

## *Acceptance & Equanimity*

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When the Buddha talks about acceptance, he talks about it in the context of two things. One is learning how to tolerate unpleasant words from other people, and the other is learning how to tolerate pain. In the first case, you accept the fact that human beings have this kind of speech. That's one of his contemplations. You're born into the human world. What is human speech like? Sometimes it's true, sometimes it's false. Sometimes it's well-meaning, sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's said with a mind of goodwill, sometimes with a mind of inner hate. Sometimes it's useful, sometimes it's not. This is the nature of human speech. So if people speak to you in ways that are untrue, useless, or ill-meaning, it's nothing out of the ordinary. If you want to hear nothing but nice speech, you've got to go to a higher level.

Accept the fact that there is speech like this in the world, but you shouldn't just sit there and accept it. There are times when you can respond in ways that can undo what the person has said. Other times there are not. There's no opportunity. You just have to put up with it. But you don't let it go into the mind and create havoc. You have to learn how to reflect on it. One useful strategy is to think of it just going right past you. They may have aimed at you, but you're not there to be aimed at. You step aside a bit, watch it go past. Realize it's their karma, their intention. You don't have to take it in.

Then there's the reflection that Ven. Sāriputta recommended, which is that when people say unpleasant things, you remind yourself simply that an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear. That's it. Leave it there. Of course, when you leave it there, it goes away. The problem is that we pull it in and then we stab ourselves with it. Who are you going to blame? You're the one who pulled it in.

The other thing to accept, of course, is the fact that there's going to be physical pain in the body. And here, the Buddha says, you can do lots of different things with it. You can learn how to perceive it in a different way, in a way that doesn't stab at the mind. His image is of an arrow. You've been shot by one arrow and then you're shot by a second one. The second one is the one you shoot yourself as you comment on the pain and complain about the pain, get worked up about the pain. The ways of relating to pain: Take them apart in terms of your perceptions or in terms of your bodily, verbal, mental fabrication around the pain—how you breathe around the pain, how you talk to yourself about the pain, the perceptions you apply. Does the pain have an intention? Does it have a shape? Does it have a

color? Is it solid? Call these perceptions into question. And simply calling them into question puts you out of the line of fire.

So with acceptance, you don't just sit there. You accept the fact that there are these things in the world, but then you have skills for dealing with them in such a way that you don't have to suffer from them.

The same principle applies to a quality that's very close to acceptance, and that's equanimity. Look at the various lists in which equanimity is mentioned. It's always the last one. In the brahmaviharas it comes after goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy. In the factors for awakening it comes after mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, and concentration. So obviously it's something good, but it's never good on its own. And the Buddha says it's something you want to develop. We already have equanimity in an ordinary, everyday way. Something happens and you don't feel one way or another about it, or you make yourself not feel one way or another about it. But, as he says, that equanimity goes no further than that particular object. What you want is a more all-embracing equanimity, one that can deal with anything that comes up.

To develop that, the Buddha doesn't say just to go from being equanimous about one thing to being equanimous about everything. I've found three different contexts where he talks about the development of equanimity. In each case, you have to develop a sense of joy first before you go on to a more all-embracing equanimity. After all, beginning equanimity can get pretty small-minded and small-hearted and kind of depressed.

There was that study they did years back of laypeople who were very much into the Dhamma in Sri Lanka. The researchers came out with the conclusion that the laypeople were all suffering from minor depression, which may have been true in some of the cases. You hear about everything as being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, nothing is worth going for, so you should be equanimous about everything. That's a pretty depressing thought if you're not coming from a better place.

In some cases, the Buddha says first you develop joy through concentration, and in others you develop it through insight. In the third instance, you develop it through cultivating both qualities at once.

With the concentration, of course, it means getting the mind into jhana. You don't go straight to equanimity. Get the mind focused in such a way that it's feeling rapture and pleasure. Rapture may be too strong a word sometimes. Sometimes it's simply refreshment. In other cases, though, it really is that strong. But the point here is that if you're going to go on to a more all-embracing equanimity, you've got to be coming from a sense of well-being. You've found

something better than the normal things you've been attached to. Then you can look back at them and realize it's not such a big deal that things are not going the way you want. After all, when you signed on to the world, nobody agreed that they would make the world be like what you want it to be. You were the one who barged your way in. Or as Ajaan Fuang said to one of his students one time, "You're the one who butted in." So here you are.

There's a lot in the world that's really not the sort of thing you'd want—not only in the case of what's happening to you, but also when you look around and see what's happening to other people, what other people are doing to other people. In the case of the brahmaviharas, you develop goodwill and compassion for those who are suffering, and empathetic joy for those who are happy. But then you realize that not everybody is going to be happy, no matter how much you wish for their happiness, because it's going to depend on their actions. And even though you may try your best to help them, everybody's going to die at some point. So if your happiness depends on your goodwill, your compassion, and your empathetic joy, you're setting yourself up for a fall.

This is why the brahmaviharas require equanimity as well, so that you can continue having goodwill in places where it's appropriate. Like the Buddhist instructions on generosity: Give where you feel inspired or where you feel the gift would be well used. You may be inspired to want to see everybody happy, but as for your efforts to help other people to be happy, you have to focus them on places where they would be well used. And for that, you need equanimity, a more all-embracing equanimity.

You can develop that through the practice of concentration, or you can develop it through insight. When the Buddha is talking about household joy, household grief, household equanimity, or renunciate joy, renunciate grief, renunciate equanimity, the typical line-up goes like this: People go from household joy and then, when the things that they like change, they go to household grief or distress. Then they may go to household equanimity and say, "Well, I'll just learn how to accept that." But it's a small-hearted acceptance.

To move on to the more all-embracing equanimity, first you go through renunciate grief, which is the realization that there is a way out, but you're not there yet. Other people have found it, but you're not there yet. There's work to be done. Maybe grief is too strong a word. Distress may be a better translation. But that distress is important as motivation on the path.

So apply yourself to the path. Try to develop your insight. As the Buddha said, there comes a point where you see that not only are the things that you wanted to be good not going to be good, but everything is inconstant, stressful, not-self.

There's a certain joy that can come from that insight. Some people find it disorienting, in which case they really need to practice concentration first. But other people find the insight uplifting. They can see that they're making progress in the path as that insight lifts some of their burdens and puts their minds on a higher plane.

This fits in with the Buddha's image for discernment, that it's like being in a tower, looking down on people below you. There's something about that insight that places you above the things that are inconstant stressful, not-self, because you've learned to find a sense of well-being that comes from not insisting that everything be the way you want it to be.

But the Buddha doesn't stop there.

If you're going to develop a higher equanimity, you have to develop concentration as well. This is simply a case, though, where the insight comes first and then is followed by the concentration. As the Buddha said in one of the suttas, there are cases where tranquility comes first and then there's insight; others where insight comes first and then there's tranquility. You've got to have both. It's just that sometimes gaining the insight is what uplifts the mind and makes it more willing to get into concentration.

Then there's finally the case where you're developing both of them together. That's what's portrayed in the factors for awakening. You go from mindfulness to analysis of qualities, which is basically directed thought and evaluation. You're getting the mind into the first jhana. And in that directed thought and evaluation, you're engaging in the activity of discernment as well. As you notice what's skillful and what's unskillful in the mind, you let go of what's unskillful, develop what's skillful, and that's what gives rise to a sense of rapture, well-being.

Once you've been energized by the rapture, then you can calm things down. And here you're coming from a sense of well-being, a sense of being nourished. You look around you and you can see the world really is the way it's going to be. Some things you can do, some things you can change and help, other things you can't. But you're coming from a sense of well-being inside, and that's a very different take on equanimity. You're not just saying, "Okay, well, I'll just accept things and be okay." You've lifted the mind and then you look around and you realize you've got something really good inside, so you can be equanimous about the things that you used to have to depend on for your happiness. You see that they're not dependable, but you've got something more dependable inside. That kind of equanimity is healthy, and that's the type that we're working on.

So don't just go from a blah to a larger blah. There are times when you look around in your ordinary equanimity and it's kind of narrow and confining. You're

accepting things even though you really don't want to. You've got to give the mind a sense of joy, a sense of well-being, if you want your equanimity to be healthy. You can find it through insight, you can find it through concentration. Different people will find it in different ways, but there's a certain range that everybody will have to go through. Some people emphasize the insight first; other people emphasize the concentration first. But look for ways to develop that sense of well-being in the mind. That creates a different kind of equanimity. It's not forced on you. It comes from finding something better than what you've had all along. That's why it's safe.