

Equanimity & Endurance

September 11, 2014

You probably remember, when you were a child, the first time you questioned whether, when you see blue or yellow, and someone else says that they see blue or yellow, do they actually see the same color as you do? It's one of those questions that strike everyone as odd, and there's really no way of answering it. But it's pretty easy to put it aside and move on with the rest of your life. The words blue and yellow serve well enough.

But then there's that area of your experience that no one else can peer into where there's a big problem, and that's suffering: the suffering that the mind places on itself. You experience it, nobody else can: what it feels like to you, the sharpness of the pain, the heaviness of the pain. No one can experience it, the same way that when they have their pains that you can't experience, either. There's that famous philosopher, Leibnitz, who said that we're all little monads living in our own little worlds, and this is what he was talking about: There's a huge part of your experience that you don't share with anybody. But he didn't talk much about suffering. That was the Buddha's specialty.

We see other people suffering and we can sympathize, but we can't really feel their pain. There's always the question: How much can you go in and help the other person with his or her pain? The main way is through your example of learning how to deal with yours, along with the good results that can be seen outside as you learn how to deal with your pain. Then when you have the experience of pain, you've learned the techniques, learned how to stop creating your own pain, and you can offer good advice to others.

This is what we can do to help one another: to work first on our own pain. That doesn't mean we don't share anything with other people until after we're awakened, but we can, as we work in our meditation, get better and better at dealing with this problem, and we're in a better position to help other people deal with theirs.

You feel this especially when someone around you is sick or dying. They're going through a process that you can't feel. You sympathize, but you have to remember, how can you best help them? It's through developing good qualities in your own mind. And one of those, paradoxically, is equanimity. We usually think that what the other person needs right now is a lot of goodwill, a lot of warmth. That may be part of it, but in order to provide skillful warmth, skillful help,

skillful goodwill, it has to be backed up by equanimity: the ability to step back and rely on that part of the mind that's not affected by anything.

We talk about the committee of the mind, and there is one member of the committee that tends to get overlooked: the part that just knows and can bear it. Whatever comes up, it knows and bears. It can endure. And usually it's not offered much prominence at the table when the committee members are having their dinner conversation. But it's a really important member to develop. Sometimes you feel when your emotions are running high, how can you find any equanimity at all? Actually, it's there already. You don't have to create it. Just remember that it's there as one of the members. It's the part of the mind that simply registers things. Whatever come in—good, bad, indifferent—it can register.

Ajaan Maha Boowa often makes the point that our mind is really resilient. If it weren't really resilient to all the suffering it's experienced through all our many lifetimes, it would have been nothing but smithereens a long time ago. But it keeps on knowing, keeps on registering, keeps on noticing.

The suffering comes from the next step, when you start reacting, deciding you like this, you don't like that, can stand this, can't stand that. Things that you can actually stand, you tell yourself you can't stand. Then you get thrown into a tizzy, and you're not going to be any help to the people around you. They're already in a tizzy. But if you can be solid, you're offering an awful lot, even though it may be just being quiet in the background.

I knew someone in college on our wait staff when I was waiting tables. He didn't talk much with the rest of the staff. He just did his job. And when the staff was having conversations before we served the meal, all the other people were the light of the party, but this person hardly talked. At the end of the year, though, it turned out this was the person everybody in the room liked, because they knew that he did his job. That's what equanimity and patience are. They're the quiet members of the staff, the quiet members of the committee. They do their job.

We have to learn how to appreciate that, the ability to notice things and not react, because that's the part of the mind that allows you to develop strength. When you're coming from that strength, when you're not wasting your time and energy with a lot of other proliferations on top of that, then you're in a much better position to see what needs to be done. In that way, your own pain is not weakening you.

So learn to see equanimity and patience in a good light. They're an important part of every situation inside your mind, to help you deal with issues, and also outside your mind, when you're dealing with other people. We tend to think of

equanimity as being cold and indifferent, but that's not the case. It's learning how to husband your strength so that you can devote it to things where you really can make a difference.

If you don't have that ability to step back, there are two problems. One is that you start rushing into a situation, hoping to help, and you end up doing yourself harm. Two, you rush in and you end up doing other people harm because you can't see clearly what needs to be done. The first type is what Ajaan Fuang would call metta falling down the well. You see somebody else down in the well, you try to pull them up, but they're heavier than you can pull. They end up pulling you down. The second type is when someone else is getting out of the well. You have your ideas about how they can get out faster and you end up pushing them back in. Neither type is very helpful.

Equanimity has to come first so that you can see things clearly. It has to be your strength. This is why we practice concentration and try to get the mind to the levels of concentration where the mind is just there, not getting worked up about anything, not getting excited, not getting down, just right on an even keel. We don't tend to think of that as a gift to others, but it is. It's the basis for all our other gifts.

So learn how to strengthen it. Learn how to get the mind there when you need it there. Of course, that means learning how to get it there *before* you need it there. Gain some practice in just being very still. You know, know, know, but you're not reacting. You're not taking the next step. A lot of strength can come from that ability.