

## *Patience & Endurance*

*June 17, 2015*

When we chant the formula for the brahmaviharas, you may notice that the pattern for equanimity differs from the pattern for the other three. For goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy, it starts, “May all beings be happy, may they be free from suffering, may they not be deprived of the good fortune they have obtained.” In other words, “may, may, may.” Whereas with equanimity, it’s a statement of fact: “All beings are the owners of their actions.”

When I was in France a couple weeks back, I came across a Pali chanting book with French translations, and the person who had done the translations hadn’t noticed that difference. It was “may” for all of them. You get to equanimity: “May all beings be the owners of their actions, whatever they do for good or for evil, may they fall heir to that.” It sounds like a curse. Actually, it’s a fact. This is the way things happen. This is something we have to accept. There are some things the Buddha has us accept, and others we don’t have to accept. We have to accept the fact that we’re going to reap the results of our actions. The purpose of that acceptance, of course, is to get us to pay more careful attention to what we’re doing.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate. Actions come out of the mind. If the mind is well trained, then it’s going to do things skillfully, to have more skillful intentions—to at least be able to hold its unskillful intentions in check, and to develop more skillful ones in their place.

So as we meditate, we’re working on skillful intentions. What’s skillful right now? Try to get the mind to settle down. We want to get the mind in a position where it doesn’t get worked up over pleasure or pain, where it can see things clearly for what they are. To do that, you’ve got to give the mind a sense of well-being right now. It does need some pleasure in order to keep going. If you try to deny it pleasure—by just noting, noting, noting, or just being with whatever comes up, good or bad—it’s going to start slipping out, slipping away, playing tricks on you. But if you feed it well, it’ll perform well.

So try to notice: What kind of breathing feels good right now? What’s going to be good for the body? What’s going to be good for the mind? You can experiment. It’s interesting to note, though, that when the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, he didn’t start out with the breath. He started out with teachings on patience and

endurance: to make your mind like earth; make your mind like water, wind, fire. Earth is unmoving. The others move, but they don't react to unpleasant things. In other words, you use water to wash away dirty things, and the water doesn't object. Fire burns up trash, but the fire doesn't object to the trash. Wind blows trash around, but it doesn't get disgusted by it. The reason for these instructions is that to get the mind into concentration, to be able to observe it, you have to start with a certain level of non-reactivity.

The way the Buddha teaches this is interesting. He has you hold these images in mind, saying to "tune in" to that kind of energy. What's the energy, say, of your bones right now? When a pain comes into the body, do the bones react? No. They just sit there. That's earth. See if you can emulate that, because the less reactive you are, the more clearly you see things. The more clearly you can see them, the more clearly you can see what needs to be done. It's not that we're just sitting here accepting whatever comes up willy-nilly. Everything the Buddha teaches falls under the four noble truths, and the four noble truths all have duties: four different duties. It's not just noting, noting this or noting that.

Where there's stress or suffering, you want to comprehend it. When you begin to see what's causing it—in other words, you ask yourself, what comes along with the stress and when what goes away does the stress go away?—try to see that connection. When you can see that connection and comprehend it, then you can abandon whatever the cause is. To do that, you have to develop the factors of the path, so that you can realize cessation. So there are four different duties to be done. One of the most difficult parts about the meditation—one of the most difficult parts about the practice as a whole—is to sort those things out.

The four categories sound pretty obvious, but they're not always. Some desires are a cause of suffering; other desires are part of the path. Sometimes, when the mind is harsh with itself, it's part of the path, and sometimes it's part of your desires to get away from the practice. In other words, you beat yourself up to the point where you can't practice anymore. So you have to learn how to sort these things out. To sort them out, you've got to be as non-reactive as possible. Part of that comes from having the right attitude. That chant we had just now about aging, illness, and death being unavoidable: The Thai translation is interesting. It goes in a different direction. It says, "Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal."

When we can learn to regard these things as normal, then we can observe them. When we see them as abnormal—everything is out of joint, something is wrong, things shouldn't be that way—then we can't observe them. We're trying to push, push, push them away. It's by first accepting them as normal: That's when you can do something about them.

Similarly with pain, similarly with harsh words that other people say. When the Buddha talks about endurance and patience, those are the two topics he focuses most of his attention on: physical pain and hurtful words. With hurtful words, he talks about how you have to realize that human speech has different kinds. There's true and there's false. There's kindly and there's unkindly. There's useful and there's useless. Well-meaning; ill-meaning. In other words, both good and bad speech are normal.

If someone says something really horrible and hurtful to us and we get all upset, it clouds the mind. We can't see how we could best respond—especially when we think, “This shouldn't be happening. There's something really wrong here.”

You're on the human level here. The human level has this kind of speech. When you learn how to accept that, then you're in a position where you can respond more skillfully.

This is where responding is different from reacting. Responding starts with the acceptance: “Okay, this is normal. This has happened many times in the past, and will happen many times in the future. How can I not react, so that I can see what the most skillful way of responding to it is?”

The same with pain: It's useful to sit with pain. It trains the mind to realize that this is the way the body is. Ajaan Suwat once made a comment, if you don't think the body is ready for pain, just stick an iron stake into it at any spot and it's going to hurt. It's ready to register pain. That's why we have nerves. So we have to learn how not to get worked up about it. If we can, we're in a stronger position. If we get worked up about pain or worked up about harsh words, we're fearful. When we're fearful, other people can make use of our fears to drive us in whatever direction they want to. So it's good to take a matter-of-fact attitude toward these things: “This is the way they are. This is normal.” Then you can see clearly what the appropriate duty is.

Concentration, for example, is not something simply to watch come and go. When concentration begins to come, you accept that and then you work with it. You develop it even further. When it goes, you don't accept it. You accept the fact that it's gone, but then you don't just sit there. You've got to do something to give rise to it again. That's what right effort is all about. So we use our powers of judgment to see: “Which category does this particular experience fall under? Which truth does it fall under?” Then, from that, you can know which duty is appropriate.

So when we talk about acceptance as a part of the path, we have to be very careful about what it means and what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that you just accept everything as wonderful, learning to be accepting of all things and equanimous around all things. Sometimes equanimity is useful; sometimes it's not. You accept the fact that your actions do shape your experience, and you accept the fact that there're going to be a lot of unpleasant things in life because you've been unskillful in the past, but you don't just sit there. You try to figure out what you can do now to act as skillfully as possible, speak as

skillfully as possible, think as skillfully as possible, listen as skillfully as possible, respond to pain and pleasure as skillfully as possible.

So make use of the insight that our lives are shaped by our actions. The question is not so much what we *are*, the question is what are we *doing*? Actually, what we are is the result of actions, both past and present, so even that issue gets resolved into: What are we doing? How can we do it well? How can we do it coming from a position of strength? Learn how to accept the fact that there will be pleasures and there will be pains. There will be kind words; there will be unkind words. Think of your bones. They don't react. But you don't stay with your bones all of the time. When you're on the receiving end, you learn how to see things as they are with a minimum of reaction. Then the mind can respond in a way that gets actually results that are more acceptable, i.e., more in line with our aspirations.

We do want true happiness. That's a desire that the Buddha affirms. The teachings as a whole are aimed in that direction: nibbana, the highest happiness. It's not the highest equanimity, or the highest acceptance. It's the highest happiness. And even though we can't create it, we do reach it through our efforts. That's one of the potentials of human action. So if you want to explore that potential, accept the fact that your actions are shaping your life and build from there.