

Equanimity as a Factor of Awakening

May 19, 2005

Equanimity is one of the factors for awakening. And it's important you understand what equanimity means here. The word actually has two meanings in the Canon. As a feeling, it means a feeling halfway between joy and grief: neither-joy-nor-grief. But as a factor for awakening, it means something else. It's the ability to watch, to look at things without getting carried away. It means a basic state of mind that stays on an even keel, doesn't get knocked over. It can watch anything and not get swept away. That's the factor for awakening, and that's what we're trying to work on as we meditate.

There's a passage where the Buddha said there's a very subtle pleasure that goes along with that ability to watch. It's not totally neutral, because it's accompanied by an inner sense of well-being. So we're not here trying to iron out all of our emotions so that they're perfectly flat or grey. The emotions will go up and down, but you want to maintain an inner gyroscope. It's like a ship on the ocean. The waves go up and down, but you want the ship to stay on an even keel so that it doesn't get swept away, doesn't get overturned.

The image here actually starts with the breathing meditation. Ajaan Lee has an image of having the mind like a post set at the edge of the sea. The tide rises, the tide falls; the waves come in, the waves go out—but the post doesn't rise or fall, doesn't go in or out along with them. It stays right there in the midst of all the activity of the water. The mind knows when it's in a state like this: It knows what's coming in, knows what's going out, what's rising and falling, but it doesn't follow along with them. That's the mind state we're trying to develop. Solid and aware.

One of its main aids is a little bit of skepticism. Basically, the Buddha's saying, "Don't believe everything you think. Don't believe everything you feel." Put a question mark next to all these things. That helps to maintain the equanimity. I remember noticing when I went to stay with Ajaan Fuang that he had a skepticism that I had seen in very few of the Thai people I'd encountered during my first two years there. He was very skeptical about a lot of values that I thought seemed to be standard all the way across Thai culture. But it wasn't a bitter skepticism. He seemed perfectly happy, perfectly at peace. So that's the kind of skepticism you want to work on, too, as a meditator, because a lot of that skepticism is what's going to carry you through.

As we were saying today, it often happens while you're sitting here trying to keep the mind quiet that all of a sudden a thought comes up or a feeling comes up. It's like a car driving up and the driver saying, "Hey! Jump in! Let's go." And you jump in without asking where they're going or who they are. Now, you should have had enough experience with thoughts to know

that sometimes they take you to a dark, quiet place where they shoot you and push you out the door, leaving you there on the side of the road, and then you have to hobble back home.

By now you should be wary of these thoughts, and yet they come along and they seem so convincing. You see all the tricks that advertisers play in their ads, all the power of suggestion. Where do they get their skills? Where do they get their ideas? From the way the mind ordinarily fools itself. A thought comes in, and it's not so much the actual content of the thought that pulls you in. There's a lot of power of suggestion around it, a lot of hype in the mind. This is what you've got to learn to be skeptical about.

When these thoughts come in, you have to ask, "Is this really true? Is this really worth going with?" And then just stay right there and watch. They say, "Come on! It's not fun unless you jump in, too." But you have to be stubborn: "I'm going to watch here to see where you're going." The thoughts don't go very far. Sometimes there will be thoughts that really are worth following through: things you have to plan, things you have to contemplate. It's not the case that all thoughts are bad. After all, a lot of the practice of discernment is learning to ask questions. That requires thinking. But what you're trying to figure out here is which thoughts are the skillful ones and which ones are not.

You want to have a basis from which to watch these things. It's best if that basis is still so that you can see their movements from whichever direction they're coming. And there should be a certain sense of well-being within that basis as well, so that you don't feel that you've got to go someplace, that you've got to think something, you've got to feel something in order to get some pleasure. As long as there's a sense of well-being, you can resist their pull. You can resist their allure.

Sometimes it's not just a thought that comes in. The thought comes in with a feeling and it gets into your bloodstream. You feel patterns of tension in the body. You think, "If I don't go along with that thought, or don't follow through with that desire, I'll just feel so tense I won't be able to stand it."

This is why we have the breath as our basic technique, so that we can learn how to breathe through that tension, relax the tension. Think of all those little muscles in your bloodstream, and think of them all relaxing, wherever there tends to be tension, say, in the back of the neck, around the hands, in the feet, wherever. Stay focused on keeping those parts of the body relaxed, and you'll find that the thought loses a lot of its power. You're inhabiting your body so that the thought can't slip in and take over your body. You're keeping the body relaxed so it can't tense things up.

What you're doing is putting yourself in a position of strength, with the very subtle sense of well-being that comes along with getting the mind to settle down and feeling really solid in the present moment. Use that as your vantage point to watch whatever comes, whatever goes, whatever arises, whatever falls, so that you can see it for what it really is.

This is an essential part of the path. It's not the goal. Don't believe them when they say that the path is the goal. Eventually you have to get to the point where you realize that there is a subtle attachment to the equanimity and you'll have to let *that* go as well. But in the meantime, you want to use it as your foundation.

So hold on for the time being. It's like the image of the raft. You have to hold on as long as the raft hasn't gotten over to the other side. But don't think that this is all the Buddha has to offer. There's a lot more on the further shore. This is simply how you get there.