Equanimity with Wisdom

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When the Buddha teaches equanimity, he teaches an equanimity that has to know its time and place. It’s not the ideal that you’re equanimous about everything all the time. The good side of equanimity is that your motions are stable, you’re not easily disturbed. But there are times when you don’t stop there. There are things that have to be done. Back when I was staying with the John Fuang, one of the neighbors said he was not inspired by John Fuang. When he was young, there was an abbot of a monastery in the little village where he grew up, who was equanimous about everything. Whatever happened, he didn’t really respond at all, just stayed very calm, unruffled, but didn’t do much of anything. That was this village’s ideal monk. Well, certainly not the way the Buddha was. If he had been equanimous all the time, nothing would have happened. The Dhamma wouldn’t have been founded. He would have stayed under the Bodhi tree. Before his awakening, if he was equanimous all the time, he wouldn’t have even gained awakening. As he said, being a meditator is like being a goldsmith. This goldsmith knows when to put the gold in the fire, when to take it out and look at it, and when to blow on it. Putting it in the fire means making an effort, unskillful thoughts in the mind. You have to do what you can to get rid of them. Blowing on it to cool it down, that’s concentration. Get the mind solidly established. And then looking at it is equanimity. He said if you just put it in the fire all the time, it burns. If you put it in the water all the time, you can’t make anything out of it. And if you just look at it, you won’t even be able to get it into concentration. So equanimity has to know its time and place. A couple of stories about Ajahn Chah in this regard, and they’re interesting because Ajahn Chah is often said to have taught nothing much but let go, let go. But there was one time he was invited into the palace, two other Ajahns. It was during a time when the military and the students were attacking each other verbally. And the king wanted some advice. The first two monks, who were more senior than Ajahn Chah, said, “Well, you should try to be equanimous.” When it got to Ajahn Chah, he said, “Well, you have to use your equanimity with discernment.” In other words, know the right time in the right place. An example from his life at the monastery, the storm went through the monastery one time. And after the storm had passed, he went to check up and see how much damage had been done. He came to this one hut where half the roof had been blown off, and the monk was sitting in the hut meditating. And Ajahn Chah asked him, “Why aren’t you fixing the roof?” And the monk said, “I’m practicing equanimity.” And Ajahn Chah said, “That’s the equanimity of a water buffalo. Fix the roof.” Now in Thai, that’s a fairly strong insult to call somebody a water buffalo. But he had his point. If you just endure and are equanimous about things, the things that need to get done don’t get done. The Buddha explains this in more internal terms. In the mind, there are different kinds of causes of suffering. Some of them go away if you just look at them with equanimity. But with others, you have to exercise what he called the fabrication. The first kind are the ones that are there in the mind, largely because you’re not paying attention. When you stop and you look at them, you realize they’re foolish. It’s very easy to let them go. With others though, you’re more attached. These are the ones that you have to figure out what’s the allure. Why do you like them? And what are their drawbacks? You have to watch to see when they arise. What causes them to rise? And we’re talking about causes inside the mind. When they pass away, what passes away together with them? In other words, you have to understand them so you can make a good value judgment. Are they really worth the effort they involve? Do the drawbacks outweigh the allure, or does the allure outweigh the drawbacks? In the case of greed, aversion, and delusion, if you’re fair, you have to realize the drawbacks way outweigh the allure. You develop dispassion for them and gain your escape. So in some cases you have to do a lot of thinking. Other cases you don’t have much thinking at all. And the discernment lies in knowing which is which, when you apply which tactic. So you can’t say that the Buddha wants us to be equanimous about everything. He does want us to be unswayed by events. That’s the kind of equanimity that comes from endurance. In other words, you make up your mind that you’re not going to be affected by things. And as your practice gets deeper, then you find that as the mind gets deeper into concentration, you can base your equanimity on the well-being that comes first, from getting the mind to settle down with a sense of pleasure and a sense of rapture even, so it feels that its needs have been met. Then you become equanimous based on concentration. So even though you have to start out with an attitude that you’re not going to be easily affected by things, as the Buddha said, make your mind like earth. People pour disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t shrink away and doesn’t get disgusted. You have to train your mind so that when things you don’t like about yourself appear in your own mind, you’re willing to admit them. You don’t run away from them. That’s when you can deal with them. But to be more solidly based, you have to be able to develop a state of concentration where there’s a sense of well-being. When the mind is well-fed like that, then the equanimity that comes is much less begrudging. Because when you tell yourself not to react, there can sometimes be a resentment. When the equanimity comes from a sense of well-being, there’s no resentment at all. So when you practice equanimity, remember it has to have its timing. Even though it comes at the list of many things, like the Brahma-viharas, it comes at the end of the list of the factors for awakening. It doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s the highest member of those lists. What it means is it has to be based on the qualities that come before. In the Brahma-viharas, it means you have developed goodwill, and goodwill develops into compassion when you encounter people who are suffering. It develops into empathetic joy when you see people who are happy. But then you realize there are a lot of people out there who will not do what is needed to be done in order to become truly happy. You can’t force skillfulness on them. They have to want it and develop it themselves. So in a case like that, based on your goodwill, based on your compassion and empathetic joy, then you develop equanimity. So that you can focus your thoughts of compassion and empathetic joy in cases where they’re more productive. So in that case, equanimity is a reality check. But it doesn’t take the place of the other ones. It acts together with them. The same with the factors for awakening. We start out with mindfulness, go through analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, arriving at equanimity. But we need all of them. Once the mind is at equanimity, you don’t stop there. As the Buddha said, you can get stuck on equanimity and you don’t get awakened. You need to go back and develop more mindfulness and develop more of the discernment that comes as you analyze what’s going on in the mind. So in that case, the equanimity becomes a foundation for more activity in the mind, to figure things out. So you never find equanimity listed alone. It’s always together with other qualities that support it, and that makes it more complete. But at the same time, they all have to work together. That’s what it means to have equanimity with discernment. You understand the right time and the right place to be equanimous, the right time and the right place to base your actions on a state of mental stability, but move on from there to do what needs to be done. We have our duties, after all. We have to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path. Those things are not going to happen if you’re just equanimous. But they will likely be more effective if you can maintain the state of mind that is stable and not easily shaken. And then build on that.

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