

Vicissitudes of Life

Most people don't like change. They'd prefer things remain stable, steady. But the things of life will always be in flux, subject to constant change. Understanding that the conditions of life won't provide stability, the dharma student develops inner stability. He develops equanimity. Developed in equanimity, he skillfully meets the vicissitudes of life.

Webster defines "vicissitude" as: "1. a: the quality or state of being changeable: mutability. b: natural change or mutation visible in nature or in human affairs. 2. a: a favorable or unfavorable event or situation that occurs by chance: a fluctuation of state or condition (the conditions of daily life). b: alternating change: succession."

In a well-known teaching the Buddha delineates "eight vicissitudes" of life. The eight vicissitudes include four pairs of agreeable and disagreeable experience. They are: (1) pleasure and pain, (2) gain and loss, (3) status and disrepute, (4) praise and blame. The dharma student cultivating equanimity is encouraged to recognize when he's subject to these eight fluctuating circumstances. The eight vicissitudes are the "worldly conditions" we're most prone to become involved with, entangled with, enmeshed in, thrown by; when we get caught up with these conditions we bring about suffering. It's said we're going along with the "ways of the world" when we chase after pleasure, gain, status, praise, when we try to escape pain, loss, disrepute, blame. In following the Buddha's way, it's critical that we don't get sidetracked by these eight vicissitudes.

First, there's pleasure and pain. Experience that we take in through our sense doors may be pleasurable or painful. According to the teachings, there are six sense experiences: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily sensations, mental impressions (thoughts, emotions). There will be times when our experience, received through the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, body, mind will be pleasurable; there will be times when it will be painful.

Cultivating equanimity, following the four-step process, we recognize when we're subject to pleasure and pain. We discern that our sense experience will change, fluctuate between pleasure and pain. There will always be pleasure. And there will always be pain.

During the course of any day we're subject to an array of pleasurable and painful sense experiences. You eat a delicious breakfast. A half hour later you've got indigestion. You leave your house, step outside to a beautiful warm spring day. Later it rains and you get soaking wet. Pleasure and pain. All day long your experience is in flux.

When practicing breath meditation, we often get a good picture of the manner in which bodily sensations vacillate. At the start of the meditation there's tightness in the body. After a while there's ease. Then there's a quality of bliss. Then your knee begins to hurt, you're stricken with sharp stabbing pain. Then the pain subsides and everything feels okay. And so on. It's the way it is. In life, there's pleasure and pain.

Sometimes there's a shift while you're experiencing a specific sensation. You go to a meditation class on a hot summer night. You take a position on the floor directly beneath the rapidly beating ceiling fan. At first the sensation of the air against the skin is rather pleasant; however after some time passes you begin to feel cold. The sensation is the same but the flavor is different. The experience of the air hitting the body is now unpleasant, painful.

Next, there's gain and loss.

Gain takes various shapes. You make money. Your business flourishes. You get a job. You sell some of your work. You buy a car. You buy a television. You meet a new friend. You get married. A child is born.

Then there's loss. You lose money. You lose your job. Your car is stolen. Your television breaks down. A dear friend moves to another city. You get divorced. A family member dies.

The dharma student notices when there's gain and loss.

She comprehends the truth: there will always be gain and loss.

Gain and loss, she discerns, are both part of life.

We'd like, of course, for there only to be gain. But it's not going to happen. Loss is inevitable. People are outraged when the economy takes a downturn, when the housing market suffers, when the stock market drops precipitously. As if it shouldn't happen. But, in fact, it's exactly what should happen. It's the way things are, the way things will always be. There will be gain and there will be loss.

The next pair of vicissitudes is status and disrepute. At times we'll enjoy status. Others will regard us highly. In our careers we'll assume a lofty position. We'll take certain actions for which we'll receive acclaim. And then there will be times when we'll fall into disrepute. We'll be held in low regard.

Recognizing when we're subject to status and disrepute, we apprehend the unalterable truth that for as long as we sojourn in the human realm, the way that people look at us, think about us, will fluctuate. At your job, for instance, there will be times when your co-workers will hold you in high esteem, times when they'll hold you in low esteem. How does the song go? Riding high in April, shot down in May. That pretty much sums it up. You receive tons of acclaim for your

accomplishments, but then something goes awry and suddenly you're the object of condemnation. We frequently observe this kind of alteration in the lives of celebrities. The movie star involved in a scandal is relegated from hero to villain with startling velocity.

Although you may not be a star of stage and screen, you'll experience status and disrepute.

Lastly, there's praise and blame. Sometimes we'll be praised. Sometimes we'll be blamed, criticized.

Recognizing when he's subject to the eight vicissitudes, the dharma student takes the position of the observer. With the objectivity of a scientist looking through a microscope, he notes: "there's praise" or "there's blame." Labeling is useful; it helps set up a spacious, non-attached relationship to the experience of praise or blame, pleasure or pain, gain or loss, status or disrepute.

Observing praise and blame, the dharma student realizes that, as a human being, he'll receive both praise and blame. It's an unavoidable truth.

When we take an action, some people may praise us, and some may blame us, criticize us. When I give a dharma talk, some people like it, other people don't like it. Although I'd prefer that everybody acknowledge the talk in glowing, highly complimentary terms, it's not a realistic expectation. There's always praise and blame.

When I've organized dharma programs, there've been occasions when, after a class with a teacher, somebody approached, told me how much they appreciated the program, how much they enjoyed the teachings, and while the person and I were speaking another person came over and expressed dissatisfaction with the event, distaste for the teacher. It was right there in front me. Praise and blame.

As dharma students, we may have the idea that when we achieve a level of proficiency we'll no longer experience pain, loss, disrepute, blame. We'll only know pleasure, gain, status, praise. But that's not how it works.

Everybody is subject to the eight vicissitudes.

Everybody encounters both the agreeable and disagreeable. Everybody. Even the Buddha had to deal with disagreeable experience. There were people who disparaged him. He had to manage quarrels amongst monks. In his later years the Buddha's closest friends died. The Buddha himself was wracked with severe back pain. Like all human beings, he met with sickness, aging, death, separation.

Everybody experiences pleasure and pain, gain and loss, status and disrepute, praise and blame. The difference between the skilled practitioner and the unskilled person is that the skilled practitioner isn't knocked off balance by the vicissitudes of life. The skilled practitioner isn't disrupted by the eight vicissitudes. As the Buddha puts it, he doesn't "welcome" what's agreeable and doesn't "rebel against" what's disagreeable.

"He doesn't welcome the arisen gain, or rebel against the arisen loss. He doesn't welcome the arisen status, or rebel against the arisen disgrace. He doesn't welcome the arisen praise, or rebel against the arisen censure. He does not welcome the arisen pleasure, or rebel against the arisen pain. As he thus abandons welcoming & rebelling, he is released from birth, aging, & death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. He is released, I tell you, from suffering & stress.

"This is the difference, this the distinction, this the distinguishing factor between the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones and the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person." (AN 8.6)

The skilled practitioner understands the drawbacks in "welcoming" pleasure, gain, status, praise, in "rebellling against" pain, loss, disrepute, blame. He develops this understanding by paying close attention to the way he relates to the eight worldly conditions. With a keen, objective eye, he observes his unskillfulness. When he chases after the agreeable and opposes the disagreeable, he recognizes the painful consequences. He sees that when he becomes preoccupied with the eight vicissitudes, he suffers. In this way he gradually cultivates understanding, insight. Rooted in insight, he develops the skill of equanimity.

The Buddha puts it rather eloquently:

Gain/loss,
status/disgrace,
censure/praise,
pleasure/pain:
these conditions among human beings
are inconstant,
impermanent,
subject to change.

Knowing this, the wise person, mindful,

ponders these changing conditions. Desirable things don't charm the mind,
undesirable ones bring no resistance.

His welcoming
& rebelling are scattered,
gone to their end,
do not exist.

Knowing the dustless, sorrowless state,
he discerns rightly,
has gone, beyond becoming,
to the Further Shore.

(AN 8.6)