

Equanimity

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When the Buddha lists the factors for awakening, equanimity comes at the end of the list, which gives the impression that it's the highest of the list. And in one way it is, but in many ways it's not. It's listed as one of the factors that's useful on some occasions. When the mind is overly excited, overly energetic, overly worked up about things, equanimity is one of the calming factors. It goes together with calm and concentration. When your energy is too low, though, that's not the time to be developing equanimity. You have to work on the factors that are more energizing: analysis of qualities, rapture, and persistence. Otherwise, your practice will stagnate.

So you have to use your equanimity together with your discernment to figure out what's just right. There's a story that Ajaan Chah told about a time when he was invited to the palace in Bangkok along with a couple of other ajaans. The King was worried at the time about some political problems: a standoff between the students and the military. There were demonstrations in the streets. After the meal, he asked the ajaans what to do. The other two ajaans were more senior to Ajaan Chah, so they spoke first. They both recommended that the King develop equanimity. When it came Ajaan Chah's turn he said, "Well, yes, you need to develop equanimity, but you have to develop it together with discernment."

The discernment here is a matter of knowing what to accept and what not to accept, or what not to be equanimous about. This connects with two principles. One is that there are some areas where you can make a difference, and those are areas that you don't want to just leave alone. If you can make a difference for the better, that's what you focus on doing. Leave equanimity for the areas where you really can't make a difference.

The other principle is that there are some things in the mind that respond just to your watching them. In other words, certain kinds of greed, aversion, or delusion come up, and when you recognize them for what they are, it's as if they get embarrassed and they just go away. There are other instances, though, where they're not embarrassed at all. When you look at them, they stare right back. They're firmly entrenched. They're armed with lots of arguments, lots of justifications, and you can sit there and watch and watch and watch as much as you like, and they're not going to go away. They may go away after a while, but they come back—and keep coming back until you dig down and do something about them.

That's when the Buddha says that you have to use the fabrications of exertion. In other words, you use the way you breathe, you use the way you think about things, evaluate things, you use your perceptions and feelings to deal with those problems: to figure out where they're coming from and what you can do to undercut them so that eventually they don't come back.

So you need to use your discernment together with your equanimity to know when you let things be and when you don't.

And it's important to recognize that there are three levels to equanimity. The first one is the one the Buddha taught his son when he first taught him meditation. His first instruction: Make your mind like earth. People spit on the earth, people throw dirty things on the earth, but the earth doesn't recoil. Make your mind like water. People use water to wash dirty things away, but the water isn't upset. Make it like fire and wind. Fire burns dirty things, wind blows dirty things around, but the fire and wind aren't affected by them. So a very beginning instruction in meditation is that you have to make your mind really solid, and not run away from unpleasant things. This is where equanimity is combined with your powers of endurance.

Now, the Buddha's not saying that you make the mind like a lump of dirt, totally unresponsive. The purpose here is to make it solid so that you can watch things carefully, and watch them in a reliable way. If you're the sort of person who runs away from negative things, you're never going to know them. You're never going to understand them. So we're not here just to put up with things, or just to be equanimous. We're here to endure them so that we can understand them: how they come, how they go. Learn how to observe them so that you can see problems and solve them.

This is shown in how the Buddha followed up those instructions. After telling to Rahula to make his mind like earth, he then taught him the steps for breath meditation, which involve a lot of proactive involvement with the breath, a lot of experimentation where you have to learn how to judge the results of your experiments in a reliable way. You're not just sitting there letting the breath come in and go out any old which way. In fact, the Buddha criticized those who practiced breath meditation by just letting the breath come in and go out while trying to be equanimous all the time.

In the Buddha's 16 steps, you train yourself to breathe being aware of the whole body, you try to calm down the effect that the breath has on the body, you breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, that gives rise to a sense of pleasure and ease, you learn to breathe in a way that calms down the effect of feelings and perceptions on the body and on the mind. And while you're breathing in and out,

if you see that the mind needs to be gladdened, you gladden it. If it needs to be steadied, you steady it. If it needs to be released, you release it. In other words, in this case equanimity is the foundation for acting skillfully: assessing the situation, making a difference where you can, and reading the results of your actions in a fair and objective way. That's the first level of equanimity.

The second level comes when you really can get the mind to settle down and be still in concentration so that there's a sense of ease and rapture. Then the ease and rapture fade away, so you're left with equanimity. That's when the mind is really solid and even more observant, aware all around. This is the kind of equanimity you can use to watch subtle things clearly in the mind. You begin to notice some of the defilements in the mind—and they *are* defilements. We usually don't like to use the word "defilement" with regard to our thoughts and emotions, but that's often what they are. They cloud the mind; they darken the mind.

This equanimity that comes from concentration is useful in some cases in dealing with problems of the mind, because you begin to see that the mind has all kinds of ways of creating problems for itself. When you see that the problems are superfluous, it's very easy to let go. Those are the ones that aren't really deeply rooted.

That leaves the deeper problems, and these are the ones where you really do have to figure them out, to understand: "Where is this coming from? Exactly why does the mind go for greed, aversion, and delusion? Why does it like these things?"

As the Buddha said, if you're going to go beyond these defilements, you have to figure out how they come about, how they disappear, and how they're going to come back again after they disappear. Then you figure out what their allure is: Why do you like them? What is there about greed that you really like? What is there about anger that you really like? Usually it's something you don't want to admit to yourself, so it's hard to see.

This is why the solidity of equanimity is, again, a useful foundation for seeing these things so that you can finally admit to yourself that, yes, there is that element in the mind, there's that desire, there's that taste in the mind, that really likes these things.

Then you compare the allure with the drawbacks. Is the taste worth the price you pay? It's amazing how the mind can very easily magnify the taste and try to minimize the drawbacks. But, again, the equanimity of concentration is a good foundation for seeing this. As you get a greater sense of well-being and stability in the mind, there's less hunger, and when there's less hunger you don't fall for the

things that look like food but make you pay a heavy price in the end—because now you've already got better food.

So as you use this foundation of equanimity for analyzing things, understanding things, you finally get to the point where you can develop the dispassion that can fully let them go.

This opens up to an even higher level of equanimity: the equanimity that comes when you've found true happiness. There's nothing else you have to struggle for, and you can look at all the different things in the area of sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations, and ideas, where you used to go foraging for food, and you don't feel any desire to go looking there anymore. Ever. You've got something better.

This level of equanimity is one of the byproducts of reaching the goal. It's not the essence of the goal. Sometimes you hear the factors for awakening being described as descriptions of awakening itself, but that's not the case. They're part of the path. They're to be developed. The goal is something even beyond developing, and as the Buddha said, it's the highest happiness. From the outside it may look like equanimity, but from inside it's a totally satisfying happiness.

So there's an equanimity that's a product of the practice, and there are levels of equanimity that function as factors in the practice. The factors of the practice are the ones we need to pay attention to. The one that's a byproduct is going to happen on its own. But the ones we work with, developing the equanimity that allows us to endure things, to develop an even deeper equanimity that allows us to see things really clearly, very deeply in the mind: Those are the ones you want to focus on because those are the ones you can *do*; those are the ones you can be responsible for. As for the results, they'll take care of themselves.

But it's always essential that you understand that equanimity is only one of the factors, and not the whole path. You need to use your discernment to figure out when it's appropriate and when the more proactive side of the path has to come into play. The discernment is what does the real work, so make sure that it's as sharp as possible. This is one of the reasons why analysis of qualities comes so early in the list of the factors for awakening, because it has to inform all the other ones, to make sure they stay pointed in the right direction.