

## *An Equanimity You Can Feed On*

*October 28, 2015*

There are many levels of equanimity that we try to develop in the practice. We start out with the equanimity that the Buddha describes as being in tune with the elements, when you're being in tune with earth, being in tune with water, fire, wind. What this means is that you keep the mind non-reactive in the same way that these elements are non-reactive. If you throw something disgusting on the earth, the earth doesn't react. If you wash disgusting things away with water, the water doesn't react. Similarly with wind and fire.

This type of equanimity is a prerequisite for being able to do the meditation, because meditation requires that you be very observant. If you're quick to react and quick to decide that you don't like something, you're not going to be able to see anything very clearly in the mind. You have to be able to sit with things, sometimes unpleasant things, for a while before you can figure them out. You have to work the mind into a state where it can actually find pleasure, even when there are unpleasant things around it.

This level of equanimity is needed to be observant, but it's not a kind of equanimity that you can feed on. There's not much pleasure there. The equanimity you can feed on comes either through doing the brahmavihara practice or through practicing strong concentration. In both of those cases, you have to take the mind first through some pleasant, nourishing states. Feed it with pleasure, and then you move on to the equanimity that comes with being full. There's a very subtle pleasure that goes with the equanimity, and it's the kind of equanimity that you can actually feed on.

For instance, while we're working with the breath, in the beginning you want to get the breath so that it's pleasurable, with a sense of real refreshment that comes with staying with the breath. Otherwise, if you try to develop equanimity right away, the equanimity gets very dry and it's hungry. When the mind is hungry, it'll stay with equanimity only through willpower. Then it'll go slipping off. When the mind goes slipping off like that, it just goes back to its old likes and dislikes because it needs some food, it needs some nourishment of some kind.

So you have to learn how to feed the mind well. A sense of comfort, a sense of refreshment with the breath is a part of the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness of breathing. If you don't have this kind of pleasure to feed on, this kind of rapture or refreshment to feed on, then no matter how much you understand the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, you're going to go back to them.

The equanimity that comes from insight is not enough. It needs to be backed up by the skills that come from learning how to breathe well, learning how to breathe in a way that really feels nourishing for the body and nourishing for the mind.

Sometimes you hear people warning you away from the pleasures of jhana practice, saying that you're going to get stuck there because the pleasure is so great. But that's really foolish. Of course you want to get stuck on these pleasures, because otherwise what pleasures are you going to get stuck on? The pleasures of sensual thoughts, sensual passions, sensual objects. The pleasure of jhana is a lot safer than the pleasure of sensuality. Nobody's killed or stolen or engaged in illicit sex or lied or gotten drunk because of the pleasure of jhana. But the pleasures of sensuality can lead to do those things. In fact, they're the main reason why we have so much strife in the world: People are stuck on sensual pleasures and fantasies.

So you wean the mind away from those kinds of pleasures by providing it with an alternative. When you feed the mind well, there's a sense of ease that comes from breathing well, and this can be done in lots of different ways. You can work with the rhythm of the breath. Or you can work from the outside in. In other words, think of the breath energy flowing in your arms and legs, as you relax around the process of breathing. Relax your arms, relax your legs. Start with the feet. Start with the hands and come into the center, and the in-and-out breath will find a good rhythm on its own.

But it is something you fabricate. In other words, you do work on this. You adjust the condition so that it feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out, it feels good just sitting here, inhabiting your body, inhabiting the form of the body. Allow yourself to gain an appreciation for this level of pleasure, this level of refreshment. As the Buddha says, you indulge in it, and it helps you to stabilize the mind. As the mind gets more stable, it reaches a point where it doesn't need that much of the pleasure, refreshment, or rapture or whatever.

It's like drinking your fill of water. When you've had enough and you don't need water any more, then you can be equanimous about the water. The water is there if you ever need it, but you'll be equanimous about it in the meantime. This kind of equanimity comes with a sense of fullness. This is the kind of equanimity you can feed on.

The same with equanimity in the brahmaviharas: You start with goodwill and compassion and empathetic joy. You don't go straight to equanimity, because feelings of goodwill are nourishing. Feelings of compassion are nourishing. Feelings of empathetic joy: When you realize that you don't need to feed on

resentment anymore, you can actually feed off the happiness of other people. All of these attitudes are uplifting for the mind.

But they have to be backed up by equanimity, and the equanimity needs them, too. Otherwise it gets dry. The reason they need to be backed up by equanimity is because often when you see people who are suffering, or other times when *you* are suffering and you can't do anything about it, you can't let yourself get worked up. Or there are cases where you see that people are happy, but you realize it's not going to last. You realize there are cases where you have pleasures and happiness that are not going to last, and you have to meet that fact with equanimity.

But again, this comes not from just telling yourself to be non-reactive or not to care. You feed the mind well to the point where it can actually feed off the equanimity, and then you can live in the world and not have to suffer so much from it. After all, we live in a world where we're not the only ones subject to aging, illness and death. The people all around us are, too. And many of them are people we love, people who have been good to us.

When you come up against these cases, you can't just say, well, be equanimous and leave it at that. That's going back to the old non-reactive equanimity, which is not all that nourishing. It's not all that stable. You need to be able to feed the mind from within, so that it's food source is independent. That way, when you're with people who are suffering, especially people who are close to you, people and your family very close friends, you can actually be of more help if you have this kind of equanimity behind you.

It's in this way that equanimity is a social virtue. It's the equanimity that allows you not to have to feed off your relationships with other people. We were mentioning today the story where Ven. Sariputta talks about how he was sitting one afternoon, realizing there was nothing whose change in the world would cause his mind any grief. Ven. Ananda heard this and immediately said, "But what if anything happened to the Buddha?" Sariputta replied that it would be a shame that such a great being would have to pass away, someone who has done so much good for the world, but that's the nature of fabricated things.

Ananda's response was that this was a sign that Sariputta had gone beyond conceit.

This incident points out the fact that often our suffering or our grief over what's happening to the people we love has an awful lot to do with our own idea of who we are and how our identity builds around either our compassion or around our relationship with the other person. In other words, sometimes there's a sense of pleasure that comes from feeding off the thought, "I'm compassionate."

You've probably been a victim of some people's compassion like this. They're feeding off the idea that they're good people, they're generous people, they're compassionate people, but what they're doing for you may not be all that helpful. It has more to do with them than it has with you.

And there's the other case, of course, where your identity is so bound up in the other person that the idea of their suffering feels as if a huge chunk of you is suffering. The loss of them is going to be a huge gaping hole in you. What does that gaping hole come from? It comes from where you're feeding off the other person. You're feeding off the relationship. You're feeding off your sense of who you are as defined by that relationship.

This is one of the reasons we need equanimity as a social virtue. Learn how to feed off of that so that you can be in a better position to see what actually needs to be done right now. This doesn't mean you don't care. It means that you have to have your own well-being well established before you can see what the other person needs, what can be done, what's the best thing to do in any particular situation.

This is the kind of equanimity that comes not simply from saying, "I'm going to be non-reactive." It comes from feeding the mind well, either with the bramaviharas or with good breath energy as you get the mind into jhana. Which is one of the reasons why these practices are not selfish. After all, if your mind is not in a turmoil, you can see things more clearly. You see what's needed, what's possible, and how best to do it a lot more clearly than if you're still feeding off your compassion or your sense of identity that's built around the other person.

So these skills we're developing here—how to get a sense of well-being with the breath, how to use that to feed the mind well so that it can reach a state of equanimity—are beneficial not only for us, but also for all the people around us.

So try to develop the kind of equanimity that you can feed on, that comes from a sense of plenitude inside. You'll benefit, and the people around you will benefit, too.