

## *Equanimity in Heart & Mind*

*May 23, 2022*

We often have that contrast in the chants before we meditate, reflecting on the facts of aging, illness, death, separation, how the world is swept away, offers no shelter, one has nothing of one's own—and then the chant, “May I be happy.” But really, it's not that much of a contrast, because part of the solution is in that fifth contemplation: “I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” It's through our actions that we can find happiness in the midst of all this aging, illness, death, and separation.

This is why we come to train the mind—but not just the mind. In Pali they use the word *citta*, which means both “heart” and “mind.” As you look through the various Buddhist cultures, you can see that there's no clear distinction between heart and mind—the mind being the mental function that figures things out, analyzes reality, and then the heart being the part that has desires and wills things to happen.

I think it's interesting that Buddhism doesn't recognize a clear distinction between the two. After all, the heart has its reasons, and reasons have their desires. The question is how to put them together in such a way that satisfies both: You're clear about reality, but at the same time you can find happiness. So we train the mind and the heart to put reality and happiness together.

As we bring attention to the breath, you want the mind to settle down, to be still, both because it's a good place to be in the present moment to get a sense of well-being in the mind, and because it allows you to see things more clearly. So focus on your breath, something that's right here. You don't have to go looking anywhere else for it. It's about as close to the mind as you can get in the world. Of the various properties in the body, it's also the one that's most responsive to the heart and mind. You can tell yourself to breathe long or short, heavy or light, fast or slow, and the breath will respond right away. At the same time, the quality of the breath energy in the body has a very direct impact on the state of the mind, the state of the heart.

So explore this fact. Try different ways of breathing right now, and see what feels really good. Think of the breath not just as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as a whole-body process: the energy that courses through the nerves, courses through the muscles, courses through the veins and the arteries, out to every pore. Think of that energy as nourishing for the body and refreshing for the mind,

because for the mind to look at things clearly, it has to have a calm and equanimous state. But before things are going to calm down, first you want to energize the body and energize the mind. Give them a sense of satisfied well-being.

The Buddha talks about bringing the mind to equanimity, and then going beyond ordinary, everyday equanimity, which is where you're simply okay with whatever happens. You want to bring the mind to a more solid state of equanimity than that. He recommends two ways of doing that: One is through concentration, and the other is through insight. In both cases, though, you first have to go through a stage where you develop a strong sense of well-being.

In the case of insight, here's a hypothetical case: Suppose you're suffering from some distress about what's happened in your life. The Buddha says that people's normal reaction to that distress is to try to find some pleasure in the senses: nice sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, things that make you feel comfortable for a while. But then it's so easy to slip back into the pain and distress again, because things of the senses are constantly changing on you.

If you want to get out of that cycle, you develop what the Buddha calls "renunciate distress." That's where you think about how there are people who've found true peace, a true happiness that doesn't change, and you tell yourself, "When will I find that too?" There's a distress there—in the sense that you realize there's something you haven't attained and there's work to be done to get it—but it's distress that has hope. The distress of the world can leave you hopeless, because you know you're going to go looking for pleasures, but the pleasures will change on you again. So it's better to go for the distress that says there's work to be done, but that the work will accomplish something of lasting value.

Then he says you contemplate the nature of the things of the senses, and you realize that your distress is not the result of anything particular you've done wrong. It's the nature of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas that they're going to change. They're inconstant, they're stressful, and ultimately, they lie beyond your control. Some people find that that insight gives them relief. There's a joy that comes with that. In other words, it lifts you out of the sting of your personal losses. You take a larger view, a more expansive view. Then, from there, the mind can calm down and find a state of equanimity that's not based on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, but based on insight.

Other people, though, don't find that that particular insight is joyful, so they have to take the route of concentration, as we're doing right now, focusing on the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease and a sense of fullness. You can think of the energy in the body as something you can fill up, not by filling your lungs, but by simply thinking, when the breath comes in, that the energy can flow

everywhere in the body, saturating the nerves. This requires that you hold a perception in mind of the breath flowing in. Ask yourself: Where do you feel that it flows in? Here, we're not talking about the air. We're talking about the energy. Where does it come in? Or does it feel more like it's originating from inside the body itself, and welling up to fill the whole body? Which perception do you find more nourishing?

So explore. Try to get a sense of ease, well-being, refreshment here in the present moment—by the way you breathe, by the way you allow the mind to settle in and not have to worry about anything else. In terms of the texts, they say that you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. What you work on are qualities of mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind; alertness, your ability to know what you're doing while you're doing it; and then ardency, your desire to do this well. When you have these qualities working together with the breath, you create a sense of well-being that feeds the energy needs of the body.

When the energy needs of the body are met, things begin to calm down. It's in this way that you ultimately get to a more stable state of concentration, a more stable state of equanimity.

Then, when the mind has reached equanimity, either through concentration or through insight, you can use that state of mind to look into your emotions. This is where you bring the mind and the heart together.

Look for where there's a state of greed, lust, aversion, or grief. What's going on? When you've felt nourished, and the mind calms down like this, it's a lot easier to be honest with yourself about what your mind is doing to create suffering around greed, aversion, and delusion. The mind doesn't have to go outside to look for its happiness through the power of those things when it has a source of happiness inside.

Or when you're angry at somebody, what do you really get out of it? There's a sense of power that comes with the anger. That's a lot of its allure right there. But there are so many stupid things you do when you're angry. You think you're doing something that's going to be for your benefit, but then when it's done and things calm down, you realize that you created more problems than you solved.

With grief, you've lost someone—and now you can look at it very clearly. You begin to see how that person seemed to become part of you. You were actually feeding on that person in terms of your emotions. A large part of your identity is built around that relationship. But look what happens: Every relationship is going to end. And when it does, are you going to go looking for another one? Or would

it be better to try to find your happiness inside, to try to find your nourishment inside?

This is another reason why we do the concentration, because the mind can find food inside, a sense of nourishment. That nourishment allows it to step back from its old feeding habits.

So as you get the mind to settle down with the breath like this, it's an opportunity to train not only the mind but also the heart. You start thinking clearly about your emotions and noticing where they do you harm when you start siding with them. You realize you don't have to go with them. When the mind is really still, it can see when a particular emotion begins, and how arbitrary it can often be.

We go with these emotions largely through force of habit, and we do get some kick out of them. That's why the Buddha says you want to look for their allure, then look for their drawbacks. The allure is an area where we tend not to be honest with ourselves, so we have to keep looking again and again and again, because you can tell yourself about the drawbacks of things, and the mind still goes for them—which means that you're still missing something.

So be willing to sit with these issues, sometimes for a long time, before things finally clear up inside. You'll come to see things that were there all along, but you didn't see them. But this training—where we learn how not to be slaves to our cravings, slaves to our desires—requires that you're training both the heart and the mind. The heart is the part that goes for the allure of things. It expects some happiness out of them, some satisfaction. Sometimes it knows that it's not being honest with itself, so it likes to hide things from itself. As Ajaan Chah once said, one of the first things you notice as you start watching the mind or heart is how much it lies to itself.

So what you're trying to do is to get the mind into a state of nourished equanimity that follows on a sense of well-being. You can do this either through insight or through concentration. Then you're in a position where you can look at the heart and the mind, and see through the lies. You begin to realize that it was because you were lying to yourself that you stood in the way of your own happiness. You were looking for satisfaction in things that couldn't provide it.

As the Buddha said, there are better things in life that are to be found as the mind gets trained. Equanimity itself is not the end. It's just part of the path. But the insights and the concentration lead further to something that really doesn't change: what the Buddha guarantees to be the ultimate happiness.

Always keep that possibility in mind.

And it may be distressing: There are people who have found this happiness, but you haven't found it yet. It's going to take some work. But as I said, it's distress with hope—much better than the hopeless distress that we spend so much of our time running around in. The Buddha's showing us there's a way out. And he says that if you think that it's not going to be happy, change your views. He can't show it to you, but Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice comment: He said that if the people who have attained nibbana could show it to everyone else, nobody would want anything else but nibbana.

So always keep that possibility in mind.