

Equanimity & Action

October 3, 2013

The reflection on equanimity focuses on karma: All beings are the owners of their actions, heir of their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and have actions as their arbitrator. In other words, the actions that we've done and we're doing are the things that lead to happiness, lead to sorrow, lead to ease, lead to difficulty.

Why should that thought give rise to equanimity? Because it's useful to reflect on that when you encounter things that you would like to have a certain way and they're not going to be that certain way: times when you'd like to help someone else, times when you'd like to help yourself, and yet it's not working. At least, it's not yet working. And equanimity there is useful several ways. One, if it's something where you really can't make a difference, you have to just put it aside. But then you can also ask yourself, "Well, if it's the fact that I'm not yet making a difference, maybe I could act in a different way and make a difference." So it points you back to your own actions.

This is where appropriate attention comes in: the element of discernment in equanimity. You take stock of your actions—what you've been doing, what you are doing—and see what could be changed. Because that recollection on the fact that all living beings are the owners of their actions, etc., is also a reflection for giving rise to heedfulness, giving rise to *samvega*. Heedfulness in the sense that your actions are going to make a difference so you have to be careful in what you do, what you say, what you think, and particularly what your intentions are, because your intentions make all the difference. As for *samvega*, you start thinking about the fact that everybody, no matter where you go, is subject to the principles of action, no matter what you could be reborn as. Even the highest levels of the devas are subject to their actions as well. You would think that living up in the higher levels, they'd have less pain weighing down their minds. And they would have the opportunity to do a lot more good. Well, they have other problems.

There was a Brahma that the Buddha had to go and, as they say in Thai, torment because he thought he'd achieved the ultimate achievement, that there was nothing better than what he had. So the Buddha had to go and show him that there was something better, because his pride was what stood in his way. Then of course, there are the sensual devas, and they're just having such a good time. They couldn't worry about what the consequences of their actions are because they're

enjoying what they're doing so much right there. They don't see any trouble. It's because it's hidden.

So no matter where you might go, you can't escape the principle of action. This is the thought that motivates the desire to find the way out entirely.

All of this means that equanimity is not just a passive state of mind. It's a matter of learning what you have to put down so that you can look at what's really important and worth doing. What you put down are your likes and your dislikes about things—wanting them to be this way, just pushing and pushing and pushing to get them that way. If it's not working, you've got to stop and ask: Are you pushing against a wall? Are you pushing against a locked door? Or what's the problem? If it's a locked door, find the key. If you're pushing against a wall, stop pushing there; push someplace else. Equanimity has to use discernment.

So right here, while you're meditating, how are the results? You've been meditating for about five minutes now. Something should be showing by now. If the results aren't what you want, what could you change? Of course, this has to be balanced out with the realization that sometimes the results will take a while. So if you change things around and it doesn't seem to be an improvement, do what you think is best and stick with it for a long while. But try to be as objective as possible in evaluating how it's going. If there are pains in the body that you can't change, those are things you may have to accept. Or again, you can change your approach to them. Sometimes going in to a very solid or recalcitrant part of the body just makes it worse, so you've got to stop. Step back a bit and just hover around the edges. See what you can relax. See how gentle you can be with it. See if that works.

So if the direct approach doesn't work, you try an indirect approach. There are times when you have to focus really heavily and other times when the focus has to be very gentle. Remember that you have a range of options. And if the action you're doing right now isn't getting the results you want, step back a bit. See if there's something you can change. If you've tried your full repertoire, then you just have to leave it alone and watch for the sake of learning something new.

This is where the root of the Pali word for equanimity comes in. It means, "to look on." In other words, you just look. And sometimes just looking means you know it's there but you've got to put your primary attention someplace else to see if there's something else you can actually improve. At other times, it means keeping your focus there but just watching it for a while and being willing to wait for a while to see what new things are going to appear.

This is where equanimity ties in with patience. You start noticing certain changes and you ask yourself, "Look, why did those changes happen?" Or you look away for a while and look back again because sometimes the way you look is

part of the problem. You look away and then catch what happens as soon as you look back again. What's going on there? Sometimes you find that if your mind is wandering away, your breath is perfectly fine. But as soon as you focus on the breath, something goes wrong. Okay, what are you doing when you focus on the breath? Try to catch it as soon as you can.

So you're not just here passively accepting whatever comes up. You have to remember that the Buddha's picture of the mind is that it's active, simply that in its actions it's sometimes doing something unskillful. You have to learn how to back off for a bit and watch for the sake of learning what to do better. And then, as long as you can't figure out what to do better, just keep on watching. Something will have to show after a while.

One of the reasons why we find equanimity difficult is that we've got certain desires that we can't let go of. Another is that we're afraid that by being equanimous we're going to be too passive or too cold-hearted. That's not what the Buddha's teaching. After all, he does teach equanimity as part of the *brahmavihāras*, to go along with goodwill. When equanimity is a reflection on action, it's not telling you to be passive. It's just telling you to look carefully at things in terms of the principle of action: what you've done in the past, what you're doing right now, and the results of both. Which results of past actions are showing right now, and which results of what you're doing right now are showing, too?

It keeps coming back to your intentions. What are your intentions? Sometimes the intentions are good but the strategies you're using are not. Sometimes the intentions are not good at all and then, no matter what strategies you're going to use, nothing's really going to work. When the Buddha analyzes actions for the sake of assigning offences, there's the issue of intention and motivation, the issue of perception, the object, the effort and the result.

Sometimes it's useful to look at your mistakes in the meditation in line with that framework. They may not be offences but you can ask yourself: What is your intention? The intention sometimes includes an impulse. In other words, is greed, anger, or delusion involved? What do you want to get out of this? Maybe something can be changed there. Or your motivation: Why are you doing this? Or your perception: How are you perceiving things right now? What's the story you put around things? What are the images you have in your mind? What happens if you change those images? The image of where you think you are in your body, your image of what the breath is doing: What happens if you change them? Object: breath. Sometimes the mind doesn't want to stay with the breath. Or it starts getting sleepy when it stays with the breath. Well, you might want to

change. Start contemplating the different parts of the body. Visualize them; go through the whole catalogue. Give the mind work to do so that it doesn't just drift off, come back, and wonder where it was. Effort: What is the effort you're doing right now? How are you focusing; where are you focusing? How much pressure are you putting on the focus? Is it too much or too little? Can you read these things by reading the results?

The teachings on equanimity are there to teach you about action—to take a mature attitude toward your actions, seeing where you've made a mistake, where things are not going well, and what you can do to change. One of the definitions of maturity is being able to admit a mistake. If you don't admit your mistakes, you're never going to learn from them because you can't even see them. That closes off all possibility of improvement. So that's something we have to be equanimous about as well: the fact that we've made mistakes. We've done unskillful actions, but we have the opportunity right now to do something more skillful. We can learn.

So equanimity is not just acceptance and it's not just passivity. It's directly related to appropriate attention. If there's something wrong, look at your intentions. If there's something wrong, look at what you're doing. Your intentions may be good, but the means may be wrong. Or your intention may be corrupted and, in that case, no matter how good the means or strategies are, it's not going to work. So look at these aspects of your actions: the intentions, the perceptions that underlie them, the effort, the object, and the results. Remember that equanimity is not here just as a final resting spot. It's actually one of the prerequisites for learning how to meditate.

Remember the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. He told him, "Make your mind like earth." Good things are thrown on the Earth, and the Earth doesn't react. Bad things are thrown on the Earth; the Earth doesn't react. But that's not the last instruction in meditation; it's the very beginning instruction in meditation. It's there so that you can see things clearly—so that you can look at your actions impartially. Because after the Buddha teaches that principle of nonreactivity, then he teaches the steps of breath meditation. Those are proactive—the whole point being that if you're going to do the meditation, you want to train your mind to be a good observer, a fair observer. Otherwise, you'll never know what results you're really getting because your likes and dislikes will get in the way. Your desire that what you're doing right now will be the right thing may get in the way of seeing whether it is the right thing or not.

So always combine equanimity with appropriate attention. That's how you get the most use out of it.