Resolve:
Adhitthāna Pāramī

The eighth of the ten *pāramī* is resolve — *adhitthāna*. The prefix '*adhi-*' means further, higher or fuller, and '*-thāna*' is a foundation, a standing place. Thus the origin of the word suggests the most complete establishment, and it has come to mean resolve or determination. When it's conjoined with other perfections, *adhitthāna* serves to underline and strengthen them. So one determines to be generous; to refrain from doing harm; to let go of what needs to be relinquished; to discern and investigate; and to bring energy, patience and truthfulness to one's practice.

This *pāramī* is then a foundation: intentions are pretty weak if one has no resolve to carry them out. You have to make the resolve to practise if you are to follow any path at all. But that resolve requires the wisdom to sense that a course of action is worth following through, and to moderate and supervise one's resolve. So as with all the other perfections, wisdom is involved: the wisdom that is in touch with cause and effect, and can get a handle on what and what not to follow. It's good to review: is what I'm involved with for my welfare and for the welfare of others, and if not, why do it? Any such enquiry which is sustained for ten minutes, or a day or a year, goes against the passivity, indifference or blind willpower that consigns us to the floods.

The Need for Commitment

Resolve isn't a small matter: if you're looking for the best results or the deepest changes, you have to do that with the

understanding that this will most likely mean working at it and overcoming some resistance. And it will require the faith that you can at least try. Otherwise you aren't going to grow.

Naturally, you can develop stronger degrees and a further extent of resolve in accordance with a wise assessment of what is needed or useful for you. For example, when you begin to meditate, you might start with ten minutes and check out how that was. If you get interested you go on to fifteen minutes, or half an hour or more. When you read a book, you don't start off thinking that you will read all day and all night, but rather you pick up a book and then look into it for ten minutes; then if it's worthwhile, you continue. So wise resolve supports strengthening according to feedback, interest and capacity. It's not blind doggedness.

It does, however, mean that you put aside the alternatives and stay with your central aim. The end result is a stronger and more skilful mind, but it means getting over the first hurdle: the idea that lasting personal development can occur quickly with little effort. Frequently we find ourselves presented with many options, so it's more likely that we'll get exactly what we want. It sounds good, but the multi-option scenario can lead to option paralysis: you don't give due time and effort to change in yourself, and you get the ongoing sneaky feeling that if you'd only done that, or bought *that* one, it would have been better. So resolve comes late on the list of perfections, because to make a wise resolution requires a mind that has sampled, practised and received the benefits of generosity, virtue and the rest. Then you know what a useful commitment, and its results, feel like.

Without this ongoing reflection you may find yourself with commitments that you never clearly looked into and resolved upon. Sometimes relationships can be like that. Or it may be that you have the commitment to go to a job every day, but you don't feel that interested in it. To you it is just a way of making some money and getting by. And yet in this society there can be very high expectations of commitment to your job: you're expected to believe in it. You must subscribe to the notion that selling insurance is what you want to do for your life, or that inspecting

machinery is your role on the planet. Otherwise you're not perceived as motivated, and you don't get a job. However, if commitment is to something that does not catalyse personal development, or if commitment is expected with regards to aims and concerns that we don't find worthy, we can't find the willingness of heart (*chanda*) to make the effort. Instead we want to break out of the drudgery or the insane pressures; we want to kick back and be free.

Therefore, when we first come to Buddhist practice, we may feel it's about freedom from commitment: that liberation is about openness, spontaneity and being with the moment. The idea of being boundless and free is attractive, and we can assume this comes around through not having any commitments or aims. People may think, 'Don't tie me down, I'm a Buddhist. I want to be completely open. I want to feel free to follow my intuitions.' We sometimes get people coming to the monastery and remonstrating with us, saying that our Buddhism isn't really up to much because we have these petty rules and restrictions, rather than being free, boundless and cosmic. We're stuck in our narrow little Theravada ways, such as: 'Please don't point your feet at a Buddha-image; it's disrespectful.' It sounds like school again. This is why our times are sometimes called the Dhamma-ending age, because it's hard to get some of these teachings across in a society that has turned the precious qualities of motivation, respect and resolve towards material ends and towards beliefs that don't go that far. Then it's quite understandable to feel: 'I've had enough of being controlled and driven. Freedom is the opposite from obeying rules and making effort.' Until you wake up one day with a hangover and the realization that: 'This way of life is going nowhere. I'd better shape up and get my act together.'

This was the case for me. When I was still at school, you always had to wear a uniform, a school tie and a school cap. And if you were walking down the street and saw a teacher, you always had to take your cap off to the teacher. Most of us would try to find any way possible to rebel and wriggle out of it, like wearing your tie crooked, or not doing your jacket up, or wearing your cap

backwards. There seemed to be no wisdom or benefit in keeping this rule. So by the time I got away from school, it seemed to me that all rules that didn't make sense to me were superfluous, and I wanted to break out of their confines. I didn't want to be contained by something that seemed meaningless.

Many people at that time were looking for freedom through living spontaneously, taking drugs and travelling around. Freedom was definitely not associated with adhering to the Five Precepts. But even then I was still very interested in what I felt spirituality to be — and that certainly wasn't adherence to meaningless rules. I'd read spiritual classics like the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and so on. I remember reading several books while I was living on a beach in Morocco — where I'd never even heard of, let alone kept, a precept! I was reading about the Tao: 'The way that can be named is not the True Way.' That sounded great. And then there was Krishnamurti, who seemed to say that any kind of rule or convention is not really where it's at. I thought, 'That's it, freedom from tyranny!'

But I'd still be left with the question: 'But what am I supposed to *do*?' In the book it might say something like: 'Be here now, and let go of the idea that you need to be something.' I thought, 'OK, I'm here — so now what do I *do*?' The advice was good in a way, but it didn't provide a path, and I didn't have enough *pāramī* to be able to dwell on a plane of serene, intuitive abiding. I was still swamped with urges, drives, greed, fear and delusion. I didn't have the clarity of intent and insight to be able to use these realized statements. They just stayed in my head, and I couldn't live them out.

Developing Resolve

So with only an unformed sense of inner direction, yet at least realizing there had to be one, I started travelling and ended up in Thailand. By chance I stumbled across a meditation class and ended up staying in a monastery as a guest to develop that practice. In the monastery some things were very clear. They said,

'This is what you do. You sit there and you watch your breath. And while you are here, no drink, no sex, no drugs, no music; and, you can't eat after noon. Keep noting the breath, and when your mind wanders, bring it back to the breath.' Naturally the resistances arose. I'd think, 'I don't know whether I can handle all this. I don't know whether I can make it. This is tough, all this restraint.' But I could feel restlessness, doubt and confusion and recognize that if I followed those, then I'd be back going round in circles the way I'd been for much of the past decade. Also I could recognize that for a moment at a time, I could follow those instructions. And with that, I was inching out of the flood which I'd been floundering in. My mind would still say, 'I can't do this,' but, a moment at a time, I was doing it! No one asked me to do this for the rest of my life. Just to do it for one day; and if I decided to leave, that was OK. So I'd think, 'I'll do it for a little while.' Then the next day, 'I wonder if I'll get through another day of this? Well, that's the morning gone, then the afternoon, that's another day gone. Two days, pretty good! Then I've managed a week, that's good! Fifteen minutes sitting meditation, fifteen minutes walking — nearly there. Nibbāna will surely be here soon.'

It is simply a case of taking the practice a little bit at a time, with a 'why not' attitude rather than a compulsive one. The approach was: 'Look, you can do this. You can stay for as long as you wish, and just build it up.' That approach was kindly and gave a tangible path to gradually haul out of the floods, a moment at a time, as best one could — and then to value the fact that one had done this much. That alone was an education in terms of handling motivation skilfully and laying down a steady, patient foundation. Those causes naturally had their effects: at first the mind was pretty chaotic and threw up all kinds of resistance, desires and restlessness. But it made me even more aware that this confused and obsessive stuff was what I really didn't want to be immersed in. I could commit to trying to get out of all that.

At first, meditation wasn't rapturous: there was just the resolve to hold to the meditation topic and the simple form of the life within this torrent of moods and feelings, and to let those torrents pass.

I mostly had to put effort into not despairing, getting forceful or becoming angry with myself. But gradually my outlook shifted from 'getting Enlightened' to one of being aware of the mind a moment at a time and being content with that. Surprisingly enough, with this attitude, the intensities abated, and I began to recognize that there was some awareness that didn't seem to be in the floods. It had been here yesterday and for as long as I had been around. 'Be here now' started to make sense! Something was always here, and what my Dhamma-resolve had done was to resist the pulls long enough to get a feel for this 'something.' I couldn't really figure it out, but it seemed like a norm of awareness that wasn't a thought, feeling or emotion. And I felt: 'That's more like it; that's more what I want to be with.'

However, making that kind of resolve certainly highlighted the emotional chaos, insatiable desires and insecurity of the mind. All the excuses and plausible rationales would come up — the host of Mara, right on cue. Convincing voices would whisper, 'You can do this much easier in a more comfortable place, rather than sweating through the days alone in a bare hut in this strange country with these weird rules.' 'If you keep on this track you'll miss out on the new developments in spiritual practice.' But in a way, that strengthened my resolve — it made me ask myself deeply: 'Do I want to encourage all this restlessness? Do I want to have a mind that can't settle and needs continual propping up?' After years of following my impulses, I felt over-saturated. I wanted to go inwards, and I recognized that I could benefit from the restraint that being in a monastery could provide. After a while I thought, 'I could try this for three months. Three months should be enough. Three whole months! I ought to have the big breakthrough by then!' Of course, by the end of three months, I could see that there was a lot more stuff that I didn't want to adopt. Yet, as these mind states lost their intensity, I felt a little more spacious, grounded and free. Moment by moment, I began to realize, 'It's alright in this abiding place of witnessing and watching.'

So that resolve led to considering a way to live from that stillness that I'd touched into ... and that led to making a commitment to

living as a Buddhist monk, a bhikkhu — for a few years anyway. That's the way an initial resolve feeds back and forms a path.

Small Enlightenments

The Buddhist emphasis on knowing through one's direct experience has always felt very sane to me. The Buddha's Dhamma is shown not through, 'This is Truth, this is Ultimate Reality and the Secret Law of the Cosmos,' but as, 'This is what you do to get through the mess.' And it offers an opportunity, a way to explore the mind and step back from the *samsāra* of its turmoil through the simple expedient of picking up a reasonable intention — like focusing on breathing — and witnessing how the mind skids and wobbles around that intention with its transient likes and dislikes.

In the early months of my practice the mind bounced backwards and forwards, ricocheting between feelings and fantasies, grudges and self-judgement like a ball in a pinball machine. However, even acknowledging that this was happening deepened my understanding. I'd always associated freedom with the ability to move around. Instead, it now felt like freedom was in the still watchfulness. It seemed to be here, but I couldn't locate it; it had no motive and no opinions; it was free of all that. But it seemed dependent on making a resolve.

For this reason I got very keen on making resolutions: firstly to sit for an hour, then longer, then meditate all night. Of course, every day the mind wanders; one loses or gets caught in obsessions, which could mean that every day you fail. But I found that if the mind could move through a wave of turmoil, it entered a place of peace, and that was worth aiming for. More subtly, even when it didn't reach that place, stillness could still arrive — with the sense, 'Well, that's my limit; I tried, and that's the way it is right now.' Or there could be a recognition that I had to be more patient or kinder in the resolutions that I set for myself. It was a change of view: success *and* failure, when carried out with good intention, both led to wisdom, peace and kindness. In my book, that's a little Enlightenment.

Resolve, when it's aligned to other perfections, also helps us look at daily scenarios and mundane tasks in a more Enlightened way. For example, cleaning the floor doesn't seem interesting, but taking on a task for the welfare of the situation as a whole helps to widen attention. And it activates giving, energy and patience. In general, Enlightenment begins as a shift of focus to a more 'non-self' view, and to long-term results rather than short-term moods. To take another instance: in the monastery, when we refrain from eating in the evenings, we can reflect on this restraint as being for limiting our own appetite and also out of global concern. If one simply thinks, 'I can't have anything to eat tonight,' then it becomes a problem. You think, 'I'm going to eat, anyway. I'm going to go over the wall and get a bag of doughnuts.' Yet when one considers the number of people who are starving or hungry, who don't have enough to eat, one feels, 'People are giving me enough food for a day, so yes, I can go without an evening meal,' because one's heart is touched. The focus shifts as you consider, through resolve and wise reflection, the amount of food that is wasted by people eating more than they need; or all the animals that are needlessly slaughtered; or the land that is being ravaged. Then making a determination to limit that instinct feels appropriate. Whether one is a *samana* or not, the resolve of renunciation serves to check the instinct in the mind that says, 'I want this. It's my right to have it, and I want it now.' After all, in a shared world, where is that attitude going to take us?

There are also resolves to pick up and encourage a course of action. In my case, when I came to the West, I saw that the bhikkhu training in terms of renunciation, honesty, harmlessness and modesty was a good thing to have going in this confused world. It felt good to look at living in a way that would be for the welfare of others, rather than always thinking, 'Why wear robes? Why do we have to chant? What's wrong with hair?' Picking at the details was too narrow a focus. It felt better to look at life more broadly, at how one could be part of a scenario that offered calm, attention and a quiet grace for whoever could benefit from them. Resolutions then align themselves to how one can intend for the welfare of other beings: this renunciate life is of value; it brings

forth tenderness, strength and trust. And to be part of that is both an honour and a way to shift out of personal obsessiveness. It's a small Enlightenment, a lightening of the burden of self-importance, not some personal statement about how great and wise I am.

Applying Wisdom to Resolve

Mendicant life, in which one has little say over what material resources will come one's way, automatically provides opportunities for meeting difficulties with resolution. For example, when I first came to England, I only had light-weight tropical robes and a pair of open-toed sandals. Soon it was wintertime, and it began snowing. Lay people gave boots to some of the monks, but not to me. I determined just to bear with the difficulties and not to ask for anything. I resolved to make it a principle not to seek out requisites, because I noticed how the mind whinged and complained, and I wanted to stand firm against that petty voice. So it was good to bring up and look at that feeling of wanting, when I saw other people had good stuff. 'He has boots. Why don't I have boots? It should be fair. How can they give him boots and not me?' But then I just decided it wasn't my concern; giving was their business; mine was to receive what was offered and give up jealousy and complaining. So I made it a practice to be content with what was offered, with the resolve: 'If it's not offered then it is not needed.'

Arguably, to walk three miles on alms round through the snow, one did 'need' boots. But I didn't have any, and so ... I could use the opportunity to be here with that, witness what came up and let it all pass — and it wouldn't kill me. Then the resolve would take me through the vortex of feelings to that emptying out of desire where there was stillness and peace. That felt really good and worthwhile. It was actually more useful than having the boots — because to find the way to the still point was what I was dedicated to, not to warm dry feet. Moreover, learning contentment made life easier and richer. After that, any room, any place to live, and

any food was OK. I realized that the body and mind are adaptable, and that we can adapt. And that gave richness to ordinary life.

It encourages one to look for opportunities for resolution. One can get over-zealous. I have determined some extreme practices in my life as a bhikkhu, but the most useful ones came through wise reflection on where my attachments lay. In monastic life, there is a three-month period every year for more intense practice, and taking on a resolution is a customary part of that. Three months of keeping a resolution is a good effort because what sounds like an inspiring resolution on day one gets to be a tedious burden by day sixty. Therefore you have to bear with it, and this strengthens the power of witnessing the changes of mood and inclination.

During my first Rains Retreat in England, I considered that I was very fond of ideas and I always wanted to have bright and interesting things in my mind. So I determined a few things to work against that trend. Firstly I resolved not to read anything, because I was aware of how much time I'd spend casually reading stuff just to fill the holes in the day and keep the mind stimulated. When I put that habit aside, the hours began to yawn open. This was even more the case, as for this three-month period, I was refraining from conversation. On top of these, the other resolution was the 'sitter's practice,' wherein one resolves not to lie down at any time during the three months. So there were many hours where there was nothing whatsoever to feed the mind, and no oblivion to sink into to get away from its poverty.

Also, because refraining from lying down lessens the amount of sleep you can get — which makes the mind dull and dreamy — a lot of the time I just had to sit and be with inconsequential ramblings of thought and weird daydreams and give up the attachment to bright mind states. I had to learn to hold and work with, and not shy away from, the inconclusive, dribbling, dreary mind. This meant staying with it and attending to it as if it were worthy of attention. This practice was very good for developing compassion.

Compassion is a wonderful idea when you read about it in a book. But meeting one's personal dreary, muttering mind with an unflinching and tender heart is more demanding than experiencing compassion for the starving people of the world. When one thinks of the starving millions, that readily inspires compassion. But when you take away the worthy cause, you see that the nature of the mind is to need something to engage with. Then you feel what it's like if there's nothing interesting or worthwhile to do. The mind gets moody, bored and lifeless. And you have to learn to simply hold it, as you would a baby — holding it, rocking it, bearing with it, listening to it. This is great for strengthening and broadening the heart, building up tolerance, and letting go of conceit.

Of course one can also develop resolve with the wrong motivation — such as trying to prove oneself, or just to get through the tedium of a monastic day. At times I'd get resolution-fever: fasting, cold showers, bathing in the snow. I guess I just had to burn off some energy. But over time I could sense disappointment and the way my mind could create suffering over how flaky and half-hearted other people seemed to be. The mind had the inspiring idea of how people should be, and how there should be strict discipline and rigorous effort with no one slacking or being difficult. And I could see how hurt the mind felt by the way it actually was. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice if everybody was pure, harmonious, and putting forth maximum effort?' And then I thought, 'No, it wouldn't, because then I'd complain about myself. I'd find something that I was doing wrong.' But as my view broadened through being with others in their struggles, I could sense that to develop the resolve to be with the raggedness, chaos and disorderliness of *samsāra* without conceit or irritation was in itself conducive to Nibbāna. To open to the woundedness and wackiness of my own *kamma* as well as that of other people — and to experience compassion rather than judgement — that was the opportunity to further the practice.

Resolve has to be developed wisely. It first strengthens the individual will and integrity, but then if you sustain that in

relationship to others, resolve opens the mind into a broad field of wisdom and compassion. It penetrates the isolation of the watchful meditator and reveals what the watchfulness can cover: the rawness that says, 'I want to be unmoved and not have to get involved.' The watcher can be affected by the wish to not be here, which can provide a basis for self-view and bias. So although stillness is useful, it too is not to be clung to. Unless stillness furthers letting go, it doesn't lead to final freedom — the freedom from the biases and standpoints of self-view.

Opening to Compassion

This understanding can really broaden our perspectives. We all want to be happy, and yet normally we get disappointed. This is because we imagine happiness to be a colourful emotion of gratification, but this is not as deeply meaningful and steady as compassion. Compassion is something we can all share, at any time, no matter whether we are up or down, or whether everybody else is up or down. We can all share in it. The happiness that derives from pleasure isn't something we are designed for as human beings. We can experience little bits of it, maybe, but it's sporadic. The uplifted attitude of compassion is more our measure. Compassion is the only way to hold the world.

It's not that compassion is always about doing something. Rather, it's the intention to replace the contraction and agitation we experience around pain with openness. Sometimes there are things we can do, sometimes there aren't. But when we're identified with action and responsibility, there's a stress in the heart, and the sense of having to make things work. When we get it right in a holistic way — with regard to self and others, and towards Nibbāna — we can avoid the pitfall of getting stuck in trying to be good and dutiful.

In my own case, identifying with covering a lot of duties around the monastery makes me get functional, busy and intense. And that isn't what people want from a Buddhist monk. I'd sit in meditation and just think about the work I was doing, planning the work I had to do, figuring out this and that. I wondered how to

freshen up, and so I decided to resolve occupying this busy mind with something meaningless, but devotional. Just to give myself, with no result and no one noticing. We have a memorial stupa in the monastery, and so every morning I'd get up at about 3:30 a.m. and go to the stupa to circumambulate it and bow to each of its four shrines. I decided to do that every day during one Rains Retreat, no matter what. So as soon as I woke up, before I could even think about it, I'd get up, get dressed and go. This may sound like a good idea in July, but in Britain in late October ...

Rain and cold and dark. Inner muttering and lethargy. But whatever was in the mind at the time, I would put that mind state on one of the shrines on the stupa, and bow to it. I'd think: 'Very good, I honour you.' Then the mind would say, 'What's the point in doing this?' and I'd reply, 'I bow to you, I honour you.' On another day, the mind would say, 'This is pointless,' and I'd focus on that mind state and bow to it. I developed a sense of opening to and supporting the mind, rather than trying to pull it into shape or make it have lovely thoughts. After a while, the mind would say, 'I understand what you're doing. I've got the point now, so now you can relax.' And I'd think, 'I bow to that mind state. I honour, love and respect you.' Then the mind would say, 'But it's raining this morning.' So I'd bow to that. The mind would say, 'What are you trying to prove anyway? Who do you think you are?' And I'd respond by bowing to and honouring that thought.

Crazy? A little — but it got me to see through the compulsive and insatiable nature of needing to be doing important things. That habit was getting me stuck on goodness, on putting myself in a repair shop to try to make *samsāra* work. And with this I wasn't attuning to the invaluable lightness and joy that makes it possible to both live in and see through the world at the same time. This is where, when duty stales us, wise devotion can further us. Devotion is not a matter of superstition or blind ritual. Directly experienced, it has a light, uplifting energy. The heart-activity of praising the good has an energy that lifts the mind. This energy can move us beyond the horizon of the functioning, managing mind with its self-importance, its need to be busy and its demand for results.

With devotion we can work without making a solid thing or person out of whatever great or small deeds we undertake. In such self-emptying, the mind inclines towards the Nibbāna that is the basis for the serene compassion of the Buddha.

Over time, my resolve energy has simplified and calmed to one of sustaining the attitude, 'May this action or thought be for my welfare, the welfare of others and lead to peace.' Compared with the more extreme practices, such a resolve doesn't make the headlines. But it acts as a life commitment and a basis for external action, enquiry and insight. This resolve doesn't make a self out of intention or results; it just holds experience carefully and lets it pass through and dissolve. This is beautiful, and selfless: the self doesn't do it, *pāramī* does. In this way, when resolve widens through compassion and wisdom into self-surrender, we can liberate all the beings that arise in consciousness. Whether they arise from an internal or external source, we work to free them from aversion, indulgence, indifference and identification.

May our resolve open us to the great heart that crosses the floods!