

Resolve Week 2: The Four Resolves

from Chris

This week, we will look at the sutta MN140. This sutta contains a list of four Resolves (or Determinations or Foundations) that can guide the whole path of practice. It's the main place in the suttas where there are explicit teachings on this Parami of Resolve.

This sutta tells the story a travelling seeker named Pukkasati who was intending to join the Buddha's order. One night he was put up in a potter's shed and was soon joined by another travelling stranger. Unbeknownst to the seeker, this other person was none other than the Buddha. The Buddha discerned that Pukkasati was a sincere and experienced meditator and offered to teach him the Dhamma. What he teaches is a beautifully succinct summary of the whole path of practice that is oriented around these four Resolves and culminates in a description of complete freedom defined in those terms.

The Buddha instructs Pukkasati that a person has these four resolves or determinations: 'One should not be negligent of *wisdom/discernment*, should guard the *truth*, be devoted to *relinquishment/generosity*, and train only for *peace*.' Being resolved on these four, one can navigate one's way along the path of practice toward ever more complete attainments of these very four factors. The word for the third factor (*caga*) is usually translated as *generosity* but, especially in the context of this sutta, also as *relinquishment* or *letting go*—the open hand of non-clinging.

We have already begun to look at the first three in our study of Wisdom, Truth and Renunciation (and/or Generosity). To be 'resolved on' these is to keep orienting our perceptions and actions in light of these factors. We practice the wisdom of not fixating on experience as "me and mine", the wisdom of not resisting change, the wisdom of understanding the causes of suffering in our own habits of clinging and resisting. We practice learning to see through "the tides of conceiving" and contact direct, experiential truth. Seeing the truth of how clinging and resisting leads to more suffering, we are more able to let go. As we experience the peace of a little bit of letting go, of moments of simple sensory contact without resistance or conceptual elaboration, we are able to resolve more clearly to continue to walk this path.

In this sutta, the Buddha describes the truth of direct experience in terms of the great elements of earth, air, wind, fire, and space plus consciousness/mentality. Using wisdom and truth, we can orient our perception to see that both internally and externally, experience is made of these same elements along with consciousness of them as feeling pleasant, unpleasant or neither, and the tendency to react and conceptualize based on these.

The sutta instructs, for example regarding water: "Now both the internal water element and the external water element are simply water element. And that should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' When one sees it

thus as it actually is with proper wisdom, one becomes disenchanted with the water element and makes the mind dispassionate towards the water element.”

Take some time to sense and experience your body as made up of the same stuff as all of nature: solid matter (solidity, texture), water (fluidity), heat/coolness, air/gas (movement, vibration), space. What part of experience is simple sensory contact with the nature of these elements, both external and internal? What do mental processes then add on? Where is the suffering?

When with wisdom and devotion to truth, we are able to attune to this non-personal elemental level of experience, then we may have tastes of being ‘dis-encharnted’ (not caught up in our concepts about it) and ‘dis-passionate’ (not emotionally attached or resistant to the direct experience). With the lessening of conceiving and emotional entanglement, it’s easier to relinquish our identifications with that type of experience. When we can do that, we experience greater peace. In line with the fourth resolve, we can attune to that peace, appreciate it and resolve to continue to cultivate it in this way.

For example, suppose you need to tend to a wound. Can you see it simply in terms of a mix of solid matter, watery-ness, air, heat, space, perhaps unpleasant sights, smells and sensations? If you don’t dwell on thoughts of “me and mine”, it may be easier to let go of the proliferating worries, disgusts, preferences and avoidances that come with that. Then you can simply get the job done with relative peace of mind.

This perspective based in wisdom and truth can expand to include our mental life so that we can see thoughts and emotions as simply the arising of the elements of mental experience. Then we may find more ease with the process of allowing a wounded heart/mind to slowly sort itself out. For example, by gently and clearly recognizing memories as memories, thoughts of the future as thoughts or images, reactive habits as habits, we allow them to arise, be met and recognized and move through. There is relative peace in observing and allowing our mental and emotional life to unfold from this perspective.

By repeatedly recollecting, attuning to and strengthening these four resolves, we can gradually progress along the path to complete peace:

“The tides of conceiving do not sweep over one who stands upon these foundations, and when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over him he is called a sage at peace.”

And these four resolves find their highest expression in reaching the goal of liberation:

- the knowledge of the passing away of all suffering & stress — is the highest noble discernment.
- Nibbana, the undeceptive — is the highest noble truth.
- the renunciation of all mental acquisitions [the tides of conceiving]— is the highest noble relinquishment.
- the calming of passions, aversions, & delusions — is the highest peace.

At the end of this sutta, Pukkasati suddenly realizes who it is who has been training him, apologizes for having been so informal with the Buddha, and asks for full ordination. In the way several of these suttas end, he is then killed by a stray cow while out looking for a robe and bowl, but the Buddha assures everyone that he had attained the first stage of liberation during that night of intensive practice and was reborn in a good place where he will achieve final liberation. Perhaps the moral of these abrupt endings is that you never know how much time you may have left, so practice wisely while you can.

In this time of the virus, staying at home with perhaps tendencies to worry and search for 'truth' on the internet, it is well worth contemplating these four guiding resolves of practice, and looking for ways to strengthen the determination to keep our minds and hearts heading in the direction of peace. Relinquishing the proliferation of fear-based thoughts and imaginings, we can focus on the direct sensory experience of the immediate tasks at hand--of keeping our bodies and spirits nourished, our kids engaged, helping our neighbors where we can. If circumstances permit, this is a rich opportunity to meditate, study Dharma and inquire deeply into a wise relationship with life including the eternal truths of old-age, sickness and death. This may be a time of strengthening our resolve to navigate by wisdom and truth towards seeing through and letting go of habits that lead to suffering. It can be a time to discover the deepest potential of this practice: the freedom of inner peace independent of external circumstances.

Gil and Andrea gave a retreat at IRC on the theme of these Four Resolves in 2015. That whole series of talks is available here: <https://irc.audiodharma.org/retreats/118>

Or here is a link to just the first overview talk by Gil:

https://www.audiodharma.org/talks/audio_player/6250.html