

## *The Treasure of Equanimity*

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Last year, when I was in France, I glanced through the chanting book printed by the group there, and they had the chant on the *brahmaviharas*, the sublime attitudes, like we have here. The problem was that, in the French translation, when they got to equanimity, it wasn't, "All living beings are the owners of their actions." It was, "May all living beings be the owners of their actions, heir to the actions, born of their actions, related through their actions." Sounds like a curse—when you think about the way most people act.

The passage is actually meant to be a statement of fact. It's not a wish. It's a fact. This is the way we are. Our lives are shaped by our actions. Our experience of pleasure and pain is shaped by our actions, past and present. Traditionally, this chant is one way of developing equanimity, although it's useful to note that there's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about ways of dealing with aversion, and one way is to develop equanimity. Another is to reflect on the principle of karma – that all beings are the owners of their actions. So for him, these were two separate things.

What it comes down to, I think, is simply the fact that equanimity is a recognition that there's a lot in the world that you can't control, and trying to control it, trying to change it, is a waste of time. It's not worth it because it distracts you from the things you *can* change.

Equanimity is not a blanket indifference to everything. It's learning how to focus your efforts. Einstein once theorized about why most advances in theories of physics are made by young physicists and not by old ones, and his conclusion was the old physicists see many possibilities and many issues all at once that are interesting and might lead to new insights, so that they can't follow any one thing, whereas the younger physicists have an easier time focusing on just one thing and sticking with it. However true that might be, it is noticeable that as you get older, your mind tends to scatter in lots of different directions. But you can learn how to gain some control over it before you get old.

The mind has this tendency, exacerbated now by the Internet, where you can surf all day – follow one topic as it leads into another into another and end up in Helsinki someplace. What you've got to learn is how to detect what's worth putting your effort into and how to put everything else aside. It's a matter of letting go of things that will not reward your efforts. Or even if they do, they're

not as important as the rewards coming from some other things. It's a matter of priorities: What's really important in life?

The Buddha's answer is to focus right away on issues of the mind, because those issues will be with you all the way through. As your various physical abilities go away, as your range of power goes away, it's as if the world is closing in on you. Things that you used to be able to do, you can't do anymore. Places you might have gone before are now too far or too difficult to go to. What do you do then? You can focus on the things where you *can* do something, where you can make a difference. This is where you have to deal with your big responsibility.

When the Buddha's talking about issues of the four noble truths—i.e., the fact that there's suffering, there's a cause of suffering, and there's a path to its end—he's talking about things that you experience from within that nobody else can experience for you. Politicians can say that they feel your suffering, but that's politicians. They'll say anything. You know that your suffering is your suffering. Other people can sympathize with it and give you condolences and try to do the best they can, but they can't come in and take your suffering away.

It's like a child, crying uncontrollably. You hold the child. You try to carry it around, do everything you can in hopes that it'll stop crying. But you can't really reach in and change the child's suffering, or take part of the suffering away from him or her. There are times when all you can do is watch and be patient, because there's a part of the child you can't touch at all. Well, that's the part inside you that you've got to be responsible for, too—the part that feels the suffering inside *you*—because when you're responsible for that, you're not the only one who benefits. People around you benefit as well.

You can learn how to handle the issue of stress and suffering and pain inside by developing your own inner qualities. That's the other aspect of the four noble truths—that the suffering felt from within is caused by factors that you experience directly within, and that, again, no one else can see. The solution also lies within—in qualities that you develop from within. This is a series of issues that will be with you all the way, so you want to get as skilled as possible in handling them. Then, when you learn how to handle your own suffering, you're much less of a burden on others.

So as you look around, you see a large world with lots of possibilities and it's tempting to want to take them all, all the different roads leading in all the different directions. But there comes a point when maturity strikes. As someone said, the realization of death is the beginning of wisdom, when you realize that you have only so much time, only so much energy left. Where is that time and energy best invested? The Buddha actually talks about this in financial terms. He

calls it “noble wealth,” the qualities that will be good for you, that you can take with you when you go.

The first is conviction, which begins formally with the conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. What that means in terms of your life is conviction in the principle of kamma: that our actions are what make the difference between finding true happiness and not.

The second noble treasure is virtue, not wanting to do anything that would be harmful, learning how to restrain yourself from doing things that would be harmful to yourself or others. Here it’s interesting to note how the Buddha says that in killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, or taking intoxicants, you’re harming yourself. For him, harming others means getting them to do these things. In other words, you respect the fact that they, too, are agents, and that their lives are shaped by their actions, so you don’t want to harm their lives by giving them the wrong ideas of what they should do.

Two other noble treasures are a sense of shame and compunction. These, too, are wealth. Shame is when you think of something that would be unskillful, that would be harmful, and you feel ashamed to do it. You realize that you’re above that. It’s beneath you. Compunction is when you realize that you don’t want to bring on those harmful results. These two qualities can protect you from all kinds of unskillful behavior, because when you do something unskillful, you can’t go back and undo it, no matter how much money you pay.

Then there’s learning, learning the Dhamma, as it applies to your life, so that you can remember it and use it when situations call for it.

There’s generosity. The act of giving a gift broadens the mind, makes the mind more expansive, as you take into consideration the needs of other people and try to help those needs.

And finally discernment: the ability to see what’s skillful and what’s not, to see what is your business and what’s not your business. This is where equanimity and discernment come very close together. As the Buddha said, “A fool tries to take on duties that are not his. A wise person takes on only the duties that are his.” So you look and see, “What are my duties right now? What can I best do to make a difference in life—in my life and the life of others?”

This question keeps coming back to the mind. This is your area, this area within you that you directly experience. This is where you can make a huge difference. And you can always make a difference here as long as you’ve got a breath to focus on; as long as you’ve got a breath to keep the body and mind together—and even as the mind is leaving the body, as your consciousness is

looking for someplace else to go and it can't stay here anymore. You can still do your best to do that as skillfully as possible.

The Buddha talks about people gaining awakening at the moment of death. This is because they don't give up in that struggle against things that they can't change and they focus on things where they can make a difference. And one of the big differences is, where is your craving going right now? What things are you clinging to? How do you learn how to let it go? There'll be a lot of things rushing in at the mind at that point. So again, you have to learn how to pick and choose: which things are worth focusing on, which ones are not?

So equanimity is a matter of keeping your focus where it belongs; keeping your priorities straight; and learning that although there might be a lot of things out there you'd like to see different from what they are, a lot of things you'd like to see changed, or just a lot of things that you'd like to explore, places you'd like to go – the mountains in the south of Chile, the mountains on Baffin Island: Well, they're awfully far away. You may have to decide that that's not on your itinerary for this lifetime. Even things that are closer—issues in the family, issues at work, issues at home: These too will have to be let go.

So it's good to get some practice in letting go. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. You realize that there are lots of interesting things out there in the world, but the really important work is right here: what your mind is doing right now, what choices it's making, where it's focusing its attention, what it wants to change and can try to change, and what other things are not worth trying to change.

We had an old man dying of cancer back at the monastery in Thailand, who was staying up in the chedi. His faculties left him, one by one. First he could stand but couldn't walk. And then he couldn't stand. And then he couldn't sit. Finally got to the point where he couldn't talk. But there was one point after we thought that he wasn't going to be sitting up anymore, when a group of people came up the back of the mountain, moving in on the property of the monastery, cutting down some of our trees, burning what they had cut down, and laying claim to the property as if it were their own. The old man heard about this and he struggled to stand up, yelling at them. We told him to calm down: There was nothing that he could do about it anymore. He had other things he had to focus on. So he went back to his meditation. It was because he had been meditating that he could, but there was that moment where he forgot himself.

So you don't want to forget yourself. In other words, look at what your abilities are, what you can do, what's worth doing with those abilities and seeing the other things that you can't change as not worth the effort even to try to think

about them. That's how equanimity is a really useful quality to develop. Even though it's not listed among the noble treasures, it's connected with discernment, which is. So it's really valuable.