one in which you're pushing yourself not too little, not too much — something that's outside your ordinary expectations but not so far that you come crashing down. Second, it means clearly understanding what you have to do to achieve your goals — what causes will lead to the results you want.

It's important to have specific goals in your practice: That's something many people miss. They think that having a goal means you're constantly depressed about not reaching your goal. Well, that's not how to relate to goals in a skillful way. You set a goal that's realistic but challenging, you figure out what causes, what actions, will get you there, and then you focus on those actions.

You can't practice without a goal, for otherwise everything would fall apart and you yourself would start wondering why you're here, why you're meditating, and why you aren't out sitting on the beach. The trick lies in learning how to relate to your goal in an intelligent way. That's part of the

discernment that forms this factor in determination.

Sometimes we're taught not to have goals in the meditation. Usually that's on meditation retreats. You're in a high-pressure environment, you have a limited amount of time, and so you push, push, push. Without any discernment you can do yourself harm. So in a short-term setting like that it's wise not to focus on any particular results you want to brag about after the retreat: "I spent two weeks at that monastery, or one week at that meditation center, and I came back with the first jhana." Like a trophy. You usually end up — if you get something that you can call jhana when you go home — with an unripe mango. You've got a green mango on your tree and someone comes along and says, "A ripe mango is yellow and it's soft." So you squeeze your mango to make it soft and paint it yellow to make it look ripe, but it's not a ripe mango. It's a ruined mango.

A lot of ready-mix jhana is just like that. You read that it's supposed to be like this, composed of this factor and that, and so you add a little of this and a pinch of that, and presto! — there you are: jhana. When you set time limits like that for yourself, you end up with who-knows-what.

Now, when you're not on a retreat, when you're looking at meditation as a daily part of your life, you need to have overall, long-range goals. Otherwise your practice loses focus, and the "practice of daily life" becomes a fancy word for plain old daily life. You need to keep reminding yourself about why you're meditating, about what the meditation really means in the long-term arc of your future. You want true happiness, dependable happiness, the sort of happiness that will stay with you through thick and thin.

Then, once you're clear about your goal, you have to use discernment both to figure out how to get there and to psyche yourself up for staying on the path you've picked. What this often means is turning your attention from the goal and focusing it on the steps that will take you there. You focus more on what you *do* than on the results you hope to get from what you do. For example, you can't sit here and say, "I'm going to get the first jhana," or the second jhana, or whatever, but you *can* say, "I'm going to stay here and be mindful of every breath for the next whole hour. Each and every one." That's focusing on the causes. Whether or not you reach a particular level of jhana lies in the area of results. Without the causes, the results won't come, so discernment focuses on the causes and lets the causes take care of the results.

The next element — once you've decided on your goal and how you're going to approach it — is to stay true to that determination. In other words, you

really stick to your vow and don't suddenly change your mind in mid-course. The only good reason for changing your mind would be if you find that you're doing serious damage to yourself. Then you might want to reconsider the situation. Otherwise, if it's just an inconvenience, or a hardship, you stick with your determination no matter what.

This is your way of learning how to trust yourself. Truthfulness, "*sacca*," is not simply a matter of speaking the truth. It also means sticking truly to what you've made up your mind to do. If you don't stick truly to that, you've become a traitor to yourself. And when you can't rely on yourself, who *will* you rely on? You go hoping for someone else to rely on, but they can't do the work you have to do. So you learn to be true to your determination.

The third element in a good determination is relinquishment. In other words, while you're being true to your determination there are things you're going to have to give up. There's a verse in the Dhammapada: "If you see a greater happiness that comes from forsaking a lesser happiness, be willing to forsake the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one."

A famous Pali scholar once insisted that that couldn't possibly be the meaning of the verse because it was so obvious. But if you look at people's lives, it's not obvious at all. Many times they give up long-term happiness for a quick fix. If you take the easy way out for a day, then you take the easy way out for the next day and the next, and your long-term goal just never materializes. The momentum never builds up.

The things that really pull you off the path are those that look good and promise a quicker gratification. But once you've got the results of the quick fix, many times you don't get any gratification at all — it was all an illusion. Or you get a little bit, but it wasn't worth it.

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha presents those strong images for the drawbacks of sensual pleasure. A drop of honey on a knife blade. A burning torch you're holding in front of you, upwind, as you're running. A little piece of flesh that a small bird has in its claws, while other, bigger birds are coming to steal it, and they're willing to kill the smaller bird if they don't get it.

These are pretty harsh images but they're harsh on purpose, for when the mind gets fixated on a sensual pleasure it doesn't want to listen to anybody. It's not going to be swayed by soft, gentle images. You have to keep reminding yourself in strong terms that if you really look at sensual pleasures, there's nothing much: no true gratification and a lot of true danger.

I once had a dream that depicted the sensual realm as nothing more than two types of people: dreamers and criminals. Some people sit around dreaming about what they'd like, while others decide that they won't take no for an answer, they're going to get what they want even if they have to get violent. It's a very unpleasant world to be in. That's the way the sensual realm really is, but we tend to forget because we're so wrapped up in our dreams, wrapped up in our desires, that we don't look at the reality of what we do in the process of our dreaming, what we do in the process of trying to get what we want.

So learn to reflect often on these things. This is one of the reasons why your determination should start out with discernment. You have to use discernment all the way along the path to remind yourself that the lesser pleasures really are lesser. They're not worth the effort and especially not worth what you're giving up in terms of a larger pleasure, a larger happiness, a larger wellbeing.

The fourth and final element in a proper determination is peace. You try to keep the mind calm in the course of working toward your goal. Don't get worked up over the difficulties, don't get worked up over the things you're having to give up, don't get worked up about how much time you've already spent on the path and how much remains to be covered. Focus calmly on the step right ahead of you and try to keep an even temper throughout.

The second meaning of peace here is that once you've reached the goal there should be a steady element of calm. If you've reached the goal and the mind is still all stirred up, it's a sign that you chose the wrong goal. There should be a deeper pacification, a deeper calmness that sets in once you've attained the goal.

As the Buddha said, it's normal that while you're working toward a goal there's going to be certain amount of dissatisfaction. You want something but you're not there yet. Some people advise that, in order to get rid of that dissatisfaction, you should just lower your standards. Don't have goals. But that's really selling yourself short, and it's a very unskillful way of getting rid of that sense of dissatisfaction. The skillful way is to do what has to be done, step by step, to arrive at the goal, to get what you want. Then the dissatisfaction is replaced, if it's a proper goal, by peace.

So, as you look at the goals in your meditation, in your life, try to keep these four qualities in mind: discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, and peace. Be discerning in your choice of a goal and the path that you're going to follow to get there. Once you've made up your mind that it's a wise goal, be

true to your determination; don't be a traitor to it. Be willing to give up the lesser pleasures that get in the way, and try to keep your mind on an even keel as you work toward your goal. That way you find that you stretch yourself — not to the point of breaking, but in ways that allow you to grow.

As you learn to push yourself a little bit more, a little bit more, a little bit more than you thought possible, you find that each little bit becomes quite a lot. It all adds up, and you find that the practice can take you to places that you otherwise wouldn't have imagined.