

Equanimity in Action, Equanimity at Rest

October 20, 2020

Equanimity—the ability to keep the mind on an even keel in the face of pleasant and unpleasant things, to accept what has to be accepted—is an attitude we’re supposed to develop immeasurably: in other words, for all beings without exceptions.

But it has a different meaning as to whether we’re talking about equanimity in action or equanimity at rest.

At rest, it’s a topic of concentration. You sit here resting in the equanimity that you can extend to everyone all over the world, regardless: equanimity for yourself, equanimity for others. That’s possible only from the fourth jhana on up.

Prior to that, equanimity has to be in action, and it’s immeasurable in a different way. What that means is that whatever you need to feel equanimity for, no matter how easy or how hard, you’re able to do it. And it’ll depend on the situation, because remember, equanimity is never taught as a quality on its own—it’s always part of other series.

Particularly in the four brahmaviharas, you need to develop it together with goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy. You have to be able to draw on each of those when appropriate. So it’s immeasurable in that way—as a skill where you can give rise to equanimity when you have to, regardless.

At the same time, it’s selective. You focus it on certain things and not on others. For example, when you’re trying to get the mind to settle down in concentration, you have to have equanimity for the world so that you can focus on what you’re doing right now. You have to have equanimity for the fact that you’ve got this body: whatever the physical conditions it has right now. But you don’t just leave it there. You accept what you’ve got so that you can work with it.

It’s like going into the kitchen and finding that there’s nothing but celery in the refrigerator. So you try to figure out what are some good things you can make out of celery. Or when there’s nothing but a potato: You can’t just eat the potato as it is. Celery you can pretty well eat as it is. Potatoes, though, you have to fix. If you eat a raw potato, it’s actually poisonous.

In a case like that, you accept the fact that that’s what you’ve got, but then you do something with it—out of compassion for yourself, compassion for others, or goodwill for

yourself, goodwill for others. So the equanimity is selective.

Even more so as you're out dealing with people. There are some situations where you realize you can't make a difference, or you could make a difference but it may not be worth it.

Some people listening to the brahmaviharas say that they sound like the serenity prayer: wanting the ability to accept what you can't change, the courage to change what you can change, and the discernment or wisdom to know the difference.

But life is a lot more complicated than that. There are a lot of things that you could change but wouldn't be worth it. And that requires real discernment. After all, even though we try to have equanimity and goodwill for everybody, we have limited resources. The attitudes may be unlimited, but our resources are not: In terms of your time, your energy, your monetary resources, there are limitations. So you have to figure out, given the limitations, what's the best use of what you do have.

There may be some areas where you have to choose which battle you're going to fight. You can't fight two at once, or you can fight two, but you can't fight three. You have to gauge your strength. Focus on the battles that are most worthwhile to win, and develop some equanimity for the things that are not.

So here again, it's selective: immeasurable in the sense that you have to apply it whenever appropriate, but selective in where you apply it at any one time.

And as I said, equanimity in action is something that's applied in daily life, and even when you sit down to meditate. When the Buddha was telling Rahula to make his mind like earth, he was basically teaching selective equanimity. Rahula wasn't supposed to be earth-like toward everything in his meditation. That attitude was for whatever was unpleasant.

This was the instruction the Buddha gave before he taught breath meditation, and breath meditation is not simply sitting there accepting whatever breath comes up. You work with the breath; you train yourself. You train yourself to breathe in a way where you're aware of the whole body, or where you can calm bodily fabrication. Breathe in a way where you can be sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. Now, these things don't happen on their own. They come from seeing what you've got, accepting what you've got, and then seeing that there are possibilities for change in what you've got.

Remember, the Buddha's view of the world is not static. It's not a matter of things just as they are. It's more things as they're functioning. Because things function. They have potentials. So you want to figure out what those potentials are and make the most of them.

There's a lot you can do with the breath. There's a lot you can do with the simple fact that the mind talks to itself: That can actually become a factor of jhana.

When directed thought and evaluation are listed as a factor of jhana, they seem exotic and strange. Some people say, "How do I start directing my thoughts, and how do I evaluate?" Well, you're doing these things all the time. You think about a topic: That's directing your thoughts. You make comments on it: That's evaluating it. In concentration, it's simply a matter of now learning how to apply these activities to the breath and keep them with the breath, to keep the conversation on topic, Don't let it wander off into other areas. And learn how to evaluate wisely.

As Ajaan Lee points out in the factors for the first jhana, directed thought is basically concentration, singleness of preoccupation is concentration, but the evaluation is the beginning of your discernment, as you try to get things to fit together. You don't simply accept what's there. You accept what's there so that you can work with it.

When things settle down to the point where you don't have to talk so much about it anymore—the mind is with the breath, the breath is with the mind; it seems like your awareness, and the object of your awareness become one—then you can drop the directed thought and evaluation. Stop the chatter and just *be* with the sensation of the breath, the sensation of the breath coming in, going out. Think of it welling up from within the body.

The Buddha's image is of a spring at the base of a lake, with water welling up inside, cooling the entire lake. You might hold that image in mind, and then allow it to go still.

The next image is of lotuses immersed in the water of the lake. The lake is still, and the lotuses are saturated with water, from their roots to their tips. The breath grows still, saturating the body, and then finally it gets to the point where it stops.

That's where you're at equanimity at rest. There's nothing you have to do at that point, aside from maintaining what you've got. Use it as a place for the mind to rest.

After all, this is the level of concentration where the Buddha gained awakening. So it's a good foundation. It's the level of concentration from which he entered total nibbana, so it's a good place to rest, to get your bearings.

It's at this point where your equanimity can be totally all-around. But of course, you can't stay here forever. So a large part of the skill of equanimity is realizing when you can be at rest with it, when you have to apply equanimity in action, and how the two differ: Equanimity at rest is total, all-around; equanimity in action has to be selective. A large part of your

discernment is figuring out where and when to apply it, and where and when to apply the other brahmaviharas. When you understand this point, you can avoid a lot of the mistakes that come when thinking you simply have to accept everything.

There's that idea if you want things to be different from the way they are, that's craving, and craving's a cause of suffering. And you shouldn't do that. But if you can't want things to be different from the way they are, how are you going to follow the path? How are you going to develop anything on the path?

The path has to be motivated by desire. After all, with right effort you generate desire to give rise to skillful qualities, to abandon unskillful qualities. So that's a case where you don't simply accept what's there and leave it there. You accept what's there and try to develop its potentials.

You extend equanimity to everything that's not related to what you're trying to accomplish right now, but keep your desire for change focused on what you're doing. When you understand this point, you avoid a lot of the misunderstandings that come up around equanimity.

As the Buddha said, it's not always appropriate. If you simply develop equanimity while you're meditating, it's like a goldsmith who never puts the gold in the fire and never blows on it. He just looks at it.

Nothing's going to happen to the gold when you just look at it. You put it in the fire: That's the effort of the practice. You blow on it: That's concentration. And you learn to figure out when is the appropriate time to do which task.

Then you try to apply the same lessons to your daily life: There are areas where you have to really work hard at things to make changes. You have to stay focused there. There are other areas that you just have to let go, because they're going to distract you from the real work.

It's through understanding where equanimity is skillful and unskillful that you can develop a lot of discernment, both inside and out.