

# *Equanimity*

*April 16, 2006*

Those five reflections we chanted just now—we are subject to aging, illness, death, separation, and we have karma as our arbitrator: Actually that's only part of the contemplation that the Buddha recommended. He said to go on to think about the fact all beings—men, women, children, lay or ordained, past, future, no matter what their level of being—are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, separation; they all have karma as their arbitrator. The two sides of the contemplation are meant to lead to two different reactions. The side we chanted just now is to make you realize that you've got to get your act in order, to straighten out your life, because what you do is what makes all the difference in the world.

The second side of the recollection, though, is to give you more a sense of *samvega*, a sense of dismay over the nature of the human condition, to expand your perspective, to want to look for a way out, and also to get a larger sense of compassion. When you realize that everybody is subject to these same problems, it gets you thinking in terms of the sublime abidings, the *brahma-viharas*—limitless goodwill, not just for your friends and family, but for everybody, because everybody is subject to these same problems. Limitless compassion, appreciation, limitless equanimity. We're not the only ones subject to aging, illness, and death. The Thai translation of this passage is interesting. It says that aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal, separation is normal. We forget about that. So it's good to expand your perspective to realize how normal these things are.

There's that famous story of the woman whose child died, but she couldn't accept the fact that it was dead. She went around asking people for medicine for her sick child. So people sent her to the Buddha. The Buddha said, "Okay, it would be possible to make a medicine for your child, but it has to be made out of mustard seeds." Well, mustard seeds are easy, they were the cheapest thing you could find in India. "But," he said, "it has to be mustard seed from a family where there has never been a death."

So the woman goes from house to house to house, asking for mustard seed. Everybody's willing to give her mustard seed, but when she adds the conditions, they say, "Oh, no, we've had a death. My mother's died, father's died, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, children"—and after a while, it hit home. Her child was dead. She was willing to accept the fact because she realized this was a normal part of the human condition.

If we had a decent education system, it would teach us how to deal with aging, illness, and death. But we don't have much training in that. Our education system is designed to make us producers and consumers. And the skills we develop in that direction are not necessarily good for the mind, and not necessarily helpful for dealing with aging, illness, and death when they come. This is what the Buddha's training is all about. You go to a monastery in Thailand, that's the first thing you hear: We're all subject to aging, illness, and death, and the lesson is to learn how not to suffer in the face of these things. We're all subject to separation. How do we not suffer in the face of that? That's

the real issue.

Here's where the teaching on equanimity is important. It's the one of the brahma-viharas that helps keep the other ones from causing us to suffer. We want all living beings to be happy. Yet we see some are suffering and we want to help them. Sometimes we can, but many times we can't. That's where equanimity has to come in. Put your mind in a larger frame of reference - that we are all subject to our actions. So the question is, what can you do? Equanimity doesn't teach there's nothing you can do. It just points out the areas where you can't do anything, so you can focus on areas where you can be of help.

It's basically the reality principle. Notice in the statements for the four brahma-viharas. The first three start out: may all beings be happy, may they not be deprived, may they be released from stress and suffering. It's may, may, may. It's a wish. But equanimity is the reality principle: All beings are the owners of their actions. There's no "may" in there at all. It's just a statement of what is.

So you take that as your foundation for then looking to see where can you be of help, both in terms of your own suffering and the suffering of other people. Then you can act accordingly. That's when you really can be helpful.

One of the principles of equanimity is to just accept the fact that aging, illness, death, and separation are normal. The question is how not to suffer. That's what you can do something about. You know the old story about the man shot with one arrow who then shoots himself with another arrow. The first arrow is the suffering that comes as part of the way we live, the nature of having a body, of having a mind. These things are inconstant, stressful, not-self. That's the first arrow when pain comes up.

But then there's that second arrow. It's not just another arrow. Many times it's hundreds of arrows that we shoot ourselves with as we get all wound up around the suffering. Those are not necessary. And it turns out that those are the ones that really cause a big burden for the mind. If we didn't have those other arrows, just the first arrow itself would not reach the mind. It's our misunderstandings, it's our tendency to get all upset around the suffering— those are the arrows that really hurt based on craving and ignorance. So those are the ones we want to learn how not to shoot ourselves with. When we stop shooting ourselves with those, the mind feels no suffering at all.

So you have to sit down and face the fact of aging, illness, and death. These things are inevitable, so what do you do? The Buddha says there are four reasons why death scares us, has us in fear. First is attachment to the body. Second is attachment to sensual pleasures. Third is the knowledge that we've done cruel and horrible things to other people, to other beings, and fear that after death we're going to be punished for it. And the fourth reason is not having seen the true Dhamma, having doubts about the true Dhamma. If we can learn to overcome these four causes of fear, death won't bring suffering.

And it's only when we've got a handle on these things that we can really be helpful to other people. Now this doesn't mean that you've totally overcome the fear, but if you learn to deal with your fear of death so that it doesn't freak you out, then you can help other people as they approach death, too. This is why it's not a selfish training. It really does put you in a better position to be of help. If you've sorted through your attachments to the body, sorted through your attachments to sensual pleasures, learned to focus on the positive things that

you've done, realizing the punishment for the bad things is not necessarily inevitable, and even better if you gain vision with what they call the Dhamma Eye—vision of the true Dhamma—you can totally overcome your fear of death and then you can really be helpful to other people. But this doesn't mean you have to wait until that point before you can actually help them.

Take this issue of being afraid of the harmful things you've done in the past. The Buddha says that it's not inevitable that you're going to have to suffer from them. He gives the analogy of a crystal of salt. Say you've got a crystal of salt the size of your fist. If you put it into a glass of water, you can't drink the water. It's much too salty. But if you find a large clean river and throw the crystal of salt into the river, you can still drink the water from the river because the salt gets so diluted by the quantity of the water. That's an analogy for the mind that's developed the four brahma-viharas. When you develop this limitless quality of mind, the mind becomes very expansive. And it's the nature of such a mind that the results of past bad actions just don't touch it. At least they don't have such an impact, they don't impinge on the mind as much.

This is one very good reason to develop these qualities of mind: so that when the results of past bad actions come, they don't hit you so hard. And you can then train other people in the same skill. Get them to develop this larger, more compassionate, more equanimous state of mind. You can begin by reminding them of their generosity, the good things they've done for other people in the past, the bad things they've avoided—these are forms of generosity, forms of compassion and good will. Because they open up the mind, make it more expansive. When the mind is in a more expansive state like that, the amount of suffering grows less.

So it's good to develop these qualities in the mind. One way of developing them is learning how to develop these same attitudes toward your breathing. Have good will toward your breathing, compassion, appreciation, equanimity towards your breathing. In other words, allow the breath to be comfortable so that you can have a foundation. Where it's not comfortable, work at making it more comfortable: That's compassion. Where it is comfortable, appreciate it. Sometimes, especially in the very beginning, the states of comfort seem to be very minor and not impressive at all. But that doesn't mean they don't have the potential to be more impressive. You've got to give them a little space.

It's like oak trees. They start out as tiny little acorns. Or even better, think of coastal redwoods. They start as the tiniest little seeds, and yet the tallest trees on earth come from these tiny, tiny seeds. Develop the conditions, allow them to grow and they become a huge forest.

It's the same with a sense of well-being in the body. First find areas that are simply not in pain, that seem okay. That's good enough. Just be very careful to keep them okay. Don't let the way you breathe push them or pull them, or squeeze them or anything. Just let them be all right, continuously, all the way through the in breath, all the way through the out breath, and they'll begin to grow. They develop a sense of fullness, and then you can allow that sense of fullness to expand throughout whatever parts of the body can pick it up. As for equanimity, when there are areas that you can't improve, develop equanimity for those. Focus instead on the areas where you can make a difference. Don't get worked up over the things you can't improve, because that gets in the way of

seeing where can you make a difference, where can you be of help.

Once you get practice in dealing with the breath in your own body in this way, then it's a lot easier to develop these attitudes toward other people, because you've got a sense of well-being inside. You realize that no matter how bad things get outside, you've still got a safe place where you can go. From that position you can see more clearly and you have the strength to be of help where you can.

So, reflecting on the nature of the world, try to develop these qualities. Partly as your own protection so you don't have to suffer more than is necessary, and partly so that you can help other people. You put yourself in a better position to be of help because you're coming from a position of strength and well-being. This is just one of the most basic lessons you need in what would be a decent education—learning how to deal with aging, illness, death, and separation. Fortunately even though they don't give us much of an education like this in school, we can educate ourselves.