

Fabricating Equanimity

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There are three levels of equanimity. There's ordinary everyday equanimity, when you maintain your even keel in the face of tempting things or in the face of upsetting things. That's the kind of equanimity that comes from force of will. You have to talk to yourself, and talk yourself into it.

The second level is the equanimity that comes with the fourth jhana. The mind has been bathed in pleasure and rapture and it finally settles down, and everything is very, very still. That, too, is fabricated, but it's based on only one fabrication: just the perception of the still breath.

The third level is the equanimity that comes about as a result after you gain full awakening and you reflect on the fact that your mind is released. You can respond with joy or rapture or equanimity. But it's the result of having completed the path and it's the result of awakening. It's not the awakening itself. It's simply a reflection afterwards.

What this means, as we're trying to get the mind settled, is that we have to start with that first level of equanimity. And one of the ways we talk ourselves into it is through a series of images that the Buddha gave to his son. He said, "Make your mind like earth." People throw disgusting things on the earth and it doesn't react. You can also say, people pour perfumed water on the earth, and the earth doesn't react. In the same way, when agreeable and disagreeable things come up in your mind, you don't react.

Now, this doesn't mean you just stay there non-reactive, because the next step after the Buddha taught his son to have his mind like earth, was to focus on the breath. And in dealing with the breath, you're more proactive. You breathe in certain ways, you breathe holding certain things in mind, trying to develop a sense of ease, try to develop a sense of rapture. You breathe in a way that calms the mind, steadies the mind when it needs to be steadied, or gladdens the mind when it needs to be gladdened.

So what the Buddha's basically saying is that as you start out, you want to get your mind very, very even, so as you're trying to figure out how to get yourself to settle down with the breath, you're coming from a place of objectivity, not a place of reactivity, where you try something and then you judge the results with a fair mind—and if it doesn't work, okay, then you try something else. You need this place of steadiness, this place of objectivity, in order to be able to make good judgments. Otherwise, you decide you like something and even though you know the results may not be all that good, you stick with it. And you miss the opportunity to make some improvements.

So this is the kind of equanimity that goes together with persistence, making an effort, and it goes together with your ingenuity. It allows the mind to think up new things and then to test them, and to be fair in its test. So even though this is just the first level of equanimity, as you come into meditation, you have to build on this level of equanimity if you want to get anything further.

So try some long breathing for a while, try some shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, and try to be a fair judge of what really is best right now. If it takes a while to figure this out, okay. Show some endurance.

But the fact that the mind is calm also gives you the opportunity to remember things you'd forget if you came into the meditation like a stormy or gusty wind. You want things to be calm, still. Even though you're not yet fully in concentration, you're trying to bring the mind to a state of solidity with that perception of earth. And as long as that perception is helpful, you hold onto it.

If earth gets too solid, too constricting, remember that the Buddha also mentioned to make your mind like water, make it like wind, make it like fire. Fire burns things and doesn't get disgusted by what it burns. Water is used to wash away disgusting things but it's not disgusted by what it's washing away. Wind blows garbage around but it's not upset by the garbage.

Whatever quality of mind you need to have a sense of well-being right here, you can hold that image in mind. But remember, it's meant to be an image of non-reactivity so that you can watch carefully what you're going to be doing proactively, so you can come up with good ideas and pass good judgements. This is how the first level of equanimity develops into the second.