

Finding our Way (5 of 5) with Peace and Agitation

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Buddhism is often associated with peace. The emotional manifestation of awakening, of freedom, that the Buddha points to is most commonly associated with happiness and peace. The opposite of peace may be agitation and conflict, and that is part of our world.

We navigate a world in which we're calm and then not so calm, we're peaceful and then not peaceful, we're agitated and then less agitated. How do we find our way with that? When do we emphasize peace – appreciate it, value it, cultivate it? And when do we allow ourselves to become agitated, less peaceful, or energized in a dynamic way that doesn't feel peaceful?

There are times for both. Living in this world, there are times when it's appropriate to put aside our peace and enter into a world of doing and activity, not being so concerned about whether we are agitated or have lost our calm.

There are times for peace and times when peace is not appropriate. There are times when there is agitation which is inappropriate and challenging and makes our life much more difficult. There is a time to allow ourselves to become agitated or lose some of our calm.

It's easy to argue that maybe it's always good to be calm, but realistically, I don't know if that's really going to happen unless we're living a solitary, quiet lifestyle. If your neighbor has a serious injury and asks you to take them to the hospital, that is not a time to be excessively concerned about your calm. As you get to the emergency department, maybe your neighbor can't talk much at that point, so you're having to explain and be engaged in that activity. I think the chances are that is not going to help keep your calm. You're going to be strongly activated, enough so that when your friend is finally being taken care of and you can sit quietly, you see how much activation there is. You're spun up.

But that's not wrong for those circumstances. In fact, to be holding on to calm and peace – “Let's slowly and peacefully walk to the car, counting our steps and with each step say ‘peace’ – that is really not the name of the game. We have to let go of any emphasis on peace and just engage in what's needed. Being in the world with what's needed is part of what dharma practice is about.

Certainly, it's possible to be attached to peace and hold on to it. It's possible to pretend we're peaceful or hold or contain ourselves in a certain way so it's kind of like we're not agitated. We're not physically moving around a lot. We're kind of staying close to something that looks like peace, but it's more attachment. The peace is manufactured and not real.

The ability to navigate between activated states and peaceful states is a lot easier if we are fluid and can move between them. If we resist or hold on to one state, then we are not fluid, and it's not easy to go back and forth between states. In fact, one of the principles of dharma practice that I value a lot is that we do not try to attain any particular state as if that is the state we're supposed to be in. There are all kinds of mental states, embodied states, we can experience. To be free is to have fluidity, to be able to move back and forth between them.

If we have fluidity, then we can navigate this world quicker and more easily. If we don't have fluidity, we become fragile, we're holding on, we're resisting. We are threaten-able because what we're holding on to is threatened or what we're afraid is going to happen will come and overwhelm us. But if we can surf with it, navigate it, with fluidity, ease, and relaxation, not holding onto anything and not resisting much in the inner life, it's much easier to let go. It's much easier to not be troubled by things.

So there are activated states in life, and there are peaceful, calm states. Sometimes it's healthy to move between them with fluidity. It's okay to be activated. It's okay to lose our calm sometimes. And sometimes it's not.

Sometimes we lose our calm, and we make mistakes, we make the whole thing worse.

Agitation can create a lot of stress and exhaustion, and so we learn to navigate that. It's much harder if we're clinging, grasping, holding on, and resisting. All that creates more agitation and less peace. Non-clinging, non-attachment, creates more fluidity and more appropriate peace. It creates a greater capacity to flow out of peace when something else is needed and when that is no longer needed, to flow back to a calm and centered state.

Finding our way with peace and agitation (activation) also has to do with becoming connoisseurs of both. Not just becoming an expert on peace, but becoming an expert on agitation itself. Mindfulness practice is to see and understand how our life works. What are these things we go through really like?

So when you're agitated, spend time with these questions. What is this agitation? How am I experiencing it? What's being triggered? Where does it live in me? What's my relationship to this agitation? Do I believe it? Do I go headlong into it? Am I resisting it? Am I judging it? Am I critical of myself for being agitated? Those are things to study and become much more aware of. And we can bring a peaceful mindfulness to that. A non-conflictive mindfulness: "This is how it is. This is how it is."

We want to study peace equally well. We want to get to understand it, become connoisseurs of it, and recognize it. Be able to recognize even the small hints of peace, even when it's very minor peace. Be able to recognize when it's available. Peace is much more available than most people realize.

Most situations that we are in have more peace somewhere in the center or the corner of them than the busy, activated mind allows us to tune in to. So to study these things, get to know them more. And that brings us to our capacity to recognize when we cling, when we resist, where our attachments are. As the practice deepens, there's a process of letting go, relaxing, or softening our attachments that goes deeper and deeper, more and more to the core of who we are. We start letting go of small things, and that is training to let go of the deeper attachments.

We don't want to become attached to letting go. We don't want to be attached to deeper states of well-being and peace that might be there. That is a recipe for unhealthy agitation.

Then to drop down deeper and deeper to some of the deepest places we can let go. The deepest peace is what is called release. The release is peace. The deepest peace comes from a profound release where we're no longer in a world of polarities between peace and agitation. We're centered in such a way that peace and calm go with us, even when we're busy and activated and doing things. It's not far away.

The deeper the letting go can be, the more thorough it can be. It's like it creates a space of absence, a space where there's spaciousness in our minds, hearts, and bodies. This spaciousness can feel calm and open, and because it's more like space, things can happen to us and they go right through that space.

If we are peaceful, but it's like we're holding ourselves peacefully or the state of peace feels palpable, that's wonderful. But that is not the empty space of freedom where things can just go through or there's space to hold everything. Letting go is what creates this inner space that provides a qualitatively different kind of peace, calm, well-being, and room for all of ourselves.

So to navigate this world of ours with the idea that we want to make room for all of who we are in this particular way where there are no attachments, no clinging. And on the way there, we have to make room for our attachments and get to know them as well.

It's a wonderful journey finding our way. To end this series, one of the lessons I have been trying to get across is to not have a categorical right and wrong for almost any state that you have or any way that you are. Take time to look at it. Sometimes there's almost a time for everything – certainly, a time to study it and get to know it.

Finding your way in this world, when you're a mindfulness practitioner, has a lot to do with bringing mindfulness and room to how you are, so that you can learn to find the wisest and most free way to navigate your life.

This weekend, your home practice is to study your relationship with agitation and peace, agitation and calm or tranquility, whatever you like. See how the pendulum swings between those states. Do you prefer them? Do you hold on to them? What happens if you spend time with each, studying them, getting to know them, and

becoming more familiar with them? Become the connoisseur of your agitation and your peace. Thank you.