

Worldly Equanimity & Its Uses

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People sometimes misunderstand the Buddha's teachings on equanimity, thinking that it means an attitude that doesn't really care about anything, one where you're indifferent or have no preferences. That's the equanimity of a lazy person who has no goals in life. The Buddha, of course, has you take on a goal: the goal of freedom from suffering. So he's teaching you the equanimity of a person with a goal.

Think of a warrior trying to win a battle. The warrior has to be very stable, with a mind that's on an even keel, that doesn't get upset by things, so that he or she can figure the way out of a particular difficult situation. In other words, it's equanimity for the sake of victory. I may have told you the story about my older brother when he was first going to school. My grandfather, who didn't think much of the names my mother gave us—to his mind, she gave us names a little bit too fancy for farm kids—was concerned that Galen would have other kids teasing him about his name. So he said, "You've got to learn how to fight. If anybody teases you, you'll have to punch him." So he taught Galen a few moves. Grandpa had been an amateur boxer when he was younger. And as they got going, he got a little more aggressive, to the point where my older brother lost it and started flailing. That's when my grandfather put his hand on his head and said, "Stop. Okay, you can't lose it. When somebody hits you, you've got to go cold. Then you hit him right in the face." I don't think the Buddha would have recommended hitting people right in the face. But the idea that when you're in a difficult situation, you have to go cold to see what needs to be done: That's something that I think he would have approved of.

The Buddha talks about equanimity as having three levels. There's ordinary, worldly equanimity, as he calls it, which is equanimity with regard to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. This is the kind of ordinary equanimity that, say, a soldier would have. But because we're going to be doing a lot more delicate work in dealing with bigger adversaries than just people outside—we're going to be dealing with our defilements—we need a deeper equanimity. That's where the next level of equanimity comes in, equanimity that's not of this world, or not of the flesh. That's the equanimity of the fourth jhana on up. Finally, there's the equanimity that comes as a result of having attained awakening: more not-of-the-world than not-of-the-world. The awakening itself isn't equanimity—it's the highest happiness—but when you reflect on your mind afterward, seeing

that it is now freed of greed, aversion, and delusion, you can either feel joy, rapture, or equanimity. That kind of equanimity, you don't create. It just happens. The other two kinds of equanimity you have to fabricate.

Notice that the first one covers not only everyday outside activities, but also the first three jhanas, because non-worldly equanimity doesn't kick in until the fourth. This means that, as you're practicing to get the mind to settle down, you've got to depend on worldly equanimity to help you deal with difficult issues as they come up.

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to Rahula, he taught him a whole series of contemplations useful for developing that kind of equanimity. These are basically preparations for a very proactive type of meditation. When the Buddha taught breath meditation, it wasn't about simply being with the breath however it was. You were actually going to figure out what kind of breathing would lead to rapture, what kind of breathing would lead to pleasure, how to breathe in a way that you're conscious of the whole body, how you can calm bodily fabrication, how you can breathe in a way that calms mental fabrication, and how to breathe in a way that gladdens the mind, steadies the mind, releases the mind, and provides a basis for insight to arise.

That's a very proactive program. It's a series of skills you have to develop. And, as with any skill, you're going to be running into difficulties. So you're going to need the kind of equanimity that allows you to face them down and—from a calm, cool state of mind—figure out what's going on and what can be done about it. So it's good to look at that series of contemplations that the Buddha gave to Rahula, because otherwise, we simply say, "Try to get your mind calm and cool before you meditate," or, "Work with your emotions as they come up." That doesn't give you much guidance.

The Buddha gives you some things to think about as tools. The first is: The body is made out of the four elements. When you're afraid of the pain that'll come from sitting still for a long time, or that you'll hurt your legs by meditating, you have to remind yourself, "The legs are just earth, water, wind, fire." The body's just these things. It's no big deal. Nothing special. We tend to think that somehow our bodies are made out of some special stuff that's different from the rest of the world. But we have to remind ourselves, "No, that's not the case." In this way, we'll be more willing to, as Ajaan Lee would say, "sacrifice our bodies for the sake of the practice."

When the Buddha gave Rahula some perceptions to hold in mind to help him with equanimity, he said, "Make your mind like earth, or water, or wind, or fire," because when these things come into contact with disgusting things, they don't

recoil or react. They just do their thing. You want have a mind that's able to take pleasant and unpleasant sensations and be non-reactive—again, not so that you just stop there being non-reactive, but so that you can figure out what's the wisest thing to do. This also applies to any memories that come up, pleasant or unpleasant: so-and-so said this, so-and-so said that, there was this person, there was that person, who you found attractive. Whatever the memories that come up, you have to remind yourself, "I'll just make my mind like earth toward those memories, make it like fire and burn them up, because they're not what's needed right now."

The Buddha also recommended the contemplation of inconstancy, seeing that whatever you might be planning or wishing for in the future is going to go. There's only one thing that's not going to go, and that's unbinding. Everything else you might aspire to is going to require a lot of work, and then when you get it, it's just going to start slipping through your fingers. This contemplation is for applying to any distractions that might come up and get in the way of staying with the breath. You remind yourself, "This doesn't lead to anything permanent. It's not a worthwhile use of my time." So you can let it go.

Then the Buddha listed the four brahmaviharas, starting with goodwill. This is for anybody whose image comes up in your mind while you're meditating. If there's somebody who did something bad to you, okay, have goodwill for them. Somebody in your family: goodwill. Somebody you don't even recognize: goodwill. And dedicate the merit of your meditation to that person. If you see they're suffering, have some compassion: "May this person get out of that state." If it's someone who's already happy, and they're already doing something skillful: empathetic joy. Be happy for them.

Then there are a lot of things that are just beyond your control. I think I've said other times that of the four brahmaviharas, equanimity is one that requires some discernment, so you can figure out, "What things are beyond my control? There are people I'd like to see happy, but they're not going to be happy."

This gets into another perception that the Buddha taught Rahula, which is the perception of not-self, realizing there are a lot of things in our range of awareness that we simply cannot control. If we get worked up over them, we're going to waste our energy, because there are areas where we *can* make a difference. So you have to develop the insight that can see, "What can I control? What can I not control? What do I have to put aside for the time being? What things will I be maybe someday able to pick up again, but not right now? And what things are just totally beyond me?" Have some maturity around that. Don't take on the weight of the world. Take on weights you can handle, because that way you actually will

be able to make a lot of difference. If you take on too much, you bang your head against the wall, and nothing happens as a result except for a broken head.

So what the Buddha's doing here is giving you different ways of engaging in verbal fabrication and mental fabrication to induce a state of equanimity in the mind that enables you fend off distractions, fend off different hindrances as they come up. This equanimity also puts the mind in a position where you can be a good judge of what's going on, because as you settle down with the breath, there are days when you find the breath is very responsive, and other days when it's not. So you have to put the mind on an even keel to figure out, "Okay, what's going wrong here? And what do I need to do in order to figure that out?"

You have to be willing to put in a lot of time if necessary. I had a friend who was studying pottery in Japan with one of those national living treasures, and she found herself getting upset. Every time she'd put her pots in the kiln, a lot of them would come out burned or broken, whereas the national living treasure put pots in every day and they'd come out perfect every day, every day. Until one day she came early to the pottery shed: It turned out that his pots had burned the night before. But he wasn't upset. He was in the middle of the kiln trying to figure out what had happened. She realized that was what she was missing: the attitude that when things go wrong, you don't get upset, you just try to figure out what's going wrong. What was the problem?

So as we're meditating, we're trying to develop the equanimity of a craftsman who wants the work to come out well, but realizes that it's not going to come out perfect every time, and is willing to learn, and has the patience and the endurance and the restraint to be willing to learn, because that's a lot of what equanimity is: It's restraint.

You hold your mind in check. The thoughts that would run rampant and go up and down the scales, you learn to keep them in check because they're not going to do you any good. You want to keep things on one single tone, because then you'll be in a better position to figure out what's gone wrong and what can be done to fix it. And of course, you don't want to bring these attitudes only to your meditation. They work best if you also practice them in daily life.

When people say unpleasant things or do unpleasant things, you can make your mind like earth. You can foster thoughts of goodwill for difficult people. You can figure out how not to get upset about the inconstancy of things, because you realize that it's a universal principle. It doesn't happen just to you. And you can think about the things that are really beyond your control so that you can put them aside and not let the mind get worked up about them. You want to be able

to fabricate this kind of equanimity in daily life so that it becomes easier and easier to fabricate it as you're settling down to meditate.

Put yourself in a position where you really can deal with the breath in the most effective way. Even as the mind starts getting into states of jhana, as long as you're not in the fourth jhana, you're still going to be dealing with this level of equanimity. And this contemplation will come in handy. Some people, when the mind settles down, get really excited—and, of course, they lose it. The best attitude to take is just, "Oh, there's this. Let's watch it." Again, you hold the mind in check. You exercise some restraint, not by clamping down, but by having the right perceptions in mind to make it easier to keep the mind on an even keel. Because to get the mind to the deeper levels of equanimity requires that you be really observant.

Once you get the mind into concentration, how do you stay with it? How do you be patient with it so that it can have a good effect on the mind? We're not jumping through jhana hoops here. You stay with your level of concentration however long is required for the mind to settle in, gain a sense of nourishment from it, and be in a position to start observing, "Okay, where is there still stress here? What am I doing that's causing the stress? How can I stop that and not lose my concentration?" That requires a very balanced, even-keel kind of mind.

So even though this is the lowest level of equanimity, it's the foundation for everything else. And try to develop the values that see equanimity as a good thing. Our culture doesn't place a very high value on equanimity. But then again, look at our culture. As we meditate, we're trying to enter into the culture of the noble ones, and this is one of the qualities they say is worth developing. You want to learn how to delight in developing it, to see its value. It protects you from doing and saying and thinking a lot of things that you would later regret. And it puts you in a position where you can see things more clearly.

So work on this kind of equanimity, both where you're sitting here and as you're going through daily life. That's how the peace of the higher levels will become possible.