

The Equanimity of a Cow

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There's a story they tell about a monk who once stayed with Ajaan Chah during the rains retreat. Half of the roof of his hut blew off in a rain storm, and as Ajaan Chah was later walking around the monastery to check on the storm damage, he noticed that half of the roof had blown off and that the monk was simply sleeping in that half of the hut that was still roofed. Ajaan Chah asked him, "Why are you doing this? Why aren't you fixing your hut?" The monk said, I'm trying to practice equanimity. Ajaan Chah's response was: "That's not the equanimity that the Buddha taught, that's the equanimity of a water buffalo," or we in English would say, it's the equanimity of a cow.

The point here is that the Buddha didn't teach us just to be passive about things, or just to accept things. The basic concept of the path is the difference between skillful and unskillful, and there are times when simple equanimity is not skillful. The Buddha said you have to look into your mind and see what works. There are skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. There are times when you practice according to your pleasure, and it leads to defilements arising in the mind. That's when you have to practice with pain. Whether you want to or not, that's what you've got to do because you have to be very careful not to let greed, anger, and delusion overcome the mind. Those are things you can't be equanimous about.

Now, sometimes, simply watching these things come into the mind will be enough to make them fade away. As Ajaan Lee once said, they get embarrassed if you really look at them intently. There are other times though, when they won't go away, no matter how much you look at them, in which case you have to fight them off. You have to be proactive in preventing them or, if they're already there, proactive in getting rid of them. An important skill in the path is learning when to be just an observer and when to be more proactive. Again this falls back on the concepts of skillful and unskillful, which are so basic to everything.

So this is one of the reasons we work with the breath in both ways, both being proactive and simply watching it, so as to get a sense of when it's skillful to manipulate the breath, vary the length of the breath, the depth of the breath, quality of the breath, when to move the breath energy around the body; and then when to have a sense of just simply sitting there and watching the breath. Simply to accept things as they are is basically to deny something else, which is that you have power, the power to change the present. One of the skills you have to learn is exactly how much power you can exercise skillfully at any particular moment. When things are going well, how do you maintain them? What do you do in order to keep them going well—because sometimes all you have to do is just keep watching, watching, watching, and that's enough. Other times you have to interfere, to help things along, in order to keep them going well.

You see this as you try to get the mind to settle down. It takes one set of skills to get the mind in place and then another set of skills to keep it there, learning which of the activities that you have to do in order to get the mind to settle down still need to be done, and which ones can be abandoned.

You can see this in the description of jhana. It requires directed thought and evaluation to get the mind in the first jhana. You have to keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath and evaluating the breath: What can you do to make it more comfortable? What can you do to maximize that sense of comfort and spread it throughout the body? Then there comes a point where you've done everything you can. Ajaan Fuang's image was of a water jar. You've finally got the jar full; the body is full of breath energy from the top to the bottom, as much you as you can fill it up. Then, he says, no matter how much more water you put into it, it can't get any fuller than that. So you have to get a sense of how much is full for your body and then just stay there, maintain that sense of fullness. At that point you can let go of the directed thought and evaluation. Just keep watch.

It's in learning how to read the mind in its various levels of concentration, the various types of concentration you can get it into: That's when you learn how to read all the important things going on in the mind, in terms of the aggregates, in terms of how you relate to pain, in terms of how you create suffering, all the elements are right there. What makes these potentials actual is learning to bring the mind to a state of balanced concentration, where you develop sensitivity, where you can see these things in action. Then you develop a sure sense of touch as to when you let things simply be and when you move in and make changes.

Once you develop that touch, that sure sense of touch inside, you also began to notice that you begin to get more sensitive outside in the way you deal with other people. As we're here in the monastery, a top priority has to be meditation, but we're also living in a community. Learn how to deal with other people, learn how to keep things going smoothly. The question is, how much do you really have to *do* in order to keep things going smoothly and how much doing is excessive? How much is detrimental? When is it better to just watch what's going on.

One important guide is just to keep tabs on your breath all the time, and when you notice that a particular conversation or a particular interaction with somebody else is interfering with your ability to focus on the breath, you have to ask yourself, "Should I continue with this, or is it time to back off?" Here the emphasis is on maintaining your state of mind, so back off as soon as you can if you notice that you've lost the breath or your breath is getting stirred up.

What this means, of course, is keeping conversations to a minimum. Understand that other people want to keep their conversations to a minimum as well. Only when something really has to be hashed out: That's when you sit down and have long conversations. Again the question is, how do you know when? Well, you try to get more and more sensitive to this, realize that this is a big issue as we live together: which things have to be hashed out, which can be left aside. There are no simple-minded rules of thumb here. As with all aspects of the practice, you need to learn how to develop that sense of touch. In the course of developing it, you're going to make mistakes, but learn how to recognize them, and correct your course. That way, when the time comes to get back with just you and the breath, there are a lot fewer issues to sort through before you can settle down.

So be alert to the fact that you're never totally passive. There is always some activity going on, even if it's just the activity being the watcher. After all, your equanimity is a kind of action. It's an intention in the mind. But realize that you have a whole range of things you can do to the present moment, and do your best to carry your intention to stay with the breath with you at all times. Even when you leave the monastery, have a sense of the body—at those times when you can't be fully aware of the ins and outs of the breath, at least have a sense of the presence of

your body, where your feet are, where your hands are, and try to keep a sense of relaxation in the body. If you notice that there's tension, just allow it to dissipate. Breathe through it.

Some people might say that this is just too much to do any one time, focusing on the breath and dealing with other situations. But actually, the mind is already taking on several activities all at once, and a lot of those activities are just extraneous. You're supposed to be working on one thing, but your mind is thinking about something else, totally unrelated. Well, take that part of your mind and put it to work on the breath. Remember that there's one way of resting aside from just simply going to sleep, and that's finding work that's restful. Often that's much better for you than just going off to sleep. So work with the breath in a way that's restful or invigorating or whatever you need at that particular time.

Your skills as a meditator depend on having that sense of touch, learning what you have to accept and what you don't have to accept. Accept not only things as they are, but also accept the fact that you have the potential to improve things when they're not really up to standard. When the Buddha talks about contentment, he talks about being content about your food, your clothing, your shelter, and medicine, but *not* being content to let unskillful states take over the mind. Those, he said, you have to try to get rid of as quickly as possible, as if your hair were on fire, or your hat or your turban was on fire. Put it out as quickly as possible.

So the equanimity you develop is the equanimity of the Buddha, not the equanimity of a cow. In other words, your equanimity is skillfully applied. Carry around as your main category, or your main thought in the back of your mind, the question of skill and lack of skill: what's skillful to say, what's skillful to do, what's skillful to think right now and what's not. That pair, that duality is extremely important. Without it, the path doesn't make sense, doesn't work. With it, you can turn any experience, any moment, into part of your practice of the path. So always keep it firmly in mind.