

Equanimity as a Skill

May 24, 2019

You'll notice in the chant we had just now on the four sublime attitudes: "May all beings be happy. May all beings be freed from their suffering. May all beings not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained." It's "may, may, may." But then the fourth one is not like that. It's a statement of fact: "All living beings are the owners of their actions." When I was in France this last month, I noticed the French translation of the sublime attitudes in the chanting book that the group there had put together. And they'd missed that point. Their translation of equanimity was, "May all beings be the owners of their actions, heirs to their actions." It sounds like a curse. We're not wishing that on anybody. We're simply accepting that that's the way things are.

We live by our actions. Our actions shape our lives. But it's interesting to note that that reflection on kamma is used not only for equanimity, but also to gain a sense of confidence that there is a way out and we can do it through our actions. This means that equanimity is not something to develop on its own. You never see the Buddha recommending equanimity as a single practice. It's always in conjunction with other qualities of mind. And the purpose in each of those lists is not just to stop at equanimity. This is one of the misunderstandings that comes from looking at the list of the four sublime attitudes, the seven factors for awakening, even the ten perfections. They all end with equanimity, which makes it sound like this is where we're going. But that's not the case. It's meant to take you beyond itself, and to do so, you have to develop equanimity in conjunction with those other factors in the lists, keeping in mind the principle of kamma: that there are certain things that, based on past actions, you can't change.

But you have to remember that in the teaching on kamma not everything in the present moment is determined by the past. You're making choices in the present as well, and there are important areas where they can make a difference. Remember that discussion the Buddha had with some Niganthas, a sect that existed in his time. They believed that everything in the present moment was shaped by the past and they endured self-torture to burn off their past kamma. And the Buddha asked them, "Have you ever noticed that this pain you feel during your tortures ends when you stop doing the torture?"

In other words, the pain is not coming only from the past. It can also come from things you're doing right now. What you're doing right now is something you can't be equanimous about. You have to be equanimous about the fact that

there is a pattern for cause and effect. You do certain things and certain results will come: That's something you've got to accept. But then you have the choice as to what kind of things you want to do, based on the results you're looking for from those actions.

Like right now, you're making a choice: You're going to focus on your breath. How you focus on the breath will make a difference for the whole hour. If there are some pains in the body that come from past actions, past injuries, you work around them. You find areas in the body that are not in pain. You focus there. Think of good breath energies nourishing those parts of the body, strengthening those parts of the body, and then spreading from there to go through the pains—at the very least, to relax some of the tension around the pains. But you have the choice of where you're going to focus your attention right now and what you're going to do with what you're finding in the here and now.

So when we think of equanimity in terms of kamma, it just doesn't leave you there where you are. It focuses your attention on what you can do.

When I was in Paris, one evening toward the end of my stay, I was standing on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, waiting for a ride. I suddenly realized: This was my first time in the country without a translator around. What would I do if someone came up and asked me a question and exposed my awful French? Well, sure enough, there was a telephone lineman working across the street. He saw me and came across, saying, "Marvelous! Marvelous! You're just the person I want to see. I've got a miserable job. I'm surrounded by dishonest people," he said. "How can I find happiness in life? How can I find peace in life?" So I talked to him about generosity, virtue, meditation. "How do you meditate?" I gave him the address for the website. He seemed pleased, shook my hand, and went back to work.

The irony was that night I was going to give a talk at a vipassana center on the topic of how the present moment is not the goal, how we're not here simply to accept what's happening in the present moment and try to be happy with that. So I told them the story of the lineman. I mentioned that if I had told him, "Well, to be happy, just learn how to accept, be equanimous about your miserable job and your dishonest friends," he would have had the good sense to walk away.

The Buddha never told us just to sit there and accept things. You accept the way things function in terms of your actions and then you train the mind to use that principle of cause and effect to create a path. The equanimity is part of that path, but it's not the whole path—and it's not the goal. Recently I heard of a monk trained in the forest tradition saying that equanimity was the goal and we're here to arrive at right view, accepting the fact that everything is inconstant, arises

and passes away, and just be okay with that—which is appalling. The Buddha never taught that, nor did the great ajaans.

His images, their images, for people on the path are never images of people who just sit back and accept. They're people who are searching, people who are engaged in a battle, people who are trying to develop skills. Now, equanimity has a role in developing a skill. It has a role in battles. It has a role in searches. In other words, you look and look and look and when you don't find something where you think it should be, you accept that fact and then you go and look for it someplace else. If you're in a battle and there are setbacks, you accept the fact that there are setbacks, but you don't let them defeat you. You work your way around them. When you're developing a skill, you use equanimity to look at the results of what you're doing, to watch your actions, to look at the results, and if the results aren't satisfactory, you accept that fact and then go back and change your actions to be better.

So equanimity is selective. For instance, right now: Things outside, you put aside. Issues in your home, people for whom you're responsible, you just put that aside for the time being. Focus on your own mind. But remind yourself you're doing this in a way that doesn't benefit only you.

You're getting your mind under control, and you can develop qualities of discernment, mindfulness, alertness to learn how to put aside your greed, aversion, and delusion. When you can do that, you benefit, and the people around you will benefit, too. This is a part of your motivation for being here: That it's going to be better for the people around you. But your equanimity for those people at the moment is something that allows you to develop the skill you need right now. So that's one function of equanimity: to develop the skills to put anything that's not related to what you're doing right now out of your mind. It's not your business right now.

Then of course the second function is to look at what you're doing. Are you getting the results you want? If you're not, you can ask yourself, "What could I change? Change the spot I focus, change the way I breathe, change the way I conceive of the breath, learn how to think of the breath as energy?" Learn to see your sense of the body as you feel it from within as all energy. It's all breath. As you breathe in, there are no hard spots or solid spots that you have to breathe through. You're simply allowing more energy to come into your energy field. Good energy comes in; bad energy goes out.

There are lots of ways you can change the way you relate to the breath in the present moment, the way you understand the breath in the present moment, what you do with the breath in the present moment. Equanimity is there to judge the

results, to look fairly and objectively at what's going on so that you can be more effective at making changes.

So with equanimity, we accept the principle of kamma that actions have results in line with the quality of the intention. That means you have to learn the pattern of which intentions work well and which ones don't. But then it leaves open the possibility that you can master that pattern and use it for the sake of what you want, true happiness, because that's what the goal of the practice is.

We're not here to arrive at equanimity. We're here to arrive at the ultimate happiness. And equanimity, as part of the path, helps get you there. But it's not the whole path, and it's not the essence of where we want to go. It's always important that you keep these points in mind so that you can develop the skillful kind of equanimity that helps you and stay away from the unskillful kinds: the kinds that are lazy or defeatist or—in Ajaan Fuang's terminology—the small-hearted equanimity that just gets depressed and gives up. Those are not the equanimites that the Buddha was teaching. He was teaching large-hearted equanimity, in Ajaan Fuang's phrase, that has space for the effort that needs to be put into the practice. And happiness is going to result, both along the way and when you arrive at the goal.