

The Equanimity that Doesn't Give Up

November 1, 2018

Two days ago someone came to me and asked for a birthday blessing. The blessing I chose was, “May you have the strength to deal with whatever comes up.” And she looked disappointed. She said, “Can’t you wish for me to be happy all year round?” And I said, “I can’t promise that. You’re in the wrong world.”

We live in a world where there’s gain and there’s loss; status, loss of status; praise, criticism; pleasure, pain—a world where things go well and things go not-so-well. And to simply want nothing but the good stuff is very unrealistic. Which means that we need to have the strength to deal with the bad stuff when it comes.

I’ve been reading a lot of biographies of French figures and I’ve found that the ones that I admire the most are the ones who face some really difficult situations, and they know that it could be the end of them, and yet they don’t let their worries overcome them. They *do* worry, but there’s part of the mind that says, “Well, whatever happens, I’m going to try to be able to deal with it. There must be a way out.” In many cases, the situation looked really bleak, and yet they were able to find a way out. Talleyrand was one. The French Revolution began, people like him were getting their heads cut off, and he managed to get out of France with permission from the government. It was because he used his ingenuity.

So this is one of the things that helps us deal with situations as they come up: the confidence that there must be a way out: “I’m not going to let it go past and say, well, I didn’t try.” If it turns out there’s no way out, well, at least you tried. That’s the kind of equanimity you want to develop.

There are two kinds of equanimity. There’s the kind that says, “Okay, I’m just going to be okay with whatever comes up and stay there.” That kind of equanimity can sap your strength and make you say, “Well, I don’t know if it’s going to be worth the effort to make any changes, so I’ll just learn how to accept things as they are.” And all too often that’s portrayed as what the Buddha taught.

I saw an interview one time with a teacher who was saying just that: that the practice is all about learning just to go with the flow and not to try to make any changes in life. Just be equanimous about everything. The interviewer asked the teacher, “Isn’t that defeatist?” And the teacher said, “Well, only if you think about it.”

Which is pretty sad. Are we supposed to not think? Of course we’re supposed to think. The Buddha thought a lot. He set down guidelines for how to think. He didn’t say not to think. He said to think in terms of appropriate attention, to

think in terms of the four noble truths. Ask yourself questions as to what's skillful and what's not. Put things to the test, evaluate them. There's a lot of thinking in following the path.

So we're not trying to cut off our brains and just say, "Okay, well I'll be like a vegetable and accept whatever sun or rain comes my way." The equanimity of the Buddha is the equanimity that says, "Things may be going poorly but I'm not going to let that sap my strength. I'm going to figure out what *can* be done here." Simply accept the fact that things go well sometimes and not so well other times, and look inside to find strength in either situation. That's strong equanimity or the equanimity of strength—which means, of course, that if you're going to develop that kind of equanimity, you have to strengthen yourself.

First, through conviction, that if there's going to be a way out it's going to depend on your actions; and then through persistence, just keeping at it regardless. Once you're confident that you're on the right path—and what path could be better than the path that says to look at your actions and see where they're skillful, look and see where they're not skillful?—encourage the skillful ones and abandon the unskillful ones. It's a path where you're made responsible, so it's a good path to be on.

So once you have confidence in the path, just stick with it.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how, when he was first getting started in meditation practice, he noticed that his mind was going in cycles. He would progress for a while, the concentration would get better, and then it would regress. And then it would progress again, and then it would regress. The problem was that he started anticipating the regress and, sure enough, it would come. So finally he decided, "This is ridiculous. Just stick with the path, make the causes good, and as for whether the mind is going to go in cycles or not, don't pay attention to that. Just stick with the good causes." And that got him past that self-imposed cycle.

So this is the kind of equanimity you want, based on conviction, persistence—and then mindfulness, always remembering what's the appropriate thing to do. Remember to recognize unskillful qualities as they come up in the mind. Recognize anxiety when it's skillful and recognize anxiety when it's unskillful. There is skillful anxiety, you know. It's *ottappa* or compunction, combined with heedfulness. In other words, you realize, "There's work to be done or else I'll keep creating more suffering, and I can't sit around not doing the work, because I don't know how much time I've got left." The anxiety part is in the thought: "I don't know how much time I've got left." But you *do* know you have right now, so don't throw away right now over your worries about what's going to happen down the line. You've got this moment. Make the most of it. That's when you focus your

anxiety in a way that actually becomes something skillful: compunction combined with heedfulness.

So remember what's unskillful in the mind; remember what's skillful. You've got lots of voices in the mind that sound very much like you, because they *have* been you at different times in the past. Simply learn to recognize which ones in there you can actually trust. All too often, we focus on the negative ones, thinking, "Well, they're the ones telling the truth, while the positive ones are kind of out of touch with reality." You have to ask yourself: Who are your friends? The ones who try to destroy your practice? Or the ones trying to encourage it?

This is a truth of the will that we're developing here. There are truths of the observer that simply watch, where your desire for something to be one way or another can't be allowed to get in the way. You have to simply look at the facts. But there are other truths that happen only if you want them enough and then act on that desire in a skillful way. You won't become an artist unless you want to become an artist. You won't succeed at accomplishing something unless you stick with the desire to keep at the causes. The path is a truth of the will. So the voices that encourage that kind of truth, that say you *do* have the potential, you *do* have what it takes within you to follow this path: Those are the voices you listen to. You remember that.

Then based on mindfulness, when it's done properly, you get into concentration, and that's even more strengthening. You actually begin to see the results. The mind can settle down and there's a sense of well-being where you can observe the mind very clearly and feel at home here. And whether it's jhana or not-jhana doesn't matter. The fact that the mind is settled is what matters. You want the mind to be clear and mindful. Alert.

So as the concentration develops, you can ask yourself, "What here in the concentration is a disturbance? What can I let go?" That lightens the burden of the concentration and actually makes it more solid once you've let it go. That way you've got concentration working together with discernment.

All of these qualities—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—are strengths. They strengthen your equanimity so that it does become that second kind, the kind that's willing to face the fact that, "There are difficulties, things aren't going the way I want them to go, there are setbacks, but I'm not going to let that become an excuse not to practice. I'm going to make them reasons for practicing harder and with more ingenuity." You've got to have confidence that, yes, you *do* have the resources. Because after all, this is a path that many people have followed in the past, people of all kinds. They were able to do it, they're human beings, you're a human being, you can do it, too. The equanimity

that allows for that thought keeps the practice going. It doesn't get knocked around by setbacks. That's the kind of equanimity you want to develop.

Remember the story of the Zen master whose student was going to come out to LA and try his hand at the entertainment industry. The Zen master asked the student, when the student came to say goodbye, "What will you do if they knock you down?" The student said, "Well, I guess I'll have to accept that." And the teacher said, "No. They knock you down, you get up. They knock you down again, you get up again."

That's the kind of equanimity you want in the practice. The equanimity that doesn't take defeat as the final word, and doesn't get upset saying, "Gee, this human realm should have been perfect, everything should go well." Or the attitude that says, "If there's a setback, well, I'll just learn how to accept that and give up." That's not equanimity, that's defeatism. The Buddha wasn't a defeatist, and neither was his equanimity. His was the sort of equanimity that realizes we live in a world where we've made mistakes in the past so we're going to have to be dealing with the results of those mistakes, but we can *learn* from them. And we can work to get past them.

It requires a certain amount of equanimity to admit the fact that you've made a mistake, to recognize the mistake, not to hide it from yourself, but then not let it defeat you. And that's the equanimity that'll see you through.