

The Equanimity of a Winner

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There are some ideas about equanimity going around that give it a bad name. One is the idea that if you fight your negative emotions, fight your defilements, it's going to be stressful—and the Buddha taught us not to cause stress—right?—so we shouldn't put up a fight. That's what they say. They tell you to develop equanimity around the fact that you've got greed, aversion, and delusion, they come and go, and you learn to be okay with that, and learn to let go of any desire for anything better than this.

As Ajaan Lee would say, that's letting go like a pauper. You don't have anything and you tell yourself, "Well, I'll just let go of all that wealth that somebody else has." You don't gain anything from that, and you stay poor. You could also call it the equanimity of a loser, except that when you don't even put up a fight, it's hard to say that you've lost.

The Buddha never taught that kind of equanimity. On the one hand, he never said that the path to the end of suffering was going to be unstressful. He admits that the practice of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful qualities will cause stress. It'll be painful sometimes. But he says that even if it involves having tears running down your cheeks, you still want to stick with the practice. There is stress that's just useless, that serves no purpose, but then there's the stress that leads to the end of stress. We have to strengthen ourselves so that we can go put up with that stress and engage it. After all, as he said, stress is clinging to the aggregates, and clinging to the aggregates is how we define ourselves, so we're going to have to uproot parts of ourselves. It's going to be painful.

But he gives us the tools so we can face that pain—first, the sense of ease that comes with the concentration, the strength that comes with the concentration, and then also the determination: his teaching that it *is* possible to totally put an end to stress and suffering. Determination is a value that's highly esteemed in the practice.

So how does equanimity function in the context of determination? We know that the Buddha never taught equanimity on its own. It's always in the context of other good qualities. There's the equanimity of a doctor, which would be equanimity in the context of the brahmaviharas, the sublime attitudes. You have goodwill for the patient, compassion for the patient's suffering. You're happy for the patient when he or she recovers, but you have to be equanimous when you see there are certain patients you *can't* cure. So instead of focusing on trying to change things that can't be changed, you try to develop the insight that sees which is which—which can and which cannot be changed—and then you focus on the things that *can* be changed. In other words, you choose your battles. Even a doctor has to act like a warrior.

The equanimity of a warrior comes in the context of the five strengths. You have conviction in the power of your actions, and conviction that the Buddha has shown us a good

path. It's a warrior's path and it's a victorious path. You have conviction in what he taught and its implications for your actions, that *you can do this, too*. You, too, can put an end to suffering. From that conviction, you develop your persistence. You're mindful. Mindfulness doesn't just mean accepting what comes up. It means keeping things in mind, remembering to be alert and ardent in putting aside whatever is unskillful and developing what is skillful.

Concentration builds on that. In other words, when your efforts at being mindful get successful, the mind can finally settle down. When it settles down fully, it reaches a state called purity of mindfulness and equanimity. That's useful for seeing that even in good things, like the concentration, there's still more to be done. There are still subtle levels of stress in the state of concentration. And you don't solve the problem by *not* doing concentration, because that would just take you back to the greater stress of having to deal with what the Buddha calls "household equanimity," just trying to be okay with whatever comes up. Instead, you try to see more clearly what remains to be done, where the letting go has to go deeper.

This is the equanimity you need to develop when things are going well, but you realize that "*going well*" in the world is still not good enough. There's got to be something better. So the equanimity here is not lazy, for that would be unskillful equanimity. The Buddha does make the distinction: There are times when equanimity is skillful and times and types of equanimity when it's not—and lazy equanimity is certainly not part of the path.

What you want is equanimity that allows you to see clearly what needs to be done, which battles are worth fighting, which battles are winnable. And don't underestimate your powers. What may seem impossible right now, you may have to put aside for the time being, but put it aside *just for the time being*. Work on what *is* possible right now and keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Because you want the equanimity that develops the resilience, develops the endurance that allows you to stick with things.

I received a poem from a friend of a student who said he was tired of being equanimity's lapdog. Well, that's equanimity of complacency, which again is not what the Buddha taught. The lapdog is complacent, thinking that as long as there's a lap, it's fine. But laps disappear. The Buddha wants you to be heedful in your equanimity, realizing that you have to focus on things that *really* are important because your time is limited, your resources and energy are limited, and there's a lot of serious work that has to be done, so you don't want to waste your time on extraneous matters.

Even when things are going well, you have to be heedful. Develop the equanimity of right concentration so that you can see more deeply where there is still work to be done. The work may be subtle, but that doesn't mean it requires less effort. When the Buddha talks about right effort, it's not so much the effort that makes you sweat or work really hard physically. It's effort in the mind, the effort to go against certain thought patterns, certain desires, certain old ways of doing things. Even though they may be subtle, dealing with them requires a consistency and

a *persistence*, a stick-to-it-iveness that you can manage only when you have equanimity to help you see clearly.

So we're trying to develop here the equanimity of a winner—someone who can focus on the right battles, and even when things are going well in the battle, doesn't get carried away: someone who can stick with it all the way through to the end.