

# *The Uses of Equanimity*

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When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, Rahula, he first gave him an exercise in developing patience and equanimity. It's important to see how the two practices are related, because they show that equanimity doesn't mean passivity, or simply accepting things as they are and leaving them at that. Rather, it's meant to serve a purpose—to allow you to see more clearly, to learn how to accept what can't be changed, but also to look for what *can* be changed, where you can make a difference. Even when you accept the fact that there's a lot of suffering in life, it doesn't mean that you stop there. You look for the area where there is no suffering, where suffering can be put to an end.

When the Buddha taught Rahula, he said, "Start out by making your mind like earth. When disgusting things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't shrink away." We can also add that when wonderful things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't get excited. The Buddha then said, "Make your mind like water. When water has to wash away disgusting things, it doesn't get disgusted. Or like fire: when fire burns disgusting things, it doesn't get disgusted. Or when wind blows away disgusting things, the wind isn't disgusted. It stays unchanged. Make your mind like that."

But the Buddha didn't stop there, simply with acceptance. He wasn't teaching Rahula to be a clod of dirt. He went on to teach breath meditation, and breath meditation isn't simply accepting the breath whatever way it is. It's very proactive. "Learn to breathe," he said, "sensitive to the whole body. Calming the way you breathe. Train yourself to become sensitive to where there's pleasure, to where there's a sense of refreshment or rapture in the breathing. Notice how these feelings have an effect on the mind and then allow them to grow calm."

What this means is that, building on equanimity and patience, you become proactive. In other words, the equanimity and patience are designed to make you see clearly. When you lack equanimity, you react immediately to whatever happens and you don't get to see, "Well, what happens if I just sit with this for a while? Where does it lead?" When you're equanimous, you can begin to see cause and effect more clearly over the long term, without being blinded by your knee-jerk reactions. You can watch stress with the purpose of seeing what causes it, what arises together with the stress. The stronger your equanimity, the more you can see.

So equanimity and acceptance are not an ends in and of themselves. They're a means to knowledge, the knowledge we develop around the four noble truths: looking for the stress, trying to comprehend it to the point where you can see what's causing it, what activities you're engaged in that are contributing to the stress, and learning how to stop those activities, to drop them. That's where you let go.

Essentially, equanimity allows you to learn the terrain. When you know the terrain, you can find the path. Life doesn't necessarily follow your wishes, but if you're patient enough and observant enough, you begin to see that it does offer opportunities for an end to suffering. That's essentially the Buddha's message.

You want to develop your powers of observation so you can see that for yourself.

This is why we practice concentration: to get the mind solid in the face of whatever comes up. But that solidity has to come from learning how to develop strengths: a sense of well-being, a sense of ease inside the body, an ease inside the mind, so as to assist in keeping you solid.

The secret to patience or endurance is to focus not on the hard things you have to endure, but on where you can still find sources of help, sources of strength. Learning how to be with the breath in a way that induces feelings of pleasure, feelings of rapture or refreshment is an important source of strength both for the body and for the mind.

This provides you with a general pattern that you can use throughout life. When you run into limitations, you test them first to make sure they really are limitations. If you find that they are, you look for other areas where you can make a difference.

There was an old woman in Thailand, a doctor, who went with a friend to see Ajaan MahaBoowa. The friend was suffering from cancer, and the two of them stayed with Ajaan Mahaboowa for several months. While they were there, Ajaan Mahaboowa gave a Dhamma talk almost every night for the woman suffering from cancer because she knew she was going to die. The woman with cancer taped every Dhamma talk, and after she died, they found she had left behind a lot of tapes. So the old woman doctor set about transcribing the tapes, and ended up with two very large books. As she said in the preface to the books, one of the lessons she had learned from Ajaan Mahaboowa was that as you grow old and find yourself running into limitations, look for the areas where you still have strength, where you still can make a difference, where you can still offer something of goodness to the world. She was still strong enough to transcribe the tapes, so that was her offering.

There's a similar lesson in the Canon. A couple of old brahmans go to see the Buddha, and say, "We're now old. How should we live as we are old?" And the Buddha replies, "You can still be generous." Even though there are limitations on your strength, there must be *some* ways you can be generous to the world. Look for those. This principle applies all throughout the practice. You're sitting here. You find that there are areas in the body that are painful. You can ask yourself, "Which parts of the body aren't painful? How can you breathe in ways that will induce a sense of ease in those parts of the body so that sense of ease becomes stronger?" Then you can begin to use those parts as a foundation, as a source of strength in dealing with the pain.

So things don't just stop with equanimity. The purpose of equanimity is to see more clearly. When your mind is more even and still, it's less likely to be swayed by events. That way it can watch things as they actually happen. And you see that there's still an opening. Even when you face death, you realize there's part of the mind that doesn't die. As for the things that do die, you have to develop equanimity for them. And more than just equanimity: You have to learn how not to identify with them.

The Buddha talks about different levels of equanimity. There's the equanimity that simply comes from intentionally keeping your mind calm and balanced in the face of input of the senses. He calls that equanimity based on multiplicity, i.e., the multiplicity of the senses. Then there's the equanimity based on singularity,

when you get the mind to a sense of oneness in strong concentration. This is more solid, more secure, because you have something really singular and solid to base the equanimity on, and not just a reminder that you want to stay equanimous, or should stay equanimous. You've got a real foundation that lies beyond the reach of a lot of sensory input.

But even that isn't enough, because if you don't go further you'll start identifying with that solid sense of equanimity. As long as you have to identify with something, it's a good thing to identify with, but if you want real freedom, the Buddha recommends learning how to see where you're creating a sense of "me" and "mine" around that equanimity, in the narratives you build about where you are.

First you can practice applying this sort of analysis to other things. Once the mind is still, you can look at other affairs in your life to see what kind of narratives you've built around them—your identity as a painter, a cook, a carpenter, a musician. Of course, aging and death can get in the way of those identities. So you can ask yourself, "Does my happiness really have to depend on maintaining that identity?" Because that's originally why you created that identity to begin with. You developed those skills in search of happiness. And they do provide some measure of happiness, but that happiness has its limitations, for it's based on skills that will have to deteriorate someday.

Learning how to identify with the equanimity helps you step back from those identities, because it gives you something more solid on which to take your stance. But eventually you have to step back from the equanimity itself, because even it is fabricated. This is when the mind goes beyond equanimity to non-fashioning: not fashioning a sense of "I" or "mine" around even your highest attainments. And hopefully the practice you've had in learning how to cut through your old narratives can help you in this step as well.

When death comes, if you've had practice in learning how not to identify with the things you've been identifying with up to now, it's going to be a lot easier to let them go. Then you can learn to look at the situation where you are at that moment: "Where are the escape routes here?" As Ajaan MahaBoowa told the woman who was dying of cancer, when the time comes, have a very clear sense of your awareness as something separate from the pain. Now, you don't want to wait to the last moment to develop that sense. Develop it as much as you can while you're still strong, realizing that your awareness of the pain is one thing, the pain itself is something else.

One way of helping this along is, when you see a pain in the body, to remind yourself that there are body sensations and there are pain sensations, and the two are different sorts of things. Body sensations are things like earth, water, wind, and fire; in other words, your sense of solidity, liquidity, warmth, energy in the body. That's one level of sensation. Then there's the actual pain sensation, which is another level of sensation. They're there together, but they're separate. You can learn how to see them as separate. That's when you can really observe the pain. The problem is that we tend to glom these things together. If you glom the pain with the warmth, it becomes hot. If you glom it with a sense of solidity, it becomes solid, heavy. And then it's just like a big immovable lump. But if you see that solidity is one thing and the pain is something else, the pain just seems to flit around. Even if it's strong, it's very erratic, and not nearly as monolithic and

scary as it originally seemed.

So even though the pain may be there, you realize that it's not the same sort of thing you thought it was. You can see that it's something separate. The two things are there in the same place, but they're different things, on different levels. Then you can apply the same principle to your awareness of both of the pain and the body sensations. The awareness is right there too, but it's separate. Then when the time comes, you can ask yourself, "Which is going to stop first, the pain or the awareness?" And there'll be an awareness in there that doesn't do anything and doesn't die. You have to peel away different layers of mental activity around it, but there is something in there that doesn't die. You can be confident of that. Confident enough to let go of everything else.

This is why the Buddha has us develop equanimity, patience, and acceptance. It's not the case that mere acceptance is all you need to do, or all you can do. If that were the case, there wouldn't be four noble truths with four different duties. There'd be only one: There's pain, suffering, stress, and your duty is to learn how to accept it. Once I heard someone say that the Buddha claimed to teach only one thing—pain and the ending of pain—meaning that in accepting the fact of pain, you're doing all you can to put an end to pain. But that doesn't really end the suffering. And that's not what the Buddha taught at all. He didn't claim to teach only one thing. He taught suffering and the end of suffering as two different things. There is a way out. There is an escape. Suffering does end. But you have to learn to accept where there is suffering and what's causing it; you have to learn and accept the things you can change, the things you can't. Then focus on what you can change to make your escape.

That's what equanimity is for: so that you can find the escape. The more solid your mind is, the more clearly the escape will appear. So when you run into areas where you're no longer in control, you no longer have the strength you used to have, look for where you still *do* have strengths. Make the most of them. Because it's in that fighting spirit, your unwillingness to admit total defeat: That's where freedom is found.