

Equanimity & More

January 15, 2022

We chant the brahmaviharas every night before the meditation, expressing a wish for happiness for all beings: “May all those who are suffering be released from the suffering. May all those who are already happy not be taken away from their happiness.” Those are wishes. But as the Buddha said, if things could be made true simply by wishing, there would be nobody who would be poor, ugly, or short-lived.

That’s where we need to have equanimity as the reality principle: “All beings are the owners of their actions.” Notice, there’s no “may” in there. It’s just a statement of fact. After all, how are beings going to be happy? Through their actions. But their actions are often beyond your control. You want people to be happy. When you see somebody who’s creating the causes for suffering, you want them to stop. As for those who are creating the causes for happiness, you want them to continue. In some cases, it’ll happen, but in a lot of cases it won’t. As Ajaan Fuang said, if you develop the brahmaviharas without a sense of equanimity, they become a cause for suffering.

So as protection for the mind, we have to develop equanimity. What’s interesting is that the statement for developing equanimity, reflecting on the principle of karma, has more than one use in the Canon. There’s another place where the Buddha says, when you reflect on that statement, it gives rise to the path. It’s in a sutta where he starts out by having you reflect on yourself: “I am subject to aging, I am subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that is dear and appealing to me. And I’m the owner of my actions.” That reflection, he says, should give rise to a sense of heedfulness, as you realize you’ve got to get your actions under control. But then, he says, you realize that these facts are true of everybody, everywhere in the cosmos. We’re all subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, and we’re all owners of our actions.

So no matter where you go in the cosmos, there’s going to be aging, illness, and death. And there’s nobody in the cosmos who’s beyond their actions. The arahants are free from creating new karma, but even they have to experience the results of some of their past actions, for what they did before their awakening. But everybody else, no matter where you go, even the highest levels of heaven: All beings are subject to these things.

That thought should give rise to a feeling of *samvega*. Where are you going to find a true, unadulterated happiness? There’s only one place, and that’s nibbāna

—and it’s not even a place. It’s another dimension entirely outside of space and time. You think about that and you realize that that would be the only way to find true peace of mind, to find true happiness. Everything else is laced with poison and disappointment. No matter how good your intentions are when you come into this life, you’re going to meet up with beings who are beyond your control. In some cases, your own actions become beyond your control. You begin to get heedless, you begin to get complacent. What started out with good intentions sometimes changes. These thoughts should get you on the path.

The point here is that, one, equanimity is not the goal. We’re not here just to be equanimous about things, because there’s a sense of powerlessness in equanimity. You realize that there are things you simply cannot change as long as you’re in this world dealing with other people. They may decide they want to go to war. What are you going to do? You can protest, but what if they decide they’re not going to listen to the protests? What if they mow the protesters down?

People do unskillful things all over the world all the time. This is the world we’re born into—and this is one of the relatively good ones. So equanimity cannot be the goal. But the fact that the reflection on equanimity is also the same as the reflection that leads to a motivation to want to practice the path, shows that when the Buddha teaches us equanimity, it’s not just a general indifference. When you have equanimity for all beings, it’s not just saying, “Well, who cares?” It’s more to focus you. There are a lot of things you cannot change in the world, but there are some things that *are* within your power, and the path is something that’s within your power. It’s something you can do. That, the Buddha says, is a type of action. It’s the type of action that leads to the end of action, but it’s a choice you can make.

So when you develop thoughts of equanimity to overcome disappointment, grief, or just general irritation of the world, you then want to think about it a little bit further to take it beyond simply learning how to accept things as they are. You have to learn to accept the fact that there are potentials as well. There’s the potential to act skillfully, so skillfully that you can put an end to suffering. That’s there, too. So this motivation starts with *samvega*, but also leads to *pasada*, confidence that there is a way out.

Equanimity on its own, the Buddha points out, can leave you doing nothing, accomplishing nothing. He says that if you sit here meditating and develop only equanimity without trying to get the mind firmly concentrated, without exerting right effort, nothing happens. But if you combine equanimity with discernment, you realize there are a lot of things you can’t control, but there are some things you can. Focus on those.

You've got those three kinds of fabrication. You got the breath coming in and going out. You can change the breathing so that it's comfortable. That's bodily fabrication. As for verbal fabrication, you can direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the breath to make it more comfortable. Then, once it's comfortable, you can use that sense of comfort. Spread it around the body. Spread your awareness along with the breath, so that you have a good, solid place to stay here.

And then mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings: Try to develop some perceptions, one, that help the mind to settle down. And then, two, think about the perceptions that help you look at things that you've been holding on to, causing you to suffer, and show you how to let them go, not simply out of acceptance, but out of understanding. Why is it that you go for these things? What's their allure? Can you see through that allure? Contemplate the drawbacks, and the main drawbacks are the ones pointed out by those three perceptions that the Buddha has you apply to all things fabricated: Is it true that these things are inconstant? You look at them and, yeah, they have their inconstant side. When they're inconstant, they're stressful. If they're stressful, are they worth holding on to?

You come to see what little satisfaction you get out of the allure and how much suffering comes with the drawbacks. Something inside you says, "This is not worth it. I can let go." That's letting go out of understanding, and it leads to something special. If you let go and you're simply where you were beforehand, the Buddha wouldn't have recommended it. But this special letting go opens up something uncanny inside the mind. Something you didn't expect. There is that possibility. And there, there's no need for equanimity. There's nothing to irritate you, nothing to lead to grief, nothing to lead to disappointment. Total happiness.

The result of that total happiness is that you look at the rest of the world, and you realize you no longer have to feed on it. You realize that's what your holding on has been: You've been holding on to things so that you can feed off of them. You need nourishment. Sometimes you get some good nourishment; sometimes you don't get good nourishment. Sometimes you get really bad nourishment. But the mind gets to a point where it doesn't have to feed anymore. Then it can look at the world with a different kind of equanimity. There's goodwill for all beings, but it no longer hurts, because you're not trying to feed off of other beings' happiness.

So it's good to reflect on this principle of karma: All beings are subject to their own karma. Notice the various ways in which that reflection can be used to bring the mind into line, to accept what has to be accepted and to focus on changing what can be changed in a good direction. That's when your equanimity becomes wise.

As the Buddha pointed out, there are skillful and unskillful forms of equanimity. So do your best to develop the kind of equanimity that really is skillful. That gets you focused.