

Large-hearted Equanimity

May 18, 2023

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, meditating at Wat Dhammasathit up in a little shack on the mountain there, every morning at 3:00 a.m. I'd hear the bombers going overhead. This was during the Vietnam War. And it got to me: Here I was, focusing on my breath, not helping anybody else, and all this insanity was going on in the world. Why wasn't I out there doing something about it?

I mentioned this to Ajaan Fuang. He said that if you go out and try to straighten out the world, you find out that your goodness breaks, because the world resists being straightened out. In fact, a lot of the problems of the world are because people have their ideas about how the world should be straightened out, and they try to straighten one another out.

Even the Buddha couldn't teach everybody. Think of that phrase we have, *purisa-damma-sārathi*, "the trainer of people fit to be trained." There are a lot of people who are not fit to be trained, either because of their past karma or their present karma. The Buddha himself found that the reasons why some people would find awakening listening to his Dhamma talks, and a lot of people would not, had to do with factors that were beyond his control.

So even the Buddha couldn't reach everybody. He found the best policy was, in Ajaan Suwat's words, "to get himself"—in other words, to straighten himself out. As for whatever effect he could have on the world outside, it was all to the good. He would be happy. After all, he spread goodwill to everybody, everywhere, every day. But this is the problem: You can make your goodwill limitless, but the effect that you can have on the world has its limits. You have to learn how to accept that.

This is where equanimity comes in. It comes in *after* goodwill. You start out with goodwill and you maintain it. You don't drop it. It's a wish for happiness. It's a wish that beings will understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. So think about that: Their happiness will have to come from their actions. Sometimes you can exert an influence on their actions, but it's up to them to choose whether they want to be influenced by you. It has to do with their understanding, their capabilities.

So that serves as a warning. As Ajaan Fuang would say, goodwill without the equanimity of jhana can be a cause for suffering. So we need equanimity as our backup.

There are many levels. There's the ordinary, everyday equanimity, when you simply decide, "I'm not going to react. I'm not going to let myself get upset by situations that I don't like," and you maintain that through force of will.

But the equanimity that the Buddha praised starts with the equanimity of the fourth jhana. Everything prior to that is your garden, homegrown variety, which can also involve some suffering, because after all, it requires force of will and your ability to talk to yourself in a way that you accept the way things have turned out. You accept the limitations on your desire to see happiness in the world. It's a realization of areas where you cannot be of help.

But it can also be a recipe for depression if you stay only at that level. After all, what is depression? It's a sense of not wanting things to be the way they are and feeling helpless in the face of that. So the Buddha has you realize: There are other areas of your experience where you *can* make a difference. This is where you focus inside. Try to get the mind into a state where it really is solidly here, right here, right now, with a sense of well-being.

When the Buddha talks about developing higher levels of equanimity, in some cases they come through insight. In other cases, they come through concentration. But in both cases, you have to have a sense of well-being that comes from the insight, well-being that comes from the concentration, before you get to the equanimity that comes from insight or from concentration.

This way, you create what Ajaan Fuang would call, "large-hearted equanimity," which he opposed to "small-hearted." "Small-hearted" is when you say, "Well, the world can't be changed. There's nothing into I can do about it," and it does turn into depression. Someone did a psychological study a while back of laypeople in Sri Lanka who were reputed to be really into the Dhamma. The researchers came away with the conclusion that a lot of those people were actually depressed, accepting that things were inconstant, stressful, not-self—nothing much you can do about it, so you just have to let it go, let it go. Everything gets smaller and smaller and smaller in your heart.

Large-hearted equanimity comes when you have an inner sense of well-being that you can create from within. Then you can look at the situation outside and admit to yourself, "Okay, there are areas where I can't be of help, but I've managed to make changes where it really is important."

This was the Buddha's gift to us. When I was in France, there were people who asked, "If the Buddha really had goodwill for the world, why didn't he keep coming back?" The answer is that he wanted to teach by example, that by straightening out your mind so that you're not giving in to greed, aversion, and delusion, you're not causing any suffering to anybody. That's a worthy goal right

there. If we existed to help other beings, if our worth as human beings depended on how much we could help others, you'd have to start to think, "Well, what about *them*? Where is *their* worth?"

Each human being has worth in and of himself, in and of herself, in the sense that we have this ability to freely choose our actions. That's one level of worth. A higher level of worth, though, is when you use that power of choice to clean your mind, to provide a sense of genuine and harmless well-being inside. We're not here just to accept the fact that things arise and pass away. We're looking for something that doesn't arise and doesn't pass away.

There's that phrase, which is the standard phrase for gaining the Dhamma eye: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." Some people translate that as "Whatever arises will pass away." That's not what it's saying. If something is subject to origination, one, it's caused, and two, the cause comes from within the mind. And that thought, "Whatever is subject to origination," occurs to the mind only when it's come across something that is *not* subject to origination, an experience that is *uncaused*.

In other words, as Sariputta told Moggallana—this was back when he had first gained the Dhamma eye, and Moggallana asked him, "Have you seen the deathless?"—Sariputta said, "Yes, I've seen the deathless." What'd he see in that? That everything *else* is what is subject to origination. You realize: That's not all there is in the possibilities of experience. There's something deathless that each of us can attain if we practice.

But not everybody will, because we all have freedom of choice. This explains the Buddha's teachings on equanimity. Given that other people have freedom of choice, they're free to act any way they want. And you have to realize: There comes a point when you run into things in the world that are totally beyond your control. As I said, even the Buddha couldn't control the minds of the people who listened to him. But he could learn how to gain control over his own mind.

That's where our efforts are best focused, because when our minds are under control, we're not inflicting our greed, aversion, and delusion on anyone else. If we see that we can be of help, we're happy to be of help. And it's not the kind of neurotic help where you feel that you don't have any worth unless you help other people, because that kind of help is not all that reliable. You have your idea of what other people need, which may not correspond to what they actually need.

Years back, there was a Dhamma teacher who said he wouldn't want to be reborn in a world where there was no suffering, because he wouldn't be able to exercise his compassion, which on one level sounds noble. But the more you think about it, the more you realize that there's something really wrong with that

attitude. You want the good feeling of exercising your compassion, so it requires that there be somebody else there who's suffering? It's better to find happiness in something that doesn't require anybody to suffer at all, so that when you do offer help, it's not coming from a neurotic place or out of a desire to have more influence over the world than you actually can.

So it really is a worthwhile activity when you focus on what you can do to find true happiness inside. That provides your grounding so that *you're* secure, and that whatever help you provide to others is coming from the right place. And you *see* the world. As the Buddha said, when he would teach people, some people would take what he taught and put it to use, gain awakening from it, gain benefit from it. He said he'd be satisfied with that, but his mind didn't have to feed on his satisfaction. There would be people who wouldn't listen to what he said. They'd do something else. He said wasn't satisfied with that, but it had no impact on his mind.

So when you have a mind that's solid like that, that's when you can genuinely be of help to the world, because you have a mature sense of what is and isn't possible, and a mature sense of where your worth as an individual really lies.