

An Even Keel

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One of the traits that both Ajaan Suwat and Ajaan Fuang had in common was they were very solid, unexcitable. Good things would happen, bad things would happen, and they seemed undisturbed. They didn't get excited about the good things, didn't get upset about the bad things. They were able to maintain a very even keel.

And this is a quality that's very much lacking at present, especially here in America. People are very excitable: They react to the slightest thing, overreact to the slightest thing. Maybe it's because of the influence of TV, maybe it's simply because they don't take the long view.

This quality of equanimity and having an even keel depends on several other qualities that are really worth developing. One is just that: your ability to take the long view on things. You realize, for example, in your practice that there are going to be ups and there are going to be downs, and there are going to be up-again and down-again. And it doesn't accomplish anything to get excited about them. So when you can gain that perspective, it helps you to negotiate the ups and downs without getting overturned by them, and to develop qualities of endurance.

This is another important quality in equanimity: endurance, patience, the ability simply to sit with things. You begin to realize that even though there are ups and downs, there's a part of the mind that's not affected by them. And a large part of the practice is getting acquainted with that part of the mind, being in touch with it, taking it as your dwelling place: simply the part of the mind that's aware, that doesn't have to react.

There've been times when I've wondered if that famous koan about the sound of one hand clapping isn't precisely about this issue: the mind that doesn't react. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations come, ideas come, mental states come, and they clap up against the mind. And the normal mind will just clap right back: liking and disliking them, reacting, commenting on them one way or another. But what we're after is the mind that doesn't clap back, the mind that simply knows, that's simply aware, "Oh, there's that." You want to get in touch with that part of the mind and value it as well.

Again, this is where your perspective, your discernment, comes in: when you realize that when things happen, you can't always tell right away what their long-term outcome is going to be. So before you pass judgment, you want to watch. And watch again and watch again, until you're really sure.

So many times in the meditation we come up with our theories, “This has to be this way, that has to be that way.” And then a few days later, we have to throw those theories away and try new ones. There has to come a point where you realize that your theories are like post-it notes: You put them on for a while and see if they’re going to stick. If they don’t really stick, you can peel them off. And because they’re post-it notes, they’re nothing you really want to allow yourself to react to, because you don’t yet know whether they’re true or not. They’re just an idea, just a possibility, just a little note to yourself. As for whether the note is true or not, you want to watch it further.

This requires a certain amount of scepticism, as with that old saying, “Don’t believe everything you think.” It really holds in the meditation. A thought will come and you want to watch it: both the thing that it’s thinking about and the thought in and of itself. Put a little question mark next to them.

Ajaan Lee once said that one way of testing your insights is to turn them inside out: Suppose that the exact opposite of that insight were true? Or how about turning it inside out even further? Suppose that neither the original insight nor its opposite is true? Is there a third alternative?

This requires, of course, your willingness to watch, to realize that this is a long-term process we’re involved in as we meditate, so you can’t jump to any immediate conclusions. Some things, of course, will be perfectly obvious, but even then you have to ask, “Well, suppose it’s just the opposite? What are the exceptions? What are the assumptions?” Sometimes this is explained as a willingness to say, “Well, it’s not yet sure, so let’s watch.” That doesn’t mean you’re uncertain about everything. It’s just that you realize that before you are certain and sure about something, you want to test it over and over again, watch it over and over again.

And when you bring that element of scepticism to your practice, it doesn’t mean that you don’t believe anything, it’s just that you want to make sure, and you look for the areas where things are not sure—the possibility that what you think one hundred percent may not be one hundred percent. Maybe it’s only eighty percent right.

So when you combine the ability to look at things over the long-term with this quality of patience, endurance, you find it a lot easier to keep your mind on an even keel. And you begin to see in the meditation: Almost every cloud has a silver lining, almost every silver lining has a cloud.

Don’t be a person with one eye. Be like the old epithet for the Buddha, an All-Around Eye, seeing in all directions, ready to admit all kinds of possibilities. That’s the kind of eye, that’s the kind of state of mind that develops a quality of solidity, becomes a mind you can trust. And when the mind becomes a mind you can trust,

then whatever comes up in the meditation holds fewer and fewer dangers, because you're less likely to jump at things.

Because, after all, what is your guarantee in the meditation? You get a particular result in the meditation, you go running to your teacher. How do you know that the teacher knows? You go looking at the texts. How do you know that the texts really report what the Buddha had to say? Your only mainstay is your own honesty. And honesty has to rely on this ability to wait and see, not to jump to conclusions, not to simply run after what you think you want.

And what happens as a result? Ultimately, the meditation leads to a point where you get more than you wanted. The results of the meditation really do excel anything that you can imagine. But to get there requires this quality of truthfulness, honesty, endurance, taking the long view. It all comes down to this mind that's willing to watch and watch again, just to make sure.