

Skillful Distress

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I know a psychologist who has a map of emotions in terms of where you are in your head, in your intentions, and in your gut feelings. She'll put you on the map, try to identify where you are, and then look at where you want to go. The map then lays out the steps from where you are to where you want to go.

The Buddha has a similar map, what he calls the different types of joy, distress, and equanimity. There's householder joy, householder distress, householder equanimity. And then there's renunciate joy, renunciate distress, renunciate equanimity.

Most of us, when we come to the path, start out with householder distress: things in our lives—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas—that have us upset. We're looking for a way out. Now, most people think that the way out is to go for householder joy—in other words, trying to find sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas that give refreshment to the mind, happiness to the mind; or for householder equanimity—looking for things that will calm you down in terms of those six senses. But the problem with the senses is that they keep changing. What was joyful or equanimous may turn into something else very quickly, so you find yourself back at the householder distress.

When we come to the meditation, the Buddha says that when there's householder distress, you should try to cure it with renunciate distress. That's a step a lot of us would like to skip. Renunciate distress there is realizing that there is a goal that other people have attained, it is possible, but you're not there yet, and you think about all that needs to be done.

Some people find this so discouraging that they aim for equanimity as something halfway between householder and renunciate joy, but they're actually going back to householder equanimity. They comfort themselves with the idea that "Maybe there's nothing to attain" or "If I try to have an attainment, I'm creating suffering and stress for myself right now. I'm getting upset over something I can't see, so I might as well learn how to accept the way things are." They try to anesthetize themselves to the distress, and end up with a very calm state, but again, it isn't solidly based. It needs constant shoring up.

You see this in the people who say that there's nothing to attain or that if the idea of attainment gets you upset, why bother with it? Just be okay in the present moment. But again, that kind of equanimity easily slips back to householder distress. It doesn't get you out.

The way out is to focus on renunciate distress as a motivating factor, like the string on the bow of a bow and arrow. You pull it back. There's more tension, but then when you release the string, the arrow propelled by it goes far. If you don't pull the string back, or if you don't even string the bow, the arrow's not going to go anywhere. When you let it go, it'll fall splat on the ground. Only when you have a sense that there is a goal and you're not there yet are you motivated really to look at yourself and to try to figure out what's getting in the way: "What attitudes do I have to change, and how is the best way to change them? What strengths do I have, and how can I take advantage of them?" In other words, you have to learn how to think strategically. The Buddha calls this having a sense of yourself: where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are. And it's an important part of the path.

The good thing about renunciate distress is that it's encouraging. Remember that part of the phrase that you're supposed to run through your mind is that there is this attainment that other people have attained. If they can attain it, you should be able to attain it, too. That gives you hope. Household distress is pretty hopeless. If you want household joy and household equanimity, but you keep seeing them fall apart, fall apart, it gets very discouraging. You look at the human race and see how it behaves when things get difficult, and very often, it's not a pretty sight. But renunciate distress focuses your attention in a different direction: toward the people who have attained awakening. They were noble people. Instead of hanging around with uninspiring people, maybe you can hang out with people who are noble.

I was reading yesterday about how the idea that there is an attainment that you can attain—one that gets you out of this up and down of household distress and household joy—is a selfish idea that devalues the world, obstructing social progress. Well, there's no way you're going to attain awakening by being selfish. It requires generosity. It requires virtue. And these activities set a good example in the world for true progress on the social level. The people who've attained the goal of the renunciate life, whether they're monastics or laypeople, are the ones who shine a light in the world.

So it is possible for a human being to pursue a noble goal, behave in a noble way, attain a noble goal, and leave behind noble gifts: in other words, the gifts of generosity, the gifts of a good example, the gifts of the teaching that are inspiring and encouraging to others. So it's important to have a healthy relationship to renunciate distress, to realize we're not here just to be okay in the present moment, or to take householder equanimity and dress it up as more than it is.

Renunciate distress is not meant to discourage you. It's meant to encourage you that there is a way out, and that the people who've followed the way out had qualities you have in a potential form. As the Buddha said, heedfulness, ardency, resolution: Those are the qualities he developed. You look at the texts and you see other people who were able to develop them as well. You know people in your own life who've developed them, at least to some extent. You have them within you, too.

Heedfulness is the most basic of the three. Sometimes the word for heedfulness, *appamada*, is translated as diligence, but it's more than just diligence. It's a very strong sense that your actions will make a difference, and you really do want to avoid causing harm for yourself and other people. Based on that, you're ardent. You give rise to the resolute desire to carry through with that.

All of these qualities are actually based on desire. Heedfulness is based on the desire to avoid harm. Ardency is based on the desire to make the most of what opportunities you have right now. Resolution is based on the desire to stick with the path and see it all the way through.

So think of things you've done in life where you've had to see them all the way through, and you realize that they required some heedfulness. They required some ardency. They required some resolution. You've got these qualities in a potential form. You've used them in other aspects of your life. Now bring them to the meditation. Look at it as a challenge. It's going to require that you figure things out. It's going to require all the capacities of the mind. We're not dulling the mind. We're not performing a lobotomy. We're not saying that thinking is bad.

I think I've told you the story about that teacher in France who was talking about how the practice is all about accepting that there really is nothing you can do to change the way things are, so you just go with the flow. She was being interviewed on TV, and the woman interviewer asked her, "Isn't that defeatist? Isn't that pessimistic?" And the teacher said, "Only if you think about it," as if that somehow solved the problem. Just don't think.

The Buddha was a thinker. He thought things through. And he's teaching us to think and use all of our capacities to figure out this problem we have inside: Why it is that we want happiness but we're causing ourselves suffering? We feed on things, and we think the feeding is going to give us happiness. Then we find that we're suffering because we feed. How do we feed in a way that gets us on the path to a place where we don't have to feed? That's a challenge. But it's a good challenge.

Wouldn't it be good to live in a world where you didn't have to depend on unstable conditions for your happiness? Wouldn't it be good to have a happiness

that was totally secure, totally harmless? Well, renunciate distress tells us that it is possible. You're not there yet, but it is a possibility. It can be done. So learn how to see renunciate distress as a good thing, as encouragement, as a necessary step, a step you can't bypass.

Some people want to go straight from householder distress to renunciate joy, renunciate equanimity. But they end up, as I said, with basically a pale imitation, a seemingly harmless form of household equanimity. But it's not really harmless. It harms them because they're not allowing themselves to think outside the box, to think of something better. So they fall back to their old ways. But renunciate distress will take you out of your old ways. It'll force you to think outside the box, it'll force you to work, but the rewards are great.

So whatever the difficulties, remember that they're worth it, more than worth it, as the Buddha said. So give his promise a chance. Try it out, because otherwise, you know where you're going to stay if you don't. That possibility of an open door is something you always want to leave open. Don't close the door in your own face.