

Equanimity

November 25, 2022

The Buddha was once asked by a brahman, “Will the whole world gain awakening? Or one-half? Or one-third?” and he didn’t answer. Ven. Ananda was sitting by and was concerned the brahman might get upset: Here he had asked an important question, and the Buddha was silent. So he took the brahman off to one side and he gave him an analogy.

He said it’s like a wise gatekeeper. He’s looking after a fortress, so he walks all around the fortress and, aside from the gate, he doesn’t see a hole in the wall, not even one big enough for a cat to slip through—I like that detail. From this, he doesn’t know how many people are going to go in and out of the fortress, but he does know that if they’re going to go in and out of the fortress, they have to go by the gate. The gate, here, is the practice of the four establishings of mindfulness, the seven factors for awakening.

But it’s interesting that the Buddha, with all his special knowledge, wouldn’t know how many people were going to gain awakening. It’s because we have freedom of choice. It’s up to us to decide if we want to follow the path or not follow the path. Even the Buddha couldn’t make us all want to follow the path. Ajaan Maha Boowa once said that if people who had attained nibbana could take it out and show it to everybody else, nobody would want anything but nibbana. Yet it can’t be shown like that, so people go through their lives without any interest in it at all.

So even the Buddha can’t awaken everybody. As he said, he taught those who were ready to be taught. Even though he had compassion for all beings, goodwill for all beings, still, there were only so many he could teach.

It’s good to keep this in mind. It gives you some perspective on the practice of equanimity.

Equanimity in and of itself is never recommended as skillful. It has to be combined with other qualities. In the brahmaviharas, it acts as a reality check. We have goodwill for all beings: May they be happy. May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. May they look after

themselves with ease. Compassion: May all beings be freed from all stress and pain. Empathetic joy: May those who are happy not be deprived of their happiness. These are wishes we can have for all, but it's not the case that everybody is going to become happy. After all, they have to choose the path that leads to true happiness. It's not that you can touch people on the head with a magic wand and make them happy. They have to behave skillfully in their thoughts, words, and deeds, and this is their choice. They have this freedom to do it or not do it.

At the same time, everybody has a history of karma: good things, bad things, they've done in the past. You have your history: good things, bad things you've done. Those actions—your actions, their actions—are going to place limitations on what you can do. You have to think about this so that you don't suffer over the fact that all beings will not become happy. You have to realize it's going to be up to them. And of course if you're going to be happy, it's up to you.

Now, you do what you can to exert a good influence on others. It's not the case that you can't influence other people at all. Look at the Buddha. He taught the way to awakening to those who were able to take advantage of his teachings. If it hadn't been for him, who knows where they would have ended up? We each can exert our influence on the world as best we can, but there's going to be limitations on that influence. It's like the practice of generosity: You want all beings to be happy, but you only have so many resources in terms of your wealth, your time, your energy. So you have to take that into account and focus your energies on areas where you can be of most help.

This is why I said earlier that equanimity is your reality check. It requires discernment to decide how much you're going to try to help somebody before you say, "I can't. This person is beyond my help, I've got to chalk it up to karma." That's going to depend on your own powers of observation and your own connection with the person.

It's interesting that the passage that's used to contemplate equanimity—all beings are the heirs of their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, live dependent on their actions; whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir—not only reminds you of karma, but also makes you think in larger terms. This is where it's related not to just equanimity, but it also leads to further contemplation. The Buddha says that when you reflect on the fact that

you're the owner of your actions, that thought should make you heedful about what you're going to do and say and think. You realize, "Okay. My actions are going to have consequences. I've got to be careful about what I choose to do and say and think." When you start thinking further, however, that *all* beings are the owners of their actions, it means that wherever you could go in the cosmos—the highest level of devas, any place that might seem really desirable—you still would be an heir to your actions. And that, the Buddha says, should be enough to give you the desire to get on the path.

In other words, it should induce a strong sense of *samvega*—that wherever you could go, you'd still be subject to aging, illness, and death. You'd still be subject to separation and you'd still have to be really careful about your actions. You can't get rest and get complacent. You have to be on your guard at all times. That's enough—when you think about it—to say, "I've had enough, I've got to find the way out." That induces you to get on the path.

After all, the path is a path of action. Right view, right resolve, all the way through right concentration: These are things you do. They're all fabrications. As the Buddha said, of all fabricated dhammas, this is the highest: the noble eightfold path. It's fabricated in the sense that it's something you have to put together.

So when you reflect on the nature of the world, reflect on your relationship with other beings, and you realize the limitations on what you can do for the world, that's when you decide, "I want to go for something unlimited."

They say that the brahmaviharas are measureless. But they're not nearly as unlimited as total release. That's what we aim for.

Equanimity shows up in two other places—although basically they're the same place—in the practice of discernment and in the practice of concentration. In this case, the Buddha lists levels of equanimity.

You start out with the ordinary, everyday equanimity. You make up your mind that whatever you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think about, you're going to be equanimous. This is where you practice what some people call "bare awareness" or "bare attention," but it's actually an intention not to react, so it's not totally bare.

One of the Buddha's recommendations is that if someone criticizes you, you tell yourself, "Okay. An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear. When the

contact ends, the sound ends.” Can you leave it there? For most of us, that’s not the case. Someone criticizes us, and we take it in. And, as the Buddha says, it reverberates in the mind. You have to remind yourself that everything beyond the contact is something you’re responsible for, so you try to develop some equanimity for it. People will say things and do things you’re not going to like, and often you’re going to have to put up with it. You have to find a state of mind where you can be okay with these things, but for the sake of progress on the path, you have to go beyond just the resolve that you’re going to be okay. This is where you go to higher levels of equanimity.

On the one hand, there’s the equanimity that comes from insight. The Buddha’s analysis of this is interesting. He says there’s householder equanimity, which is what I just described, and there’s renunciant equanimity, and the way you go from one to the next is instructive. From householder equanimity you go to what he calls renunciant pain, which is when you’re convinced that there is freedom, there is total release, there are people who have attained that, but you’re not there yet. That thought is a painful thought—“There’s a freedom I haven’t attained”—but there’s also hope. “Other people can do it. Why can’t I do it?”

So it is important to have a goal as you practice.

The skill lies simply in learning how to relate to the goal well. If you’re going to go on a weekend retreat, often they’ll recommend that you don’t have a goal. Some people going on retreats will say to themselves, “Well, maybe I can reach the first jhana. Second jhana if things go really well.” But that’s putting yourself in a pressure cooker. People who lead weekend retreats have learned that, so they say, “It’s better to have no goals. Just sort of be here, without any idea of where you want to go,” which is okay for a weekend retreat. But when you take the practice as a life practice, you have to have goals. And there is a pain that goes with having a goal that you haven’t attained yet, but the mature attitude is to say, “Okay. I can work at this, step by step by step, and I can get there.”

You develop insight along the way, and you see that the more insight you gain into the workings of your mind, the more freedom you have. There’s going to be a sense of joy. You can tell yourself, “Greed used to overcome my mind, but now I can see through my greed.” There’s a sense of joy that comes with that. Or, “I used to be subject to anger, subject to jealousy, but now I can see through those things.

They don't have that power they had before." There's a sense of joy. So you go from renunciant pain to renunciant joy, and then from renunciant joy then you go for renunciant equanimity: The mind is calm and at peace in its sense of freedom. That's the kind of equanimity you actively cultivate through insight.

If insight teaches you things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and you get resigned to that fact but it doesn't give rise to joy, the insight is not a genuine insight. There has to be a sense of freedom and release that comes when you really understand what's going on in the mind.

Similarly with concentration: When you make it to the fourth jhana, there's a sense of equanimity, but to get there, you first have to go through a sense of pleasure and rapture or refreshment that come with the lower jhanas.

As you're meditating here, right now, try to find a way of breathing that's pleasant. It can be neutrally pleasant or more positively pleasant, but it feels okay, and from okay, you look after it. As I said earlier, in Thai the word is *prakhawng*: You hover around it, you protect it, look after it, the same way that a parent would hover over a child learning to walk. You don't grab the child, but you're there, attentive, right by it, looking after it, tending to it. As you keep at the meditation, that sense of "okay" will grow into something positively pleasant, and you can think of it spreading through the body. This is where Ajaan Lee's instructions come in handy.

The Canon simply says you have a sense of pleasure and rapture, and then you let it permeate the body. But as Ajaan Lee points out, it's really helpful when you can think of the breath energy flowing through the body, and then the pleasure goes along the breath channels, goes along with the sense of energy flowing into the arms, flowing into the legs, flowing into the head, into the torso, leading to a sense of fullness. And as I've mentioned, one of the ways you can induce that sense of fullness is to focus first on your hands.

Notice, as you breathe in: Is there any slight tensing up anywhere in the hand? If there is, let it go, release it, so that the hand feels full as you breathe in, feels full as you breathe out. That sense of fullness will grow, and as it develops, you can think of it going up the arms into the chest. You can do the same with your feet—up the legs, into the chest, into the torso—and there can be a real sense of satisfaction. You're just sitting here, breathing in, breathing out, and as you get

deeper into concentration, the sense of pleasure will get more intense. The rapture will get more intense.

It even gets to the point where the rapture feels burdensome. It feels like it's too much, so at that point you focus on a level of energy that's more refined. And as you focus on that more refined level, the grosser sense of rapture will gradually dissipate. The mind feels very equanimous at that point, but there will be a sense of pleasure still in the body, very subtle. Ajaan Lee's image is of an ice cube with vapor coming off of it.

Then, as everything in the body connects, you get to the point where you realize you haven't been breathing. The sense of breath energy in the body is totally sufficient, totally still. In that way, the concentration can deliver you to both equanimity of mind and equanimity of body.

But notice in this case, too, just as with insight, you go through pleasure, you go through rapture or refreshment first before you go for equanimity. You don't simply force the mind to be equanimous through force of will. You're coming out the other side of having fed the mind and your inner sense of the body so well that the equanimity comes from a sense of satisfaction. Your own internal needs are met, and you can view the world with a lot more peace, with less hunger.

And then, based both on insight and on concentration, you continue to develop the path, fabricating the path, using whatever further concentration and insights you can develop. First you pry away any distractions from the mind that would pull you out of concentration, and then you apply the same analysis to the concentration itself.

There's an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the typical way of dealing with distractions or defilements. First you try to see their origination—in other words, how they get caused in the mind, what comes up with them when they come. Then you see them as they pass away—and then you see them as they come back. When they come back, you have to ask yourself: What's the allure? What pulls your mind to go for them again? This you have to watch for many, many times, because the mind will often lie to itself, especially when it knows that it shouldn't be going for something but it wants to anyhow. What's the real appeal? When you can finally see what it is, and you've seen the drawbacks, then there's dispassion for it. You realize, "I don't need to make this

anymore.”

The question came up the other day about destroying a defilement and abandoning a defilement, having it cease. Why did the Buddha use all those terms? Well, the defilement has been something you’ve been fabricating all along. The mind has been fabricating defilement out of passion, so when you develop dispassion, you’re going to stop fabricating it, and when you stop fabricating it, it ends. That’s how it gets destroyed. That’s how all these things go together.

Now, as you deal with your defilements like this, you turn around and you realize this state of concentration is the same sort of thing. It’s fabricated, too. This is where the interesting passage comes in where the Buddha says you apply that same analysis to what are called the five strengths or the five faculties: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. You see their origination, too. You see their passing away. You see their allure. You see their allure in helping you to get past a lot of the suffering you’ve been inflicting on yourself. You also see their drawbacks: They’re fabricated; you have to keep on making them, keep on intending in their direction.

There comes a point where the mind says, “Wouldn’t it be better to have something unfabricated?” And when it can genuinely incline itself in that direction, there will be an opening through dispassion. As the Buddha said, it leads to the highest happiness possible. But here, too, there’s an equanimity that is a side effect.

Once the mind’s needs have been satisfied—the need for a genuine happiness it can rely on—then its attitude toward everything else will be equanimous. Now, this doesn’t mean you no longer care about anyone else. Remember: The ideal equanimity is also imbued with goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy. It’s simply that now you don’t have to feed off of other people. You don’t have to feed off of your goodwill or your compassion, and that’s when the help you give to other people is totally free and totally without selfishness.

If you’re still feeding off your compassion, sometimes your image of yourself as being compassionate can actually get in the way of genuine help. There was a Dharma teacher one time who once said he didn’t want to be born into a world where there was no suffering because he wouldn’t be able to exert his compassion. You have to stop and think about that: It sounds noble, but then you wonder: Do

you need other people to be suffering so that you can feel good about your compassion? There's something wrong there. The fully enlightened person's compassion is compassion without need. It's a totally free gift.

So those are the different levels of equanimity. There's the ordinary, everyday home-grown variety where you make up your mind, "I'm just not going to react"; the equanimity that comes after you've gained some joy from your insights; the equanimity that comes after you've gained a sense of rapture and pleasure with your concentration; and the equanimity that comes when you've tasted the happiness of total release. That last one is the equanimity we're aiming for, but we use the other ones as needed.

But realize that the one at the bottom of the ladder—the resolve to simply not react—is equanimity that needs work. Otherwise, you can get depressed—just: "Well, this is the way it is, this is the way it is, I've got to accept it, I've got to accept it." That can get you very depressed. There has to be a sense of joy, there has to be an inner sense of well-being to undergird your equanimity so that it actually does become part of the path that leads to total happiness.