

An Enduring Cheerfulness

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You may know the story of Ishi, the last wild Indian in North America. His tribe was almost entirely wiped out by white vigilantes. A very small remnant lived on, hidden away in a very tiny area of what used to be a much larger piece of their territory, until finally only Ishi was left.

Then he did something very strange. He went out and sat down in one of the white man's ranches. But instead of killing him, the white men took him in. Eventually, some anthropologists in Berkeley found out about him and brought him into Berkeley. He lived there for the last four years of his life, making new friends, learning about modern civilization, teaching other people some of his crafts.

While reading about him, I was often reminded of Ajaan Fuang: his reserve, his quiet dignity. Toward the end of the book, the author—wife of one of the anthropologists who worked with Ishi—asked her husband: What was Ishi's predominant character trait? The anthropologist said, "He was patient. Not just patient, he had mastered the philosophy of patience." Then he explained what he meant by that. He said that even though Ishi had suffered many hardships, faced many challenges, there wasn't the slightest trace of self-pity or bitterness in his character. Instead there was what the anthropologist called an enduring cheerfulness.

When you have that cheerfulness, you never let the difficulties get you down—and you find that you can bear with them. All too often, when we think of patience, we think about how hard it is to bear with things. But the meaning of patience is that you *are* able to bear with them and they don't make you crack. They don't get you anxious. You keep finding inner reserves to maintain your enduring cheerfulness.

After all, if things are going to get better, they're not going to get better because you let yourself get down. And even if situations may seem hopeless, it doesn't help if you let yourself get down, get discouraged.

So keep that in mind as you practice. Whatever difficulties you're facing—either because of the quarantine, or the pandemic, the heat, your mind's unwillingness to settle down—try to approach the whole thing with good humor. Exasperation doesn't help. Self-pity doesn't help. Bitterness doesn't help. Try to find some positive strengths and keep them going.

After all, when we leave this life, what do we take with us? We take the state of our minds. So we want to make sure that regardless of what happens, it doesn't affect the state of our mind.

So look inside you. What potentials do you have for cheerfulness? You can look for the humor in almost any situation—not the kind of humor where you laugh at people but the kind where you laugh in a good-natured way at the human condition. You see the ironies of life and you're able to step back from them, without feeling totally wound up in them. After all, it's when you step back that you see the ironies.

As the Greeks used to say, it's the gods who laugh. The gods see human beings so upset about human events, but the gods are at a certain remove, so they don't suffer. Now, the remove doesn't mean you don't care. You do care. But you look at things in the long term. There're going to be temporary setbacks as part of human life.

We live in a realm of mixed karma. If you had nothing but good karma, you wouldn't be here. So you have to accept the fact that you've got a mixed bag. When you reach into the bag and pull out something that bites you, you can toss it away. Reach in again. Maybe there's something good in it this time. You don't let the fact that something has bitten you sour you on the entire bag.

When I came back after all those years in Thailand, people would ask, "What was the most difficult thing you had to endure over there?" I thought and I thought and I thought, but I couldn't think of any one thing in particular. There were difficulties, there were hardships, but there wasn't any one thing that stood out. I began to realize: That was why I was able to deal with all the different hardships. I didn't get fixated on any of them. I didn't make them bigger than they had to be.

Part of the source of that strength was that I was engaged in an exploration, learning about the breath, learning about the mind. When you've been meditating for a long time, you tend to forget how precious this opportunity is, how rare it is, and what a good opportunity it is to be with your mind. You may have decided you don't like your mind. Well, it doesn't have to stay the way it is. There are things you can change.

After all, as the Buddha said, if people couldn't change their minds, if they couldn't develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful qualities, there would've been no point to his teaching. But he did teach, which is a sign that the mind is capable of that kind of change: change for the better.

That's the nature of hope in the practice. It's not the kind of hope where you simply hope that things will get better, or that things will come your way. Instead,

you hope that by working on skillful qualities, you'll get more and more skillful. Perhaps "hope" is not quite the right word, but it's a confidence that this path is something you can do. You'll benefit, the people around you will benefit, so it's worth doing.

That right there should be cause enough for cheerfulness. That, and the realization that human life is so hard as it is, why add extra burdens, either on yourself or on other people? If you keep piling burdens on yourself, you start resenting other people who are happy. You end up making them miserable, too. It doesn't accomplish anything.

Work on lifting your own burdens off your mind. We have the opportunity to do it here. And as you get lighter, you'll be available to lighten other people's loads as well. You'll find that that attitude of enduring cheerfulness is easier and easier to manage—and that it's an enduring gift.