

## *Three Types of Equanimity*

*November 8, 2018*

When I was in Portland this last week, there were a lot of questions on equanimity. They seemed to stem from the idea that many people see equanimity as apathy, indifference, but when you look at the Buddha's life he was in no way indifferent or apathetic. His sense of equanimity was more a matter of keeping the mind on an even keel in the midst of the ups and downs of life—and it's important to note that when the Buddha taught equanimity he didn't teach it as a single member of a list. It was always part of a list that had other members, other qualities, and it takes up some features of the qualities it's listed with

There are three main contexts in which he teaches equanimity.

The first, of course, is equanimity in the brahmaviharas. This is the equanimity that realizes how even though you may have goodwill for all beings and compassion and empathetic joy, it's not the case that everybody's going to be happy or that they will be as happy as quickly as you might like. And there are times when no matter how much goodwill you have for somebody, there's still going to be some suffering. That's when you have to develop equanimity, to realize that certain things simply will not go in line with your wishes. You want things to go well, both for yourself and for others, but you run up against a brick wall. This doesn't mean that you give up. It means that you look instead for the areas where you *can* make a difference. So the basic motivation for this kind of equanimity is the desire for happiness coupled with the realization that it's not going to happen all the time, or as quickly as you like, or in the areas where you might want.

This is like the equanimity of a doctor. A person with an illness comes to the doctor. The doctor wants to help. He does his best. But then he'll run into areas where he can't make any difference for the patient. So instead of getting upset about the areas where he can't make a difference, he focuses on the areas where he can.

So that's one kind of equanimity, the equanimity in the brahmaviharas, the equanimity of a doctor.

Another kind of equanimity occurs in the context of the Buddha's teachings on concentration practice. It's there in the fourth jhana and it's one of the seven factors for awakening. There it's related to the Buddha's instructions to Rahula when he first started meditating. He said, "Make your mind like earth. Nice things and disgusting things are thrown on the earth, but the earth doesn't react." Now this is a first step in the meditation. The Buddha went on to teach breath meditation, which was actually very proactive. It's not that you just sit there and try to maintain the state of non-reactivity, accepting everything that comes up. That's not the Buddha's approach to meditation at all.

There was an interview I saw on French TV recently, where the woman being interviewed was saying that the Buddha's wisdom is all about accepting things as they are, and not trying to make any changes, accepting the fact that any changes you try to make are just going to make things worse. The interviewer asked the woman who was saying this, "Isn't that defeatist? Isn't it pessimistic?" And the woman being interviewed said, "Only if you think about it."

Well, the Buddha was not the sort of person who wouldn't think about things. He thought a lot and about a lot of things, and especially about when and where it's possible to get things under your control so that you can make a positive difference. When you're meditating, you really are trying to get the mind under your control. You are trying to make a difference. Mindfulness is a governing principle that underlies concentration practice, and it has a task that it keeps in mind: to try to give rise to skillful qualities and try to maintain them. In other words, you don't just watch them coming and going. You try to make them come, and then prevent them from going, but to be a good meditator you have to have a certain evenness of mind so that you don't force things unskillfully, and so that when things *do* go well, you don't just jump at them.

You've probably had that experience where the mind settles down, everything's really nice and you get really excited and, of course, that ruins it. Or things go really well and then they suddenly don't go well, and you get upset. Well, neither response is right. When things go well, you have to figure out, "How do I maintain this?" When they don't go well, "How can I get the good things back?" That requires an evenness of mind.

You might say it's like the equanimity of a hunter. The hunter has to go out and wait for the rabbit. If he gets excited when the rabbit comes, then the rabbit will sense his presence and will run away. Or if he shoots the rabbit and misses and gets upset about that, he's not going to have a second chance.

So as you're meditating, you're trying to develop the equanimity of a hunter. Good and bad things are going to come; good and bad things are going to go. You have to learn to tell yourself, "Oh. There's this." And then when you notice there's this, good or bad, then the next question is: What do you do with it? Try not to get excited, try not to get upset, so that you can really master this as a skill.

That's the second kind of equanimity. Equanimity in the practice of concentration, the equanimity of a hunter.

Then there's equanimity in the context of the perfections. The major perfection is the perfection of determination. You've made up your mind you've got a goal, and you do everything you can to go for that goal, which involves developing all the other perfections. This will entail doing certain things you're you don't like doing, and giving up certain things that you'd prefer to hold on to. In addition, there will be long fallow periods when things are not going well, and you have to maintain your good spirits and not get upset by your setbacks. You have to be able to maintain a strong sense of the direction you want to go in without giving up. This is the equanimity of a warrior, who realizes there are going to be some battles you're going to lose, but you can't get upset about those. You take them in stride and learn whatever lessons you can from your defeats so that you can win the war.

Ajaan Lee talks a lot about this in the context of what they call the worldly dhammas: gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. As he points out, we'd always like the good side—the gain, the status, the praise, and the pleasure—but the good side is not always good for us. Status can go to our heads. Praise can go to our heads. People tend to forget themselves when the "good side" comes up. At the same time, there are lots of good lessons you can learn when things are *not* so good. When there's material loss and loss of status, you learn who your true friends are. When there's criticism, you have an opportunity to learn. If the criticism is true, it's helping you because it's pointing out an area where you

may have become complacent. As for praise, you have to watch out for that, because sometimes you have to wonder why are people praising you: What do they want out of you? You have to be a little bit leery of what you think is a good side and not so quick to get upset about the bad side. This is what keeps you going, realizing that not every setback is permanent. There are ways around it. So you keep coming back, coming back. That's the equanimity of a warrior.

So the Buddha's equanimity is the opposite of apathy and indifference. It's equanimity that allows you to attain your goals wisely and to not suffer in the process. Which is why equanimity is contained in so many different lists. It's the grounding quality that keeps the mind on an even keel, enabling it to see things clearly that it otherwise might miss if it was getting excited or upset about things going or not going the way you wanted them to. It's a quality we should develop in all those different contexts—as one of the brahmaviharas, as a component of meditation, and as a perfection—as a way of strengthening ourselves so that we can reach the goal that we want.

That's the other aspect of equanimity that's sometimes misunderstood: the idea that equanimity means not having any goals and being content with the ways things are. Well, yes, the Buddha taught contentment with material things, your physical situation, but he taught *discontent* with regard to skillful qualities. In other words, as long as there's still suffering or stress, even the slightest bit in the mind, you can't rest content with the level of your mental skills. There's got to be some way around that problem, some new good quality to develop, and you have to maintain your determination to see it through.

So you want to develop the equanimity of a good doctor or nurse, of a good hunter, of a good warrior, which is the opposite of being defeatist. After all, the Buddha called his path *unexcelled victory in battle*, and he compared himself to a doctor. I don't know of any places where he compared himself to a hunter, but his equanimity covered all three of the sorts that those three types of people have.