

Equanimity Isn't Nibbana

June 16, 2009

As we sit here meditating, we're engaged in a type of kamma. It's called the kamma that puts an end to kamma. But this doesn't mean that it burns away old kamma. Old kamma doesn't burn. One of the great ironies in the history of Buddhism is that some of the teachings the Buddha explicitly attacked are nowadays attributed to the Buddha himself. One of these is the idea that simply by learning how not to react to anything in the present moment, you're not just refraining from creating any new sankharas, you're also burning away old sankharas, old kamma.

But there's a passage where the Buddha actually attacks the idea that you can burn off old kamma. In fact he gets quite satirical about it. He goes to see some Jains who believed that they could burn off old kamma by submitting themselves to different kinds of austerities, that the pain in the austerity was the burning of old kamma. He said, "Can you measure how much kamma you burned today? How much kamma you burned yesterday? Do you actually see the kamma burning?" Of course the answer is No. "And what about the pain caused by your austerities? What's that?" They replied, "This is just the old kamma burning up." He said, "Have you noticed that when you don't do your austerities, there's no pain?"

Here he's making the point that when you experience the results of kamma, it's not just the results of past kamma. It's also the results of your present decisions. If the Jains didn't practice austerities here and now, they wouldn't be experiencing those pains here and now.

In fact, your present actions are the most important part of the kammic mix. This is the lesson of the kamma of meditation. Our present decisions, what we're going to do with the mind, what we're going to focus on, how we develop it: That's the kamma we witness as we meditate. So you want to focus on doing things that help you understand what's going on in the mind right now. What is this process of intention? How does the mind create an experience of pleasure, how does it create an experience of pain, out of the raw material of old kamma?

This is why right view is at the beginning of the path, because right view itself begins with the understanding that our actions are important, and that the intention in the action is what makes all the difference. This means that issues of kamma are issues of the mind. You look into the mind to see it's doing, to see where you're adding any unnecessary element of stress. The Buddha located that unnecessary element in craving, and specifically in three types of craving. The first is craving for sensuality, and here sensuality doesn't necessarily mean sensual pleasures. The Buddha makes the point that our intentions for sensuality are what we're really attached to. The *idea* of sensual pleasure, the activity of thinking about sensuality, is a lot more attractive than the actual pleasure itself. You can obsess about the idea over and over and over again, whereas the actual pleasure, once you've experienced it, quickly grows stale and is gone. Then you have to find another one to replace it. But ordinarily we don't get so upset about

replacing it because then the new pleasure provides more fodder for our sensual obsessions, and as long as we can keep on obsessing, we feel we're okay.

So our craving for sensuality, this tendency of the mind to keep obsessing about, planning about, how it's going to experience different sensual pleasures: That's what we're really attached to. We really cling to that, feed on that. It's our fodder. So that's the first kind of craving.

Second is the craving to become something—in other words, to take on an identity in a specific world of experience. The identity often plays into the world, the world plays into the identity. Whatever identity you build around a desire will then determine the parts of the world you pay attention to, in terms of whether they help or hinder you from attaining that desire. At the same time, whichever world you're thinking about right now—whether it's the world of sports, politics, or your family—will then determine the kind of identity you want to take on in that world. And we crave these things. We feel diminished if we're unable to assume an identity in a particular world that we think is important, interesting, or attractive.

And then there's craving for non-becoming—in other words, the desire to destroy whatever identity you've had, whatever world you may be experiencing, when you tire of it.

These three types of craving are the activities that add the unnecessary suffering. People sometimes assume that you can go beyond these three types of craving simply by learning to be nonreactive. But I've never seen the texts list right non-reactivity as a factor of the path. Instead, the path is largely about doing: developing and letting go. You want to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. Like right now: We're developing right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These are *sankharas*: things we do, things we fabricate.

Sometimes non-reactivity gets inserted into the path under the factor of right mindfulness. But the Buddha never defined mindfulness as non-reactivity. Mindfulness in his lexicon means the ability to keep something in mind. And there is such a thing as right mindfulness and wrong mindfulness. Wrong mindfulness is when you keep in mind desires that get you worked up about the world. Right mindfulness is when you take any of four frames of reference and keep them in mind as a basis for right concentration.

Now, when the Buddha teaches concentration, he does start out with non-reactivity or equanimity as a prerequisite. Before he teaches Rahula breath meditation, he tells him first to make his mind like earth. When disgusting things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't react. Then he adds, "Make your mind like water. Water doesn't get disgusted when it has to wash away disgusting things. Make your mind like fire. Fire doesn't get disgusted when it burns disgusting things. Make your mind like wind. Wind doesn't get disgusted when it blows disgusting things around." You try to make your mind imperturbable like the elements.

So here there *would* be an element of non-reactivity. But this non-reactivity is for the purpose of putting your mind in a position where it can observe things clearly, and in particular, to observe your actions and their results in a patient, reliable way. Because when you start working with the breath, you're not just looking at the breath in a nonreactive way. You're working with it, playing with

it, mastering it through experimenting with it. And you want to be able to judge the results of your experiments in a fair and accurate manner.

The Buddha once recommended to the monks that they practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "I already do that." The Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you practice?" The monk said, "I learn how not to hanker after the past, not to hanker after the future, and to be equanimous toward the present, as I breathe in, as I breathe out." And the Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, I don't deny it. But that's not how you get the most out of breath meditation." Then he went into the sixteen steps as the way you *do* get the most out of breath meditation.

Now, if you look carefully at those steps, you'll see that they involve a lot of willing, a lot of training of the mind to develop certain qualities. You don't just sit here and watch whatever breath comes up willy-nilly, or pretend that you're not playing any intentional role in shaping the breath. Instead, you're explicitly told to explore that intentional role, first by being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, then by calming the breath, calming the effect that the breathing has on the body, calming the intentional element that goes into the breath, making it more and more refined so that you can give rise to a sense of ease and rapture.

Then you notice how these feelings of ease and rapture play a role in shaping the mind, and how your perception of the breath plays a role in shaping the mind. You try to calm the impact of that role, make it more refined. Then you see what the mind needs. Does it need to be gladdened? Does it need to be steadied? Does it need to be released from anything it's holding on to? How do you breathe in a way that helps accomplish that? How do you play with your perception of the breath, your perception of your feelings, in order to accomplish that? What other topics—like the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, or recollection of death—can you bring to mind to accomplish that? In other words, what kinds of physical, verbal, and mental fabrications can you master to bring the mind into balance?

These are all things you do with the breath, things you do with directed thought and evaluation, with feeling and perception. And the equanimity here is simply allowing you to observe clearly what's happening so you can do these things more effectively. In the process, you see more clearly what you're actually doing.

You're using the breath to feed the mind.

This is one of the underlying images throughout the Buddha's teachings: that the mind is hungry. This is why we suffer. We're hungry for form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. We suffer because we cling to these things. The word for "clinging"—*upadana*—also means to take sustenance from something. You feed on things, and it's because you feed that you suffer. The Buddha's solution is not simply to say, "Well, just stop feeding because there's no really good food out there." That would be a very defeatist kind of teaching. And it wouldn't be very effective. It would be as if he were saying, "Okay, you're hungry, but you learn how not to be hungry by realizing there's no such thing as good food." That doesn't work with the body, and certainly doesn't work with the mind. The way to stop the mind from being hungry is to feed it so well that it's never hungry again.

This is where the analogy between the body and the mind breaks down. There's no way you could ever put the body in a position where it's totally free from hunger, but you *can* do that with the mind. And you do that not simply by learning how to accept things as unsatisfactory. You feed the mind with the good qualities you're developing. You work on your conviction, your persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment as healthy food for the mind.

These are qualities developed on the path that strengthen the mind. And especially discernment: understanding what you're doing, the results of what you're doing, seeing where the unnecessary stress is in all of this, so that you let go of whatever activities are causing that unnecessary stress. When you don't put unnecessary stress on the mind, you lessen its need to feed.

In the course of doing that, you run across something unexpected. As you let go of your attachments, you find that the mind really can touch something that's deathless. The Buddha calls it seeing the deathless with the body, or touching it with the body. It's a total experience. It's not just an idea. It totally replaces your experience of the body. And it totally satisfies your hunger.

With your first experience of it at stream-entry, you realize that this would satisfy hunger. However, only the arahants are totally satisfied. They have totally ended their hunger and, from that point on, can be truly equanimous about whatever arises at the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, or the mind. Not because they have become defeatist, saying, "Well, there is really no happiness to be found, so I might as well give up and just accept the fact." It's because their hunger has truly been satisfied. The mind no longer feels any need to feed on anything at all. That's why they can be equanimous toward the other things that, in the past, they looked to for food. Now they've found a much better happiness that doesn't need to feed.

But to get there requires feeding the mind with a lot of mindfulness and concentration that can strengthen your discernment to see these things. The deathless is available at any time, but our discernment isn't refined enough, isn't precise enough, to detect it. This is why discernment has to be trained. This is why the path is a gradual one. But it does have its turning points, or its sudden drops. The Buddha's image is of the continental shelf off of India: a gradual slope and then a sudden drop. The sudden drop is when you detect the deathless. It's a sudden, total experience. And a lot of comprehension comes along with that. You know immediately: This is deathless; this is something that time can't touch, because it's outside of time.

So the comprehension is instantaneous. We work toward it by gradually refining our discernment. When the path reaches that point, the comprehension goes very deep, very suddenly. It gives a lot of satisfaction. That's why the arahants no longer hunger. Now, the arahants haven't burned off any past kamma, but beginning with the point of their awakening, they do relate to past kamma in a very different way. All kinds of things can come up from the past, and there can still be a lot of negative stuff in an arahant's experience. Ven. Mogallana, for instance, was beaten again and again and again before he finally died. He realized it was the result of an action in a past lifetime when he had killed his parents. *But* his mind wasn't harmed by this, his mind wasn't hurt by it, because he didn't create any suffering out of it.

As the Buddha once said, it's through making the mind expansive that you can greatly minimize the impact of any past bad kamma—expansive in terms of

the brahma-viharas: limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity. And also expansive through what's called developing the body and developing the mind: in other words, learning how to make the mind so large that it isn't overcome by pleasure or overcome by pain. The arahant is totally able to do this with no effort, but we work on developing these skills in a gradual way by providing alternative places for the mind to stay.

In other words, when there's pain in one part of the body, you can stay with the comfortable sensations you develop through concentration in another part of the body. You can will yourself to some extent not to be overcome by these things, to be equanimous to these things, but that willing is impermanent and doesn't totally solve the problem. Only when you've reached the deathless do you have another source of pleasure that totally overwhelms the experience of pleasure and pain. It keeps you from being overwhelmed by ordinary pleasure or pain. This sort of equanimity comes from a much deeper source. It doesn't have to be willed, and so it's totally reliable.

This is why, from the outside, nibbana looks a lot like equanimity. There's a great deal of misunderstanding around this point. It looks like equanimity, but it's not. In fact, you have to go beyond all the various levels of equanimity—equanimity around the senses, the equanimity of all the highest levels of concentration—to a state of non-fashioning if you're even going to get to nibbana. One of the *results* of attaining nibbana is that you can be totally detached and equanimous toward the six senses, but as the Buddha said, nibbana itself is the ultimate happiness. He doesn't say it's the ultimate equanimity. It's the ultimate happiness. The arahant no longer hungers, because he or she is totally satisfied with a happiness that doesn't need to feed.

And at that point, kamma is ended. They say that the arahant continues to formulate intentions, but each intention is like a seed that's been burnt as soon as it's created. This is the only place where the Buddha talks about burning the intention. He says it's like taking a seed and then immediately burning it so that it doesn't sprout into anything else. How that happens, you'd have to be an arahant to know. But the only way you can get started in understanding the arahant's answer and developing the arahant's skill, is by really understanding what you're doing right now, understanding your present kamma. You can't learn how to have intentions that don't sprout until you've learned how your current intentions do sprout.

This is what we're doing as we practice meditation. We're trying to plant good intentions and then watch how they sprout. From that we learn how to give rise to more and more refined intentions, so that they give more and more refined sprouts. At the same time we gain a greater refinement in understanding how kamma actually happens. When you finally see through it, you'll know how to do it but without having it sprout.

So you can't simply will yourself to be nonreactive and hope that that will take care of everything—or even think that it's somehow burning off kamma—because the willing to be nonreactive is a kind of kamma itself. The correct willing here is in trying to develop right mindfulness, right concentration, all the right factors of the path, as skillfully as possible. And in developing these skills, you gain a lot of discernment. The things you know the most clearly are the things you do yourself.

This means that you should learn how to do this really, really skillfully, so you understand it through and through. You comprehend it to the point where you develop dispassion for it, and in developing dispassion, that's when you stop. You know how to stop because you know what you've been doing.

This is how the kamma of the path leads to the end of kamma. It teaches you to understand kamma so thoroughly that you can plant seeds that don't sprout. You don't have to suffer from your past kamma, and you're not suffering from present kamma. The mind is no longer hungry. So it doesn't feed on its kamma, past or present, because it's found the happiness that eliminates any further need to feed.