

## *The Equanimity of a Victor*

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A common belief about Buddhism is that it's all about accepting change: that as long as you realize that things change, and are okay about it, that's the best kind of happiness you can find.

We hear this so much that it often comes as a surprise to find that the Buddha never says anything this. His images for the practice never involve people who simply relax, sit back, and accept. His most common images are of warriors and people who are searching. There's the person searching for heartwood, who has to learn how not to be satisfied with twigs and branches but should go all the way to the heartwood. There's a person looking for what can be gotten out of a snake and has to learn the skill of catching the snake properly.

Life is a search. We're all searching for happiness one way or another. And most people end up defeated. But the Buddha's path was not like that at all. As he said, it's "the unexcelled victory in battle." We're doing battle with our defilements, battle with our misunderstandings about what happiness is, our misunderstandings about what suffering is, battle with our greed, aversion, and delusion—which means that there's work to be done.

It's in this context that we develop equanimity: the equanimity of a searcher, the equanimity of a warrior. The searcher is the sort of person who has a clear idea of what he or she wants and realizes that this may take time and may require skill. That's what you have to be equanimous about: accepting the reality of the situation and so that you can focus on what you really want, what really needs to be done to get what you want.

One of the images for equanimity the Buddha uses is an elephant in battle. It's surrounded by all kinds of horrible things: horrible sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations; seeing other animals being taken down; hearing the cries of the animals who are suffering, the people who are suffering; hearing cries of the enemy; smelling the blood; getting struck with lances and swords. But the elephant has to just keep on doing its work. It can't let those other things dissuade it or get in the way.

In the same way, we live in a world where there's a lot that goes on that's pretty horrible. And it's not that we don't care, it's just that we realize that we can't solve the problems of the world at the end, we have to solve them at the beginning. And the beginning lies where? Inside the human heart, each human heart, each animal's heart. You can't be responsible for the hearts of others but you *can* be

responsible for yours. Otherwise, if you simply focus on looking after other people—it *is* a form of generosity, and it does develop good qualities inside—but you realize you can never come to the end.

I saw a faith healer in Brazil one time. The line of people coming to see him stretched for hours. And I stopped to think about it: All these people who have the karma for illnesses, when you treat the illnesses you're treating the end of the issue. Now, it *is* good if you have the skill to treat the end of the issue, but it's never going to come to an end. The end is when you turn around and look for the source of the issue inside. We suffer but we don't understand our suffering.

When the Buddha says suffering is the five clinging-aggregates, our immediate reaction is "What? What does that have to do with my suffering?" It seems abstract, far away, technical. But it really has to do with what you're doing. Because the aggregates are activities. They're actions. Even form is something you actively maintain. Your perception of form is something you have to keep up. Feelings, perceptions: you feel, you perceive. You fabricate thoughts and you're aware. These are things you're doing, and you cling to these actions in ignorance. That's the suffering. It's an active verb. Most of us don't think of it that way. It's because we don't think of it that way: That's why we're defeated by it.

Ajaan Lee's image is of trying to kill your enemy by stabbing his shadow. That doesn't work. You have to attack the actual enemy. In this case, you have to attack the actual clinging. Otherwise, if you attack physical pains or the disappointment, you can try to end these things, but as long as there's still clinging there's still going to be suffering.

So try to take advantage of the Buddha's analysis, because he's pointing out something that you should be searching for: how to understand suffering, how to put an end to it; how to look inside and where to look inside, how to look so that you can really comprehend it and can abandon the cause.

And that's what victory is. It's the goal of the search, the goal of the battle, learning how to look for happiness in the right places and finding it. The equanimity is there to gird you so that you're up for the battle and you have the strength to realize that "Whatever it takes, I can do it"—realizing that because you have limited strength, you have to focus your efforts on where they really will be productive.

So you have to be equanimous about everything that's not helpful in this quest. Other people may not like it; they may criticize you for not getting with their program. But what is their program? Where does it come from? What kind of victory are they looking for? And even if their campaigns win out, how lasting

is the victory? And how is it really relevant to the big issues that keep eating away at their hearts and yours?

The Buddha's offering what he calls unexcelled victory, and he's right. To follow his path requires perseverance, and perseverance requires being very selective in where you put out your energy, how you maintain your energy and how you don't squander it. So think of equanimity in this context. The Buddha's equanimity is not defeatist. It's the equanimity of a victor.