

Equanimity Isn't Apathy

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There's a discourse where the Buddha teaches his son, Rahula, how to meditate. Before he teaches him breath meditation, he tells Rahula, "Train your mind to be like the earth. When foul things are thrown on the earth, the earth isn't disgusted. When fragrant things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't get enchanted." Then he goes on to the other elements. Fire burns trashy things, and isn't disgusted by them, and it burns fragrant things and isn't delighted by them. Water washes away dirty things, it washes away fragrant things, but it doesn't feel one way or the other about them. Wind blows foul things around, and it blows fragrant things around, and it doesn't get disgusted by the one or excited by the other.

So having established this principle of equanimity, this principle of not letting your mind get elated by good things or depressed by bad things, the Buddha then starts in with the teaching on breath meditation. But he doesn't teach Rahula to be apathetic about the breath, saying, well, just accept whatever breathing there is. Part of the instructions is to train yourself to breathe in such a way that you're sensitive to the whole body, that you experience pleasure, that you experience rapture. These are trainings—things you have to will to happen.

So equanimity doesn't mean apathy. It means putting your mind in a position where it's able to learn about cause and effect. You want to observe how things actually happen without your likes and dislikes getting in the way of seeing what's actually going on, but you have definite preferences underlying your desire to observe. You want to observe so that you can learn how to breathe in a way that's comfortable. You want to develop rapture. You want to develop pleasure, because these things are important in the practice. You need them to keep going. Without them the practice gets dull, apathetic, and dry. It begins to burn out.

What the Buddha was training Rahula in, was a state of mind that's able to see cause and effect. Often when things go really well, you get excited and you lose it. When things go bad, you get disgusted and you drop it. You aren't stable enough to observe *why* they're good, *why* they're bad. You don't learn either way. The attitude the Buddha wants is that when things go well, you learn why they're going well. Instead of getting carried away with how wonderful things are, you ask, what's happening here? What caused this state? Sometimes the analysis, if you do it while things are happening, will mess things up, so you have to learn how to do it right afterwards. Sometimes, though, it doesn't. If your

concentration is strong enough, you can observe what you're *while* you're doing it.

So, the issue lies in getting your mind in a state where it's willing to learn, where it's able to observe cause and effect, so you can master the skill. That's how equanimity functions. It doesn't mean not caring about what happens. You care, but you also care to learn about cause and effect: what really works in getting the breath to be comfortable, what really works in getting the mind to settle down. You can't just go on the power of wanting things to be this way or that. You've got to learn what actually works, what doesn't work. You may have some ideas about what should work, but when you find that they don't, you drop them. You're not attached to them.

There's that famous passage where the Third Zen Patriarch says that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. In terms of the Buddha's teachings, there's only one way that that makes sense, which is that you don't have preferences about what's going to work. You admit what works, you admit what doesn't work. There may be ways of meditating that you would like to see work, but if they don't work, you put them aside. There may be methods that you have a preconceived dislike for, but if you find that they actually work, you don't let your likes and dislikes get in the way. That makes the great way a lot easier.

Look at the Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths. You treat the cause of stress differently from the path to the end of stress. You try to abandon the cause and to develop the path. It's not that you say, "I don't care which happens, whether it's stress or not stress." You do care. You care so much that you're really willing to learn, to put in all the time and effort required to learn. But you may find that it requires you to meditate on the 32 parts of the body. A lot of people don't like that, but it can be very effective. You realize that if you're going to overcome lust, you really have to look into the body, take it apart, section by section by section in your mind. Then do it again, and again, and again, however many times is required until the results really do cut through lust.

You may decide that you prefer a path that's easy and pleasant, a path that involves just letting go, letting go, not having to make an effort, not having to develop any skill, not having to attain any goal. But when you find that that doesn't work, you have to put it aside, along with all your preconceived notions. If a path that works takes a lot of work, don't be afraid of it. The mind has lots of ways of looking for an easy way out. "All that work that goes into concentration practice is just an attachment," you might say. "Well, I'm going to be beyond that attachment, skip over that, because I've already seen through it." You can't skip over it. You've got to go through the process because mastering the process is what develops your discernment.

The mind can find all kinds of ways of avoiding the effort in the practice. You might decide, “Well, I’m just not up to this. I’m not good enough for this. I’m not cut out for this.” Learn to recognize that kind of thinking for what it is. It’s the voice of laziness trying to find some way to get around the practice. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, don’t be afraid of the effort that’s needed in the practice. Don’t regard it as an executioner. It’s not going to kill you. It just may take more out of you than you might want. But think of the alternative if you don’t do it. You end up looking back on your life, saying, “Gee, I could have put more into it, but I didn’t.” That’s not a good way to look back at your life. It’s better to say, “I knew what needed to be done and I did it. Whether I got all the way or not, at least I gave it my all. If I haven’t gotten all the way yet, I’ve got another lifetime coming up. I can work on it again.”

That’s what it means to be a person with no preferences. You put in the amount of work that’s required. You learn to develop the skills that are required. Whatever the path requires, you’re up for it. If you don’t feel up for it, you find ways of *making* yourself up for it. You’re willing to put in all the meticulousness that it requires, and all the time, and all the energy, learning to be very, very observant. When you find something that works, then whether you like it or not, you master it. But if you try to plan the path out beforehand, that’s just your ignorance talking, your preferences talking. You’ve been following your ignorance and your preferences for how many lifetimes? Sometimes they lead you to good places, but a lot of times they don’t. So it’s time to put them aside.

Learn to develop the mind that’s like earth. Learn to develop the mind that’s like fire—not in the sense of burning you up, but in the sense of being willing to burn anything, likable or not. That’s its natural duty. Think of the meditation as your natural duty. You’re here in this body. This body is causing suffering for a lot of other beings, because in order to keep it alive you’ve got to feed it, you’ve got to clothe it, you’ve got to provide it shelter. Look at all the work that goes into providing shelter. We’ve been building these huts now for two years and they’re still not done. For this body to stay alive it’s depending on the suffering of other people, other beings. When you put this body aside, you’re going to get another one, and regardless of what kind of body it is, it’s going to be the same process over and over again. There is, however, a path out of this process. It yields the highest happiness for you and doesn’t impose anything on anybody else. The meditation is that path. So think of that as a duty. Whatever is required, you do it, without letting your preferences get in the way.

Each of the four noble truths has its own specific duty, is based on the preference not to suffer. You definitely do want to work toward the end of suffering. You do prefer that. That’s a legitimate preference. The question is,

what's required to get there? When you've learned the requirements, you do whatever is needed to be done—even when you've completed the task.

Look at the Buddha. Even after his Awakening, he spent 45 years establishing the teaching, the Dhamma and the Vinaya. It took a lot of work. And he didn't do it with an apathetic attitude, thinking, "I don't care whether it works or not." He put a lot of effort into making it a teaching that would last. He noticed that some people would take the teaching and use it to good purpose, but he didn't let himself get elated about that. There were people who listened but then didn't really put it to any good use. He knew how not to get depressed about that. He had established mindfulness in such a way that he did what needed to be done. Of course, he preferred to do a good job of teaching. But as for the results that came, how other people took the teaching, that's where he developed the mind that was like earth, water, fire, and wind. He did his best, but as for how other people would take what he did, he learned how to put that aside.

So apathy has no place in the teaching. You need to have preferences. You do want to put an end to suffering. You have to see that preference as so important that you're willing to put all of your other preferences—and especially your preference for apathy—aside.