

To Stay the Course

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When the Buddha gave the most succinct statement of his awakening, it was a principle of causality, “From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. When this is, that is. When this isn’t, that isn’t.” Now he wasn’t stating it simply as a curiosity, that nature works this way. He was more interested in the principle of causality in your actions—in other words, your acts and their results. The results depend on the quality of the mind. And there’ll be some things you do that you like to do and they give good results; some things that you don’t like to do and they give bad results. Both of those are no-brainers. If you like to do it and it gives good results, it’s very easy to do it. If you don’t like to do it and it gives bad results, there’s no reason to do it.

It’s when you encounter actions that you don’t like to do but give good results, and those that you like to do that give bad results: That’s when you have to start thinking in terms of the direction of your life. Where do you want to go? Can you sacrifice your likes for the results, or are you going to let your likes take over? That’s a big question we face as we practice.

There are a lot of things that we have to let go of in the practice. Right now you could be thinking about all kinds of things, but no: It’s time to meditate. And there are a lot of things we have to do as we meditate. We have to keep bringing the mind back, bringing it back, bringing it back. Sometimes this gets tedious. But if you keep bringing it back, that’s because you have a sense of direction that these actions will go someplace. As the Buddha said, one of the great blessings of life, one of the great protections of life, is that you have yourself rightly directed. You have an idea of where you want to go and then you stick with it.

You want to make sure that you’re going to a good place. A lot of people have a lot of determination in life, but they’re headed off in the wrong direction. Other people have a purpose for a little while and then they change direction. Then they go back again and then they go someplace else. They’re like dust motes in the air. Look at a beam of sunlight going through the air, and you see these little tiny pieces of dust floating around. They bump up against the atoms in the air. They go around, up and down, and back and forth, and don’t really go anywhere at all. I’ve never seen dust motes in a sunbeam march in order rows across the beam.

A lot of people’s lives are like dust motes. Part of the problem is that they get easily distracted. And part of it is they simply don’t have the strength to stick with one thing, even though they know it’s good. This is where you have to develop the

qualities that will help you stick with it, and two of them are endurance and equanimity.

Endurance is the ability to put up with difficult things, and not do unskillful things in response. It's a kind of independence of mind that even though other people may be mistreating you, or the situation may be bad, you're not going to make that an excuse to mistreat others or to act in bad ways. But to stick with things, you have to have some inner source of strength. And actually, the mind has lots of potential inner resources. One of the sad facts of life is we have lots of resources inside yet we very rarely make use of them. We place limitations on ourselves by following moods, by following ideas that are not in our best interest. And this is where equanimity comes in.

Equanimity is something that the Buddha never teaches on its own. It's always part of another set of qualities. If you're just simply equanimous, accepting things as they are and just being okay with that, you go nowhere. The Buddha's image is of being like a goldsmith. The goldsmith has to put the gold in the fire, and then he has to take it out and look at it, and he has to blow on it. If it gets too cool, he has to put it back in the fire again. As the Buddha said, he needs to do all three of these activities. Otherwise, the gold never gets made into an ornament.

It's the same with meditation. Putting the gold in the fire stands for the effort you put in. But if you simply put in a lot of effort without getting the mind still in concentration, without having a sense of equanimity, you burn yourself out, just as gold would get burned up if it were stuck in a fire all the time. If you simply got the mind concentrated, things would sit there and wouldn't develop. That's like blowing on it. And if you simply looked at it, nothing would happen at all. The Buddha said if you simply keep your mind in equanimity, there's going to be no concentration. Nothing develops in the mind.

So you have to learn how to balance these activities. You put in the effort and you learn how to have equanimity about how long it's taking, and equanimity about the things that are going to come in and try to pull you away—or things that you would want to grab onto to pull yourself away. And when you do that, when you're not following your moods, you find you have a lot more strength.

So equanimity in the beginning can simply be based on willpower: You're not going to react. When the Buddha taught Rahula meditation, the first thing he said was, "Make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on earth, people can pour perfume on earth, and it doesn't react either way." So you start out with that quality of endurance and equanimity. But you don't just stay there. The Buddha went on to teach Rahula breath meditation. And breath meditation in the Buddha's analysis is very proactive.

You intentionally breathe in certain ways: breathe in a way where you're aware of the whole body; breathe in a way where you're calming the effect of the breath on the whole body; breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure, that gives rise to rapture; breathe in a way that calms the mind, energizes the mind when it needs to be energized, steadies it when it needs to be steadied, releasing it when it needs to be released of burdens. There are a lot of active things you do. The equanimity there is: one, for realizing this is going to take time. And two, you're going to have to learn from your actions, so you want to observe their results from a solid place. And three, there are going to be things that you have to do that you don't like to do, but you don't let your emotions, you don't let your feelings come in and take over and pull you away, because they sap you of your strength.

At the same time, when other things outside happen, you don't let your feelings about those things take over. You learn how to be non-reactive in that area. Then again you find that lot of your reactions sap your strength. So the purpose of equanimity here is not simply just to be okay. It's to release you from a lot of the ways in which you place limitations and burdens on yourself. It's an excellent lesson, on a beginning level, in the four noble truths.

After all, when the Buddha analyzes suffering, he doesn't talk about just any old suffering. He focuses on the suffering that the mind creates for itself when it's clinging. And where does that come from? It comes from the mind's own actions. It comes from its cravings. That's the suffering that's weighing the mind down. Without that suffering, outside sufferings wouldn't bother the mind at all. As you learn how to develop equanimity for the things that would pull you off the path—and it can be just simply a mood passing by, or it can be things that other people say—you're exercising right view.

We live in the land of wrong views. You're going to hear a lot of people saying things that would pull you away from the path. You have to learn how to be equanimous about them, not get stirred up by them, not get caught by them, not get hooked by them. When you learn how not to be distracted by these things, you find the mind has a lot more strength, that it can stick with things in the path that otherwise you wouldn't have the strength for.

You can think of this as the equanimity of a soldier. The soldier goes into battle, and there are going to be setbacks. There are going to be people coming in who'll want to kill him. And they're going to do everything they can, fair or unfair. But he can't let himself get upset by that. There'll be times when his side gets pushed back or trapped, and all he can think is, "Oh, that's it, that's the end." And if that's all he can think, then it probably will be the end.

I was reading about a forced march that took place across the northern part of France one time. It was miserable. The people in charge of the march decided they wanted to get out of France as quickly as possible. They didn't care about whether it was a good route or not. It turned out that the route was all mud. Horses sank down into the mud up to their bodies. People were drenched in the rain. And there were people who just wanted to die. They asked their comrades, "Kill me." That was because of all the things going on in their minds that time. But the actual situation wasn't the sort of thing that was going to kill them. They actually got out.

If all you can think about is, "I can't take this. I can't take this. I can't take this," you're not helping yourself be able to take it. But if you find a source of strength inside—this is what the concentration is for, to give you strength—you increase your likelihood of coming out well. You learn how not to weigh yourself down unnecessarily: picking up attitudes, picking up views, picking up feelings from other people and piling them on your head, piling them on your shoulders, and then saying, "I can't take this. I can't take this any longer." Those things don't come and pile themselves on you. You're the one who puts them on yourself. You have to see that. When you see that, you've learned a really good lesson in the four noble truths.

It's a great lesson in discernment that the things that weigh the mind down come from the mind itself. It may use things from outside to weigh itself down, but the act of weighing itself down—it does that to itself. So equanimity teaches you not to do that. There are things out there that can get you really discouraged. And there are aspects of the path that take a long time, and are going to make you think about how much you like or don't like what you're doing. But think about the results. Have a purpose. Be directed. And don't put obstacles in your way, because the strength of the mind is there. This is why the Buddha has those images of goodwill being large like the earth, cool and large like the river Ganges, as vast as space, to remind us that we do have these potentials, that the mind is much larger and stronger than we think.

It's when we define ourselves as being identical with this mood, or having this mood, and "That's me; this is my mood": That, the Buddha says, is when you place limitations on yourself. So learn how to be non-reactive to those moods, non-reactive to the words that would spark those moods, the feelings that would spark those moods. And you'll find the things you never thought you could do, you can do. You can maintain your direction. Otherwise, the Buddha said, the mind is so quick to reverse itself at the least little thing. And if you're lacking in endurance,

lacking in equanimity, you're like those dust motes: They go to the right, then they go to the left, up and then down. They accomplish nothing.

You want to remember the basic function of the mind. It gets involved with the aggregates for the sake of something. In other words, it sees them as a means. So look at your actions as a means to a goal, and be clear about the goal you want. Choose a good goal. Then do everything you can to keep yourself on the path, and shed any baggage that gets in the way.

You know that story about Ajaan Lee. A group of lay people wanted to go into the forest with him. So they all showed up at the main railway station in Bangkok and a lot of them had brought a lot of luggage. They were hoping to get porters when the train arrived at the station they were going to. Ajaan Lee looked at them and then just started walking down the tracks. Of course, when the ajaan is walking, everybody else has to walk. But people started complaining, "How can I walk with all this luggage?" Ajaan Lee didn't say anything for a while, but finally he said, "Well, if it's heavy, throw it away." So they stopped and rearranged their luggage, and each person got down to one bag. Everything else got thrown into the lotus ponds beside the railroad track. By the time they got to the next station, everybody had a manageable load. That's when Ajaan Lee let everybody get on the train.

If you don't weigh yourself down with a lot of baggage, you find that you can walk far.