

Intelligent Equanimity

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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Every evening before we meditate, we chant the four sublime attitudes: goodwill – “May all living beings be happy”; compassion – “May they all be free from stress and pain”; appreciation – “May they not lose the happiness they’ve found.”

And then there’s equanimity. Instead of saying, “All living beings can just go to hell, I don’t care,” the chant says, “All living beings are the owners of their actions, heirs to their actions.”

Exactly how is that thought related to equanimity? Notice that it comes last in the list. In other words, you first cultivate goodwill, compassion, and appreciation. But then there comes a point where you realize that you can have goodwill for people but they’re not happy. You can have compassion for them and they still don’t get released from their suffering. You can have appreciation for their happiness, but they abuse it. They abuse their power, they abuse their wealth. You begin to realize that there’s only so much you can do, not only for other people but also for yourself.

That’s where the reflection on karma comes in. You realize that certain things are caused by past karma and there’s no way you can change them. Other people’s karma places limitations on them; your own karma places limitations on you. You have to live realistically within those limitations. You can push them a bit, you can push the envelope to see how much you can work for your own happiness and for that of others, but there comes a point where the envelope pushes back. You realize that you can only do so much at any given time. You can do only so much with the energy, the talents you have. So the appropriate response is to put aside the areas where you can’t help or can’t make a difference, so that you can focus on the areas where you can.

That’s what the chant on karma is all about: to give you a sense of priorities, to remind yourself of what’s important. You’ve got a limited amount of energy, a limited amount of time in this life. You help where you can, but if you can’t help there’s no point in getting upset, no point in suffering over it. There’s no point in expending your energies in areas where you just can’t make a difference, for you only have so much. Equanimity means making peace with the principle of karma so that you can work within it and use your energy wisely. That’s part of what it means to say, “Whatever you do for good or for evil, to that will you fall heir.” You have to accept the principle of karma if you’re going to be skillful in using what you’ve got.

The teaching on equanimity is not counseling cold indifference. It’s simply reminding you of where your priorities are, where your limitations are, and that you’ve got to work within those limitations. In other words, if an issue comes

from your past karma, you realize you can't change that. What you can change, what you can shape is what you're doing right now. So focus there.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the skillful and unskillful ways of teaching karma and of thinking about karma. An unskillful way is to say that everybody who does evil is going to go to hell; everybody who does something bad is going to suffer. You look back and you realize that you, like everyone else, have done some bad things in your life: the times when you acted on less than noble or less than your best intentions. If you simply brood over your big mistakes, you put yourself into a spiral that goes down, down, down. It doesn't help you at all. What you should do is to remind yourself that even though there's past karma, there's also new karma, a fresh slate. You can choose freely right now to act as skillfully as possible. Whatever you've done in the past that was unskillful, just put it aside. Make up your mind that you're not going to make that same mistake again. And then move on. It's not that you deny your mistakes. You freely admit them. It's not that you're blasé about them. You realize that a mistake's a mistake and you don't want to repeat it. But if you simply brood on the mistakes you made in the past, you don't leave yourself the energy needed to act skillfully in the present moment.

It's a matter of priorities: Where are you going to focus your energies to get the best results? The reflection connecting the principle of karma with equanimity is meant to clear the decks so that you can focus right there, on your present actions. That's where the true issue is. That's what underlies the basic structure of reality. When you can focus here, you don't get all caught up in all the "what ifs" about the past: "What if I had done this? What if I hadn't done that?" All those "what ifs" about the past are a massive waste of time. The important "what if" is: "What if I act skillfully now?" Try that out.

Buddhism doesn't teach heartlessness. It starts out with goodwill. Look at the path: It's a way of working for your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around you, a way of putting an end to suffering. That's goodwill put into action in spades. The teaching on equanimity is meant to make sure that your goodwill doesn't run off the road, doesn't burn out, doesn't waste time getting lost in unskillful byways.

In other words, the Buddha doesn't tell you to be indifferent about your choices in the present moment, or to say, "Who cares what I do in the present moment?" You can't think that way. You have to let goodwill, compassion, and appreciation dominate your choice of how you're going to act right now – and right now and right now, as the present keeps moving through time. You can't be indifferent to that. There has to be a strong sense of desire, purpose, and resolve about doing the most skillful thing you can, each moment you're aware of your choices. You have to make yourself more and more aware of exactly what choices you're making. That requires effort and energy.

The development of equanimity husbands your resources so that you can focus them on the spot where they're most useful, where they really will make a

difference. You develop equanimity about the path only when you've obtained the goal. Even the equanimity you feel when you've obtained the goal: There's a transcending of that as well, in what the texts call "non-fashioning." In other words, you realize that equanimity is a choice you make: These are the things you're going to put aside; these are the things you're going to focus on. The things you put aside, you really do have to let yourself not get worked up about them. When the path is finally completed, that's the point when it, too, comes into the realm of equanimity. You can let go of it. Don't fashion anything at all, not even the choices of equanimity. That's when the mind gains release.

So you develop universal equanimity in accepting the principle of karma, but in applying it to your past and present choices you need a selective equanimity up until the endpoint of the path. That way, instead of being a blanket indifference to everything – which would be like being a dead person – equanimity becomes an important tool in keeping you alive and active, making sure all the energy and activity you've got to devote to the present moment is used in the best possible way. Otherwise you drag yourself down by taking on too many responsibilities, too many cares. When that happens, nothing much gets accomplished at all. Only when you focus your energies properly can they really pay off.

As you develop your meditation, try to bring the mind to concentration so that it can maintain this state of equanimity from which you continue your work. In other words, you have equanimity for everything else at that point, aside from the development of insight. Then the equanimity serves to protect you as well. Ajaan Fuang once said, "If you don't have the equanimity of jhana, goodwill will cause you suffering," because you see how limited your ability to help other people is. You keep running up against the limitations created by your own past karma in exactly how much you can accomplish for them at any one time. You also run up against the limitations of their past and present karma. If you develop the proper equanimity to those limitations, you don't have to suffer because of them. You simply recognize them and work around them, on the areas that *are* open to you. Equanimity is an important way of nourishing you on the path, giving you strength, making sure that your basic goodwill for yourself and other people gets properly directed and not squandered.

Don't think of equanimity as a heartless or cold state of mind. It's simply a very realistic way of looking at things. Notice that in the Four Sublime Attitudes, the other three are, "*May* all living beings be this way, *May* all living beings be that way." But when you get to the fourth one, the thought is, "All living beings *are* the owners of their actions." There's no *may* in there, it's just a statement of fact. You recognize reality, you recognize the limitations in this causal realm in which we operate, and you make up your mind to work within those limitations in as creative and effective way as is possible.

Someone once wrote a book on Buddhism called *The Intelligent Heart*. This is precisely what these four attitudes try to develop: an intelligent heart, an

intelligence in the way your heart, your will, and your motivation function in your life so as to get the most out of them. And equanimity is what makes the intelligence possible.