

Happily on the Path

October 22, 2022

I know a number of people who say that, as they meditate, the wild swings of mood that they used to have get less extreme. The downs aren't quite so down, but the ups aren't very up. Everything becomes gray and equanimous. But that's not the path the Buddha described. He does talk about equanimity—that's the closest he gets to talking about acceptance, accepting things as they are—but equanimity is never taught on its own, and the lists of qualities that lead up to equanimity always contain something having to do with joy, pleasure, happiness.

In other words, when the Buddha talks about equanimity, it's the equanimity of someone who has found joy in the practice and has a sense of fullness, and then can be equanimous about other things because of that fullness, because of that joy. So if you've found that your practice is becoming gray oatmeal, ask yourself what you can do to make it more flavorful.

One of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing and to delight in letting go. You have to find joy in the practice, because there are a lot of things you have to give up. Other customs of the noble ones have to do with being content with the food you get, content with the clothing you have, content with your lodgings. If it's good enough to practice, it's good enough. You don't have to go way out of your way to make things special.

But you shouldn't be content with states of the mind that are less than satisfactory. In fact, the Buddha said that was the secret to his awakening—not being content, even with skillful qualities. When he hadn't gone all the way, and there was more work to be done, he would do it. He would find ways to delight in it as well.

Even when he talks about the different levels of equanimity, he always recommends that you find some way of taking joy first, before settling into a higher level of equanimity. This is one of the reasons why the practice begins with generosity and virtue.

When the Buddha would explain the four noble truths to lay people, he wouldn't jump right into the four truths. He'd start out with what was called a graduated discourse, or step-by-step discourse, and the first two topics in that discourse were generosity and virtue. Notice: He didn't start with abstractions. He started with activities that people were already familiar with and activities they recognize as good. He's confirming that they can make you happy.

The act of generosity in and of itself is a happy act. *Generosity* here means, of course,

voluntary generosity—not the type where you’re forced to give a present because it’s Christmas or a birthday or something, but simply out of the goodness of your heart. You want to share and you have more than enough. Sometimes you may have very little, but the attitude that wants to share turns it into more than enough, and there’s a happiness in that. The mind becomes more prosperous and spacious.

The same with the precepts: You can be made happy by the fact that you’re able to abstain from low behavior. You’re not so poor and hungry and desperate that you have to grub around for what you want out of life. You’re in a position where you can step back and say, “No, that kind of behavior is beneath me.” And even though virtue may involve some sacrifices, the fact that you’re able to maintain your honor is a happy act.

So when the Buddha starts out teaching, before he gets to the four noble truths, he’s establishing that our activities are important.

Other teachers of his time would talk about the universe or the elements of the universe, drawing conclusions as to whether they would make action meaningful or meaningless. Often, they would talk about your actions as being meaningless. The Brahmans and the Jains did talk about action being meaningful, but for them, in the case of the Brahmans, it was ritual action. In the case of the Jains, all action was productive of suffering. To get beyond suffering, you had to stop acting. But everybody else would start with the universe as a whole—principles of the world, whether the world was eternal or not eternal, or who made it and what intention that maker had: that kind of thing.

But when the Buddha was talking to people, he would talk about activities that they were familiar with and that they knew were good—and he would stress the point that the happiness you get out of those activities is something to be cherished, something to be cultivated. Not only were those actions good in and of themselves, but they gave good results: happiness on into the future, both in this life and in the next.

But then he would point out that that happiness had its limitations. He would talk about the degradation of sensuality, the drawbacks of sensuality, because sensual pleasures were usually the results of being generous and being virtuous. He pointed out that even heavenly sensual pleasures have their drawbacks.

In this way, he’s starting out with something good that people are familiar with and he’s taking them to a place they may not be familiar with—the idea that maybe it’d be good to go beyond sensuality.

Then he would talk about the pleasures of jhana as he would explain the four noble truths.

We read the truths and they seem to be all about suffering, suffering, suffering, suffering. But they're not just suffering. They also include trying to find the cause of suffering, realizing that it's possible for suffering to end, and that there's a path of practice to put suffering to an end by abandoning the cause. These are things you can do. The Buddha's taking the principle that your actions can make difference, and showing how they can make a *big* difference.

This in itself is a happy thought, because if your suffering could be ended only by things that other people do, or if it simply wore itself out on its own, that would make you powerless. But here the Buddha is saying that you have power through your actions to bring suffering to an end. That thought is a happy thought, and one of the important actions you're going to need to develop is learning how to get the mind still, centered in right concentration.

The stages of right concentration are defined by their feeling tone. The first one is pleasure and rapture born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. The pleasure gets more intense in the second and third jhanas. Then finally, when you've had enough of that pleasure, that's when you develop equanimity in the fourth jhana. That equanimity comes when there's a sense of satisfaction.

So you're not forcing yourself to say, "Well, I just have to accept things as they are, because there's no other way they're going to be." One, that's not what the Buddha taught, and two, it's a depressing thought. The Buddha says you don't just accept things as they are. You figure out what you can change, so that you can follow the path to the end of suffering—and it does involve pleasure, ease, and happiness.

If your practice is getting dry, remind yourself, it's meant to provide you with delight. So, what can you do in line with the Dhamma that would provide delight? Learn how to think positively about the goodness that comes with being generous and virtuous, getting the mind still, having some control over your thoughts, and then seeing the things that have eluded you for a long time. That's what discernment is all about.

We all want happiness. Everything we do is for the sake of happiness, and yet, so often, our actions lead to the opposite. There's something we're missing; there's something we're not seeing. The whole purpose of discernment is to see clearly where we're making our mistake so that we can correct that mistake.

So the path involves changing a lot of things, with the focus on changing your actions. We look after the monastery, we look after our environment, because that's a part of contentment—taking good care of what you've got. You learn how to get by with little, and one of the best ways of getting by with little is to learn how to use what you've got in a way that makes it last,

looking after it, taking care of it. So contentment doesn't mean just sitting there with whatever. Take care of what you've got, and it'll last.

But then most of your efforts should be aimed at looking inside. How you can find delight in developing, how you can find delight in letting go? What things when you develop them, do give rise to delight? And how can you learn how to appreciate the well-being that comes as you follow the path?

So it's not all about equanimity and acceptance. We're looking for the end of suffering, and that doesn't come by simply saying, "Well, let's just be okay with whatever comes up." Some people take the word *dukkha*—suffering or stress—and translate it as unsatisfactoriness, as if the problem were simply that we're not satisfied with things, that if we could learn how to simply be satisfied with things as they are, then we'd be okay. But again, that's not what the Buddha taught.

He says you have to make changes. You have to develop skillful qualities; abandon unskillful ones. You don't just wait for the unskillful ones to die off on their own, because when they die off on their own, they come back. To be done with them, you have to understand them. You have to penetrate: What is it about them that the mind likes that allows them to come back? We get to see that they're not worth it, because we're not just sitting here, passively watching things coming and going. We're proactive in trying to figure things out.

Look at dependent co-arising, all the factors happening before sensory contact: fabrication, intentions, attention, perceptions, feelings. We're actively shaping things, and that's what we're trying to train: the way the mind shapes its experience. Part of that is learning how to find joy in simple things like generosity and virtue, and moving up to finding joy in the concentration, joy in the fact that you're getting some control of your mind, you're beginning to see into your mind.

There may be a lot of things there that you don't like to see, but it's better to see them than not to see them. If things going on in the mind are unskillful, and you don't want to see them, how are you going to get rid of them? It's when you admit that they're there that you can look into them, and you can take joy in the fact that you're understanding things you used to hide from yourself.

So delight is an important part of the practice. Learn how to cultivate it, because that's what allows your practice to last for a long time and give abundant results.