

The Lessons of Equanimity

November 5, 2017

Focus on your breath. Try to be on good terms with your breath. In other words, don't squeeze the breath. Don't force it too much. Just ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel good right now and see if the body responds. If it doesn't respond immediately, you can experiment for a bit. Try long breathing for a while. See how that feels. Shorter breathing, deeper breathing, or shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to make this a good place to be for the next hour, because if the body isn't comfortable, the mind's going to go wandering off. If it does wander off, just drop whatever it is that you've been thinking about and get back to the breath.

We're trying to develop a state of concentration here, where you stick with something and feel at home with it. The concentration is not just a matter of the focus but it's also a matter of the well-being that can come with the focus, and that requires some adjustment. This is why the Buddha says that the factors of the first jhana include directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate: Are you staying well with the breath? Does the breath feel good? How might it feel better? This way you bring the body and the mind together with the glue of a comfortable feeling inside.

Once there is a comfortable feeling, you can think of it spreading to the different parts of the body, because after all, your awareness is not just in one spot. Your awareness is present all through the body. It's just that certain areas get highlighted. You'll be able to open up to the awareness in the body a lot more easily if you can have a sense of well-being that flows through the body. So don't focus on your pains. Focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable.

When you do this, you begin to realize that you do have some power to shape the present moment. That fact is important. Without that power, there'd be no path. You have choices. There are potentials coming up from your past actions, and you get to choose what you pay attention to, what you take an interest in.

It's like watering seeds in a field. The ones you water are the ones that'll sprout. If you've got some good seeds in your field, you can get them to sprout a little earlier. If you have some skill in how you relate to the breath, how you relate to the body right now, how you relate to your mind right now, then even when bad seeds sprout, you don't have to suffer.

This is one of the basic principles of the Buddha's teachings on karma. When we think about karma, we tend to think about things you did in a past lifetime that are totally unknown, and they just come in and smack you up against the head without any warning. But that's not how the Buddha taught it. He taught it more as a process by which we can shape our experience right here, right now, and learn how not to suffer from good or bad things that are coming up.

One of the other skills he taught was the teaching on the brahmaviharas, or the sublime attitudes. That chant we had just now: It starts with "May I be happy. May all living beings be happy." That's goodwill. Then there's compassion: "Any beings who are suffering, may they be released from their suffering." Empathetic joy: "Those who are happy, may they not lose their good fortune."

You notice that those first three attitudes are all about "may, may, may this happen." They're wishes. But as the Buddha said, if we could get what we wanted simply out of wishes, who in the world would be poor? Who would be sick? Who would be ugly? Who would die early? Who would suffer in any way? It's only through our *actions* that we can get past suffering, which is why the last brahmavihara is about action: equanimity. In this context, the reflection on action points in two directions. One, in terms of things that have happened in the past, you realize that you can't go back and change the past. And the more you try to think, "Wouldn't it be better if such and such hadn't happened?" the more you're going to hurt yourself.

Remember last night we talked about the two arrows: the arrow of a pain and then the arrow of unskillful thinking around the pain. The second arrow is actually totally optional, totally unnecessary, and yet we stick ourselves with it, then we pull it out again and we stick it back in again many, many, many times. And of course we're going to suffer. So when you find yourself thinking about "*if only*," remember you're sticking yourself with an arrow. The teaching on karma is that you can't go back and change the past. As for the results that come from the past, you have to learn how to accept the fact that they're going to happen.

But the Buddha doesn't leave you defenseless. The other direction of that teaching on karma is you have within you the ability to develop some skills so that whatever comes up, you don't have to suffer from it. You can avoid doing unskillful things and actually do positively skillful things that will make a difference now and on into the future. In other words, it's not the case that you just sit here and bear with whatever bad things are coming from that past and say, "I hope someday in the future something good will come from the good actions I'm doing right now." There are good ways you can engage in the present moment so you don't suffer right now.

There's a sutta where the Buddha compares the mind to water. Anything coming up from past bad karma is like a big lump of salt. If your mind is like the water in a little tiny cup and you put that big lump of salt into the cup, you can't drink the water. It's too salty because there's so little water. But if your mind is like a large river, you can throw the salt into the river and you can still drink the water, because the water is so much more than the salt.

So how do you make your mind like a river? One is, as the Buddha said, to make it unlimited. Develop these brahmaviharas, these sublime attitudes, wishing well for everybody, everywhere, yourself included. And learn how to have equanimity in every instance. That one is hard, because there are a lot of things we'd like to have happen, but you look at the world around you and there's a lot happening that you can't change. So you have to develop some equanimity for that. There's always the possibility that things could get really bad. Develop some equanimity for that, not so that you're indifferent, but to focus you back on what you *can* change, what you *are* responsible for, and to learn how to put down all the things that you can't change. That way, you actually have more energy, more time, more of your mind to devote to engaging in the present in a skillful way.

Other ways of making the mind like a large river of water are to follow the precepts and to develop the discernment that allows you to disengage from things that are causing you to suffer—in particular your own activities that are causing you to suffer—to catch yourself when you're thinking in a way that's like another arrow thrust into the mind. As your discernment gets better, you begin to catch these things on more and more subtle levels.

And finally the Buddha recommends developing the ability not to be overcome by pleasure or by pain. When you're practicing concentration, this is how you're learning how not to be overcome by pleasure, because when the breath gets comfortable, if you lose your focus on the breath and go wallowing in the pleasure, that's it. The concentration is done. You may be quiet for a while, but you've lost your foundation.

So this is a skill in learning how to live with pleasure but not be overcome by it. You see the pleasure as something you work with as you let it spread through the body. Think of the breath spreading through the body. Here "breath" means not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the flow of energy that allows the air to come in, allows it to go out. And in the body, there are many levels of that flow extending even to the tiniest nerve endings. If you think of the whole body as the field for your breath and think of the breath as a solvent allowing the pleasure to spread out throughout the field, you're working with the pleasure but you're not overcome by it.

Concentration also gives you a good foundation for dealing with pain. The first step when there's pain, either emotional or physical, is to learn how to step back from it so that you're watching it from a little distance. And getting the breath to be comfortable in different parts of the body gives you a place to stand. As the breath gets more and more comfortable, you can think of it percolating through that particular pain. In other words, you learn to be not afraid of the pain. You don't push it out. You don't get upset about it. You realize that there is a skill to dealing with pain. You use the breath to help soothe things for a bit.

When the mind is ready, it can go in and ask questions about the pain, particularly, "Why is this pain having an effect on the mind?" The effect on the mind comes through your perceptions around the pain. How do you visualize the pain to yourself? What images come to the mind with the pain? This applies both to mental pain and to physical pain. What are the perceptions that keep that mental pain going? Can you drop those perceptions? In other words, the approach you take to the pain is not one of fear or running away. It's more of curiosity, trying to figure it out: Why does this pain have such an influence on the mind and how can you free the mind from that influence?

Changing your attitude toward the pain actually gets you engaged in what the Buddha says is the duty with regard to the first noble truth, which is to comprehend suffering. You don't comprehend it by shoving it away or running away from it. You comprehend it by having a good place to stand so you can look at it and watch it with curiosity, not thinking about how much you're suffering but simply thinking "Here's something that's been driving my life for a long time. Why do I let it have power over me?" Because even with intense physical pain, there's no need for it to have an impact on the mind. And when something uncomfortable comes up in the mind—independent of the body—you're under no obligation to feed on it. Because that's a lot of what the problem is. We've been feeding on the body, and all of the sudden this pain comes in. It's like getting some spoiled food in the midst of a mouthful of okay food. But if we're not feeding to begin with, then the spoiled food doesn't come into the mouth.

Even more so with mental pain, where we feed, feed, feed off of our sufferings in a very perverse way. We have to see that this is not giving us any real nourishment. There's much better nourishment with the breath. There's much better nourishment with developing the perceptions that the Buddha recommends for stepping back from these things.

So these are the lessons of equanimity. It's not just a matter of being indifferent to things. It's that reflection on karma to focus your attention away from the things you can't change, and give you some pointers on what you *can*

change. What is within your power? Learn how to use that power well, so that you're not sticking yourself with that arrow again and again and again. And when you're not sticking yourself with that arrow, you make things easier not only for yourself but also for the people around you.

So it's good to reflect on that passage on equanimity and its place in the sublime abidings. It's not just a matter of sitting here and thinking thoughts of pink clouds going out in every direction. It gives you specific instructions on what to do so that those wishes for happiness—the wishes that go with goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy—really will have an effect, so that you can look after yourself with ease. And to whatever extent you can help other people look after themselves with ease, it's all to the good.