

Equanimity Isn't Everything

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There was a time when Rahula went to the Buddha—he was probably a teenager at the time—and asked the Buddha how to do breath meditation. The Buddha didn't start out immediately with instructions on breath meditation. He taught Rahula a whole set of other practices to go first. The most striking one is the practice of making your mind like earth, making your mind like water, like wind, like fire. How is it like earth? If you throw disgusting things on the earth, the earth doesn't shrink away. And the same principle applies to the other elements. You use water to wash away disgusting things and it doesn't get disgusted. The wind blows disgusting things around but isn't disgusted. Fire burns disgusting things and doesn't get disgusted, it just keeps on doing its duty. In the same way, the Buddha said, when you meet up with pleasing and displeasing things, you should make your mind non-reactive: a lesson in how to accept things the way they are.

But he doesn't stop there. When you look at the instructions on breath meditation, they're very proactive. The equanimity is there to serve a purpose: so that you can watch things carefully, watch things consistently. If you say, "Gee, I don't like this, I don't like that," and get worked up about what you like or don't like, you're never going to learn anything. You have to be willing to sit with good things, sit with bad things, so that you can see them and understand them. Only when you understand them can you really free yourself from them.

This is the attitude we have to adopt at the beginning: that we're going to put up with everything that happens in the course of our meditation. Not just to sit there like a bump on a log, we're going to watch so that we can understand where things come from and where they lead. When feelings arise, whether they're pleasant or painful, you want to understand where they come from. You also want to understand the impact they have on the mind.

But then, the Buddha doesn't just have you sit there with the feelings or with whatever else comes up. In the course of the breath meditation, he tells you to try to breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of rapture, breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of pleasure. And the instructions on feelings in the Maha Satipatthana Sutta tell you to be aware of feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure or pain. And then the Buddha divides each of those three into two types. There's pleasure of the flesh and there's pleasure not of the flesh. There's pain of the flesh and pain not of the flesh. Feelings of neither pleasure nor pain of the

flesh and not of the flesh. And those not-of-the-flesh feelings don't just happen on their own. You have to will them into being, you have to be skillful in giving rise to them. Otherwise, they don't happen. Pleasure not of the flesh is the pleasure that comes from jhana. That doesn't just happen. You have to direct your thoughts; you have to evaluate things. There's work that has to be done to get the mind into jhana. It's a fabrication.

Pain not of the flesh is also something you have to give rise to. When things aren't going well in life, you remind yourself what you really do want to attain the goal of total freedom from suffering. The problem is, of course, you're not there yet. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, "Well, don't desire the goal and you'll be okay." But the Buddha never recommended that. He said, this painful feeling not of the flesh is a feeling you want to give rise to, this is a pain you want to give rise to, because it gives you the motivation to dig deeper inside, to find a better foundation for your happiness than just sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile sensations. So it's a healthy kind of pain: the pain that leads to gain.

Finally, there's the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain that's not of the flesh. That's the equanimity that comes from the practice of jhana. That, too, is something you want to develop. Because, as the Buddha said, there are basically two ways you can undercut the causes of suffering and stress. One is through equanimity, and the other is through what he calls the exertion of fabrication.

Now, equanimity comes in many levels. There's the ordinary equanimity that you learn how to just accept whatever comes up, like the Buddha taught Rahula in the beginning: Just learn to be non-reactive.

But that kind of equanimity, the Buddha said, doesn't go very far. You try to replace it with the equanimity that comes from jhāna: in other words, equanimity not of the flesh. So even there, there's an exercise of fabrication in creating equanimity. It requires a certain amount of effort. Then you use that equanimity to look at things. There are certain things, when you look at them in the mind, where you say, "Gee, I don't really want to go there. I've seen that particular defilement, I've seen where it goes, I've seen what it does, I've had enough." And that's it, it just disappears. Or as Ajaan Lee said, it gets embarrassed. If you look at it steadily enough and forcibly enough, you can see right through it.

However, there are other causes of stress and suffering that you can't see right through that way. They have a real pull on the mind, a real hold on the mind. And this is where you have to exert a fabrication, like we're doing it right now: focusing on the breath, adjusting the breath. There's verbal fabrication in the directed thought and evaluation as you direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the

breath. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breathing itself, because that's the process that fabricates your sense of the body. It's one of the few bodily processes that you can actually control. You can decide to breathe long, you can decide to breathe short, heavy, or light. It's not like your digestion. You can't tell your stomach to turn on or turn off. The breath is a process, however, that you can shape, and it really does have an impact on how you experience the body. So you learn how to exercise that control. Because otherwise, emotions come in, they take over, not only the mind, but also the body. And the fact that they get lodged in the body through the breath gives them a lot of power. You've got to learn how to undercut that power by breathing through them in a different way.

So that covers verbal fabrication and bodily fabrication.

The third kind of fabrication is mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. The feelings you create through the breath can help to undercut the hold of certain hungers in the mind. And the perceptions you keep in mind—the images and words with which you label things—can give you a new perspective on what's happening.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha included so many similes and images in his teachings: to give you a new range of similes and images—a new range of perceptions—to apply when you need to. For example, he has a whole list of similes on sensuality. It's like a set of bones with no meat. A bead of honey on the blade of a knife. So the next time you see the honey of a sensual pleasure, think of it: This is on the blade of a knife. You're going to cut your tongue if you try to lick it off. It's borrowed goods. You go around with all your cool things, and all the cool people you can gather around you, but the goods aren't really yours. Especially the people with whom you find sensual pleasure: They can change their mind at any time; you don't own them. You can't really control them. And if your happiness is dependent on something you can't really control, it's really in a bad situation.

You've got to learn how to keep these perceptions in mind to help wean yourself away from the defilements of lust, anger, or greed.

To bring the mind into concentration requires perceptions as well. You need to have a certain perception of the breath, a certain perception of the body to get into concentration and stay there. At the very least, you need to have an image in your mind or a coded sensation that says, "Okay, this is your focal point. This is where you're going to stay in order to remind yourself to stay here." That, too, is a mental fabrication.

So there are lots of different ways you can use these fabrications to counteract those causes of stress and suffering that are really deeply entrenched. And you

have to learn through your own experience which causes of suffering respond to which type of approach. We may like the idea that “We’ll just watch this, and it’ll go away on its own eventually, and that will be the end of it.” And we notice that there are times when that actually happens. But it’s not going to happen all the time. You need to have other approaches. Even equanimity itself isn’t something that comes easily on its own. You have to cultivate it; you have to give it a more solid foundation.

And then there’s the problem of getting attached to the equanimity itself. We hear about awakened people who are extremely equanimous. But it’s not the case that the equanimity is the essence of their attainment. After all, the Buddha didn’t say nirvana is the ultimate equanimity. He said it’s the ultimate happiness. But the fact that awakened people have a basis for their happiness that doesn’t depend on conditions: That allows them to look at conditioned reality with a lot more equanimity. They’re not trying to feed on it anymore; they don’t need it for their happiness. So the equanimity is a byproduct.

There is a common problem when people meditate, and they hear about awakened people being like this or that, so they try to clone what they’ve heard. But all you can clone are the effects. And if they are cloned, they’re like Dolly, the sheep: They die quickly. You want to find the real foundation for that equanimity, which is something else entirely.

The Buddha said this comes from something he calls non-fashioning. Regardless of what comes up, you learn how not to identify yourself with it. You don’t make it part of your self-definition. And then, again, we hear, “Okay, I’ll just decide that there’s no self, and that’s that.” Well, the thing is that there are going to be subtle feelings of self, subtle feelings of identification that creep in when you’re not aware. So rather than trying to deny them, you admit the fact that they’re there. You try to notice where there’s identification.

And there’s a certain amount of identification that’s needed to get the path together. You have to have a healthy sense of self in order to do this. It means a self that’s not always looking for shortcuts, for an easy way out. And one of the problems with identifying equanimity or radical acceptance as the whole of the teaching is that it teaches you to be lazy. It’s an excuse for laziness. Even determinism can be an excuse for laziness.

Once, when I was new to the practice and I was trying to think about karma, I said to Ajaan Fuang: “You know, if everything in the present is conditioned by karma in the past, that means there’s no choice that I have to make right now about whether I’m going to practice or not; it’s just going to happen. It may seem like a choice, but it’s not really a choice.” He looked at me, and the look he gave

me made me realize I should never think that way ever again. And then I realized that was laziness speaking.

Equanimity is part of the path because it puts you in a position where you can see things more clearly, more consistently. You're a better judge of what works and what doesn't work in terms of your strategies on the path and the way you fabricate things. It's not an end in and of itself.

So learn how to use it properly. Use your attitudes around equanimity properly so that you can also handle the kind of fabrication that's needed for putting the path together inside. The good side of this is that the Buddha gives you tools so that you're not just stuck having to sit there with whatever comes up, or to accept whatever comes up and be totally defenseless. There are ways you can handle difficult situations; there are ways you can handle difficult people. Whatever's really getting to you, it's not just, "Hey, just learn how to accept it and that's it." The Buddha doesn't stop there. He said that there's a way to figure out how to deal with each problem. It's going to require some patience and equanimity to see what that way is, but don't be afraid to use the tools he gives you.

Otherwise, you're defenseless in the face of not only difficult situations, you're also defenseless in the face of your defilements, because they can take on the voice of Dhamma themselves. They say, "Well, don't be desiring, don't have craving." Defilements can say that, too. "Don't desire to be rid of us, just learn to accept us." It sounds like Dhamma but it's all a bunch of lies.

So realize that the Buddha gave you a wide range of tools to use on the path. And try to take advantage of them all.