

Noninterference

by Rodney Smith

Sometimes Dharma practice is equated with changing our attitudes. “Just adjust your attitude,” I recently heard one student say to another, “And all will be well.” We sometimes link “being with things as they are” with simply adjusting our mindset about the way things are. There are many times during the day when a mood colors a perception. “I just can’t meditate,” we might say after a problematic morning. Seeing through these moods and the accompanying attitude is important if our meditation is to survive difficult times, and we do learn we can meditate despite the emotions we may be experiencing, but the practice is much more than keeping a positive attitude. Having a positive attitude can be very helpful in sustaining our practice over time, but thinking of meditation as changing our emotional response relegates the practice to behavior modification, and is similar to saying that Dharma practice is seeing the glass half full rather than half empty. Meditation is not mastering the power of positive thinking.

Most of us discover relatively soon in meditation that we can bolster our attitude by discounting some of the illegitimate thoughts and accompanying emotions that sustains it and by encouraging more uplifting thoughts. We walk a very fine line between the meditation instruction of noninterference and our discomfort with our emotional posture to the world. All of us would like our minds to be easier and more cooperative, but we may not know how to do that without rejecting the mood we are in and deliberately thinking in a more positive direction.

What does noninterference look like when we are facing a deluge of difficult emotions that we know we have the power to transform by nudging our thoughts in a different direction? There is a subtle dharma difference between actions based in wise effort and those from unwise effort. Wise effort is informed by wisdom and unwise effort is directed by our opinions and reactions. When wisdom meets an obstruction it surrenders all resistance to it, when our reactions meet an obstacle, we strategize on how to overcome the difficulty. Wisdom lives all states of mind but believes in none, ignorance identifies with each state of mind and lives out each one. Wisdom does not resist or attempt to change anything.

The instructions in meditation are to see all states as visitors passing through the mind and allow each guest a safe passage free of judgment and condemnation. The reason we leave each state of mind alone is because we cannot realize the true nature of mind if we are busy changing its composition. We cannot touch the Buddha's teaching on emptiness if we are busy tweaking what we see.

By allowing mental states to be as they are, we realize we have nothing to fear from what they are. We alter an emotional state or attitude when we do not trust it, when we give it more substance and truth than it warrants. The quieter we become the less we infuse the story of our life with self-belief. It is the narrative we fear because the narrative binds the experience to our personal point of view. "It is all about me!" we think, when actually the narrative points to no one and explains nothing.

There is a place for uplifting our emotions and discouraging difficult thoughts, but we must be aware that ultimately it is through noninterference that the deepest teaching is accessed. Noninterference is simply letting something be what it is without believing in the story that supports it. With the absence of the story, we awaken to the natural alignment of all things; we awaken to their interconnected reality. This is how awareness sees reality when the filters of the ego are removed. Reality floats to the surface of awareness like a submarine emerging out of the depths of the sea and a new joy bounds forth. A joy born of noninterference, deep contentment, and an abiding trust of life.