

Educating Equanimity

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Years back, in the very first year of the monastery, one of Ajaan Suwat's students took us to a meditation garden on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It was a beautiful spot: very neat trails under the trees, benches surrounded by flowers, spectacular view over the ocean with the sun sparkling on the water. Ajaan Suwat took one look at it and said, "This is a horrible place to meditate." He said, "How are you going to see suffering?"

This is an important point to think about whenever you're concerned about looking for the perfect place to meditate. On the one hand, there *are* certain things you want for comfort and convenience, but if everything is comfortable and everything is convenient, there's nothing to test you. If everything falls in line with your notions of how they should be, there's nothing to test you. And it's in the tests that you develop the strengths you need.

This is why, as we practice, we're learning to develop a sense of ease and a sense of well-being *inside*, in the meditation as we get to know the breath, get to know the breath energy in the body: not simply to have a nice place to chill out, but also to give ourselves a foundation for dealing with the difficulties that are bound to arise. I've heard people complain about Ajaan Lee's method of meditation where he focuses on the comfort in the breath, saying that this gets you attached to comfort. But if you don't have a source of well-being to hold on to, it's going to be really hard to deal with the difficult situations that the breath can't cover, that the breath can't change.

The mind needs its strength. It needs a foundation, so that when you're letting go, it's not out of neurotic fear or hatred or aversion. You're letting go out of understanding. You're letting go because you realize there is something better. You've been holding on to middling pleasures, minor pleasures, and in so doing you've been missing out on the greater pleasures that come from training the mind.

At the same time, as you encounter difficult issues in life—areas where you really cannot make a change, where you can't make a difference—you can regard them with more equanimity. You realize that your happiness, your well-being, doesn't depend on things being a particular way. You also learn a sense of your own limitations and the limitations of the world around you. The human realm is not a perfect place, it's never going to be a perfect place. This doesn't mean we should stop trying to improve it where we can, but we should also have a sense that we can't get everything to be the way we want it to be.

And it's not just a question of personal preferences. Sometimes you see that other people are suffering, other people are making wrong decisions, and *you can't stop it from happening*. This is probably one of the hardest parts about living in the human world: There's a lot of injustice, there's a lot of suffering out there. A lot of people are making a lot of very

unskillful decisions. Sometimes it affects people who are close to us, and that really hurts. But we should also stop and think: “It’s not just people who are close to us who are being harmed by unskillful decisions, it’s people all over the world.”

This is where you have to develop a certain amount of equanimity. It’s not hardheartedness, it’s more a realistic sense of what you’re capable of doing, where your energies are well-spent. This means that equanimity requires wisdom, it requires discernment, so that you can learn how to read a situation: Is this one where you can make a difference? Or is it one where you can’t? And given the way the brahmaviharas are set out—starting with goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy before they get to equanimity—the basic message is that you work on your goodwill first, you work on your compassion first, you try to *do* something when you see there may be a possibility that you can be of help. Only when you realize that you can’t—that’s when you have to develop equanimity.

But it’s good to develop equanimity beforehand, to have it in reserve. This means that when we’re spreading equanimity to all beings, it doesn’t mean we’re just indifferent to all beings. It means that we want to be able to call on equanimity when we need it, even with regard to people who are close to us. Just as we develop goodwill for everybody so that when someone does something *really* harmful, either to us or to the people who are close to us, we can still draw on that goodwill because we’ve been practicing. When someone close to us is ill, or doing something really foolish, and they won’t let us change what’s happening; or the situation simply will not let us change what’s happening, you want to have equanimity on hand, so that it’s not a foreign idea, and you don’t feel like you’re being hardhearted, narrow, selfish, or indifferent.

I was reading the other day about a line from George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch*, saying that if we could really be keenly aware of all the suffering going on in the world, it’d be like a person who could hear the grass grow or hear a squirrel’s heartbeat. We would be killed, she said, by the roar that lies on the other side of silence. She went on to say that even the keenest among us goes around wadded in stupidity. It’s a bracing thought. But then again, how many of us could function if we were listening to every squirrel’s heartbeat and hearing the grass grow? We do have to function in this world. It’s not just stupidity that wads us. We want to learn how to wad ourselves with equanimity, with wisdom, so that in the areas where we can be of help, where we can make a difference, we’re ready to, we’re happy to. But we also know that there are limitations on what we can do in this world.

This is a very sobering thought. Some people *like* to hear that there are limitations. They feel it means they don’t have to try to make any change—and that’s wrong. Other people get really frustrated. Both tendencies have to be looked into. Both tendencies have to be checked. You have to learn how to teach yourself—you have to educate your feelings.

Years back, I wrote an article for a magazine called “Educating Compassion.” Before I sent the article in, I was talking to the editor about it, and she was saying, “Oh, you’re basically

teaching people to have more compassion.” I said, “No. The compassion is there, it’s learning how to educate it so that it’s wise.” When you say that you’re compassionate for someone who’s sick, for someone who’s dying, or for someone who’s going through some other form of suffering: What does it mean to be compassionate? There are people who would say euthanasia is compassionate. Other people say trying to keep the person alive as long as possible is compassionate. You have to look into both extremes. Exactly which of your own fears are getting involved so that you tend to define compassion in such an extreme way? If you have a fear of your own death, you might want to keep someone else alive as long as possible. If you have a fear of watching someone else suffer, you might want to say, “Well, just put them out of their misery, i.e., put me out of *my* misery.” And either way, your own fear is getting in the way.

You have to look into that, understand that, so that you can get beyond your fears and ask yourself, “What really is the best choice in this situation?” If there was somebody who was sick, the Buddha would have you teach that person the Dhamma. If the person is beyond being taught, you try to create an environment that at the very least provides them with a sense of well-being, to be mentally encouraged, mentally supported. The biggest thing to fear, say if someone is approaching death, is that the person’s going to be worried, going to be upset about something, because that tends to veer the mind off in a really bad direction.

So you’re not trying to speed up the process of death and you’re not necessarily trying to keep the person alive artificially. You’re trying to train the person in the Dhamma: That’s the ideal expression of compassion. And as for the things you’re afraid of, you have to develop equanimity for them.

Equanimity is not easy, but it’s helped along by, one, developing a sense of well-being in your own concentration, and two, learning how to look at your own mind. That way, if the mind wants to jump into a particular situation and say, “We’ve got to help it this way or change it that way,” you can step back and ask, “Okay, is that really the wisest thing to do? Or are you just being reactive or operating out of fear?” In other words, the best expression of compassion or of equanimity is to get to know your own mind, to see what’s motivating you in one particular direction or another.

Often we think of our emotions as being a given, “This is what I truly feel, this is the way I really feel, this is my identity.” We tend to trust our emotions more than our thoughts, perhaps because we know that a lot of our thoughts are just picked up from other people, but somehow we feel that our emotions are innate to us. Well, one, we do pick up emotions from other people, too. And two, our emotions really are determined by how we think. It’s not just raw feeling in there. Certain attitudes, certain ideas trigger those feelings. You want to learn how to see that happening.

It’s in this process of looking into your mind and really probing like this: This is where genuine insight arises. We hear so much about insight being insight into how things are

inconstant or impermanent, stressful or suffering, or not-self. And that is one aspect of discernment, but the Buddha teaches many other aspects as well. It's in working our way through those other aspects that you begin to realize exactly where the teachings on inconstancy, stress and not-self really function.

This is why it's important that you do probe into your attitudes toward things. When you find yourself reacting in one particular way or another, you want to learn how to question it. Try to get the mind as still and as centered as possible, and then from that improved perspective look into the way the mind is reasoning around its reaction. Ask, "Well, why do you feel this way?" The mind will say, "Of course, I feel this way." "Why?" See if you can get some answers, and then test the answers to see if they really make sense, to see where they're coming from. If the mind refuses to respond, you say, "Okay, I'm not going to act on you, then, if you refuse to explain yourself." Sometimes it's by saying No to a reaction that you find the rationale behind it.

So insight is not a matter of just imposing the Buddha's insights onto your mind, trying to clone insight from what you've read or what you've heard. It's more a matter of probing and understanding what's going on in your mind. How does the mind function? How does it explain things to itself? How does it justify things to itself? Which explanations are the wisest? Which show the most discernment? Which are coming, not from fear, but from understanding?

It's in this way that you educate your compassion, you educate your equanimity. As you learn how to educate your emotions in this way, you learn an awful lot about how to overcome stress and suffering. You cause yourself less suffering; you cause other people less suffering. The help that you offer is more effective, more likely to lead to genuine well-being for everybody involved.