

## *Equanimity on the Path*

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I have a student back East who's on the autistic spectrum. She told me one time she could never understand why Dhamma teachers like to extol equanimity as the goal of the practice. As she said, she's pretty equanimous all the time, and it's not much of a goal. And the Buddha himself never said that it was the goal. It's the last of the factors for awakening, and that's led some people to think that that's what the factors for awakening are aimed at. But all the factors are parts of the path. They're meant to lead to something better than they are. They're all means to an end. They're tools for arriving at the ultimate happiness.

There's no place where the Buddha says nibbana is the ultimate equanimity. It's always "the ultimate happiness." So the question is: What role does equanimity play on the path?

The first thing to notice is that sometimes it's regarded as skillful and sometimes it's not. When it makes you lazy, it's not part of the path. But when it's skillful, it actually has several functions on the path. One is to apply it to anything that's not directly related to the path—issues that have nothing to do with putting an end to suffering—as a way of keeping the mind focused. Remember that the Buddha himself would put issues of that sort aside. No matter how many people would try to force him to answer questions that were not related to the end of suffering, he regarded them all with equanimity. In other words, he just didn't get involved. He had something he wanted to focus on. So that's one of the functions.

For instance, when you're getting the mind into concentration, anything that comes up that's not related to the concentration, you're just going to have equanimity for. Now, this may be temporary. It may be an issue that you have to deal with when you leave concentration. But for the time being, you want to keep the mind on an even keel, not getting worked up about the issue, because otherwise you won't be able to get the mind to settle down. So you have to treat it with equanimity.

Another function, of course, is simply to see clearly what you are focused on. This is the purpose of that instruction the Buddha gave to Rahula at the very beginning of his teachings of mindfulness. Make the mind like earth. Earth is equanimous. You pour good things on it, you pour bad things on it, it doesn't react. Make the mind like water. Use water to wash away dirty things and the

water doesn't get upset. Use fire to burn dirty things, wind blows dirty things around: They don't get upset by contact with what's dirty.

And this, of course, is prior to his instructions on breath meditation, which are actually quite proactive. So he's not teaching you just to sit there like a clod of dirt. He's teaching you to have a mind on an even keel so that whatever comes up, good or bad, you're not blown away by it. Otherwise, you won't be able to see exactly what's going on.

After all, you want to see cause and effect as they actually happen. And if you like some causes and don't like some effects, your view is going to be biased. Certain things that you really should know, you're not going to know because you run away from them, or you pretend they're not there.

So equanimity is a prerequisite for seeing things clearly. The word is actually related to another word in Pali. *Upekkha*, in Pali, is equanimity. *Apekkha* is looking at something. To look at something to see what's actually going on, you've got to get the mind calm and equanimous so that it can admit what's going on.

Now, this relates to another function of equanimity, and that's that it's a result of something that satisfies you. When the mind is really satisfied, it can look at the world, all the events of the world, with much greater equanimity than it can when it's hungry or irritated or upset. This is where equanimity gets tricky, because if you get satisfied with things, then you just stop, which is not what you want.

You want to get satisfied, and if there's more work to be done in another area, you come from that state of satisfaction in the first area and say, "Well, what about this other area which needs to be dealt with?" That's the proper use. But if you don't understand its proper use, you can arrive at some very great states of peace and equanimity, and say, "Well, that's good enough."

The Buddha talks about this in one of his discourses. Interestingly enough, it's one of the ones where he starts the discussion with the fourth jhana, where the meditator already is in equanimity, and then he works up from there. He gets the meditator to the state of dimension of nothingness. He says you can do this several ways. One is just going through the jhanas. Another is to contemplate not-self, seeing that there's no self in any of the six sense spheres, and the mind arrives at a very strong sense of there's nothing. There's a great deal of equanimity that goes with that, and you latch on.

You've got to realize that equanimity itself is a fabricated state. It's put together from certain perceptions and feelings, and if you look at it from that point of view—in other words, you're satisfied in one area of the mind, but

another part of the mind is not yet satisfied, because there's got to be something better: That way you use equanimity properly to go beyond it.

Even with the state of awakening, equanimity is necessary as a precondition so that you can see clearly what's going on and not over-interpret—and not get excited about the fact that you've hit the deathless. If you tell yourself, "Here I am. I'm awakened," that much, the Buddha said, stands in the way. There'll be a very subtle attachment there, a very subtle form of clinging, but you've got to get beyond all clinging. The proper way to respond is, "Oh, there's this." And you watch it.

Ajaan Chah talks about an experience that may have been his awakening experience. He hit something that sounds very much like the deathless three times in a row. In each case, he just watched it—"Where is this going to go now? Where is this going to go now?"—which is why he was able to go from one to the next to the next. If he had gotten excited about any of those, he would have been pulled out. But if his equanimity was such that he was satisfied with what he had before, then he wouldn't have gotten there at all. He would have just stayed there where he was.

So remember, equanimity has these three functions: one, to clear away distractions; two, to see clearly what you are focused on; and then three, to give you a sense of satisfaction so that the mind isn't so hungry. Make sure that you use equanimity in each of these ways at the proper time, in the proper way. That's how it becomes part of the path. It is a tool.

All of the emotions, or all of the feeling tones, are tools in the middle way. Another misunderstanding that I've heard sometimes is that equanimity itself is the middle way between pleasure and pain. But actually the middle way *employs* all three types of feeling tones. What's special is that it uses them as tools. It doesn't regard them as ends in themselves.

For instance, we sit with pain, and we use what's called pain not of the flesh to keep us motivated, realizing that here we're still subject to aging, illness, and death, and there is a state that other people have attained that's *not* subject to aging, illness, and death. The realization that it's possible, but you haven't gotten there yet: That's a painful realization. But it's there to motivate you so that you don't just stay satisfied with wherever you are.

The same with pleasure: We need certain pleasures to survive, and certain pleasures not of the flesh as nourishment on the path. That's the pleasure that comes from jhana.

And the same with equanimity: We need a certain amount of ordinary everyday equanimity to get the mind to settle down and take it as far as the third

jhāna. That requires everyday equanimity so that you can see clearly what's going on and react in the proper way.

It's only when you get to the fourth jhana that you get to equanimity not of the flesh. That was the point from which the Buddha himself gained awakening. It's the ideal place for the mind to see things clearly. Only in the fourth jhāna—where equanimity is pure and so is mindfulness—are you most likely to see things as they actually are happening for what they are.

So even though equanimity is not itself the middle way, it gets *used* in the middle way—along with pleasure and pain. And again, the issue is: When is it beneficial? When is it timely?

Think of the Buddha's strictures for what he would say: whether it's true, beneficial, timely. As far as feeling tones, the Buddha's not concerned about what's a true feeling tone. He wants you to cultivate the ones that are skillful. In other words, here the issue is simply a matter of beneficial and timely. Is this feeling tone going to be beneficial? Is this the right time and place for what's pleasant? Is this the right time and place for what's not pleasant? When you gain a sense of this distinction, then you don't fall into some of the traps that are there in the practice of equanimity, and you can keep the mind on the middle way.

Think of Ajaan Maha Boowa's definition of the middle way. It's a practice that's always appropriate. In other words, sometimes you use strong effort; sometimes gentle effort. Sometimes pain; sometimes pleasure; sometimes equanimity. What makes it "middle" is that you gain a real sense of what's appropriate, what's just right.

So practice equanimity in a just-right way. That's how you can arrive at something much greater than equanimity. The Buddha says that after you've attained the ultimate happiness, there is an equanimity with regard to everything else. But that's not on the path. That's something after the path—in fact, it's a result of reaching the happiness of the goal. So it's nothing you have to worry about now. What you have to be careful about now is how you practice equanimity and stay on the path at the same time.