Equanimity

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:03

As we live our lives, we inevitably encounter conditions that blow us around—conditions of praise or blame, gain and loss, status, disgrace, pleasure and pain. These are known as the eight worldly winds. They are an inevitable part of our worldly life. Even here on retreat we experience these qualities, these winds blowing through.

Typically we react to these circumstances. We like the praise, the pleasure, the status or fame, and the gain. We don't like their opposites. And there's some part of us that thinks—and we've been told endlessly by our society, by the mass media—that happiness consists in having the praise, the gain, the status, and the pleasure. So we somehow think there's something wrong with us, something wrong with our lives, that we've done something wrong if we're experiencing their opposites.

The Buddha had a different view of them. Words from the Buddha: "For an ordinary person, there arise gain, loss, status, disgrace, censure, praise, pleasure, and pain. For a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones, there also arises gain, loss, status, disgrace, censure, praise, pleasure, and pain."

So if you thought enlightenment was going to make you endlessly feel pleasure, gain, and the rest, the Buddha says otherwise. What's the difference, then, between the ordinary person experiencing these things and the well-instructed disciple experiencing these things?

He says, "For an ordinary person, when gain arises, he does not reflect, 'Gain has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, and subject to change.' He does not discern it as it actually is." Likewise for all the others. "His mind remains consumed with the gain. He welcomes the arisen gain and rebels against the arisen loss. He is not released, I tell you, from dukkha." Likewise for all the other seven.

"Now gain arises for a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones. She reflects, 'Gain has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, and subject to change.' She discerns it as it actually is. Her mind does not remain consumed with the gain. She does not welcome the arisen gain or rebel against the arisen loss. As she thus abandons welcoming and rebelling, she is released, I tell you, from dukkha."

So the difference seems to be in one's response to these things, not that they stop happening to us. There are many stories in the suttas of people coming to see the Buddha and heaping praise on him or heaping blame on him. Even the Buddha was not sheltered from these worldly winds, but his mind was sheltered.

The quality that shelters our mind from these winds is equanimity. It is a beautiful quality of mind that we cultivate, that is cultivated as we practice. It is a balance of mind, a mind that doesn't react to pleasant or unpleasant. It's a mind that accepts things as they are, understands things as they are—non-reactivity,

spaciousness, ease.

The quality of equanimity, along with several other qualities, is understood to be in every wholesome mind state. Equanimity, along with mindfulness, non-greed, non-aversion, faith, and quite a few others, are said to be in every wholesome mind state. So we cultivate these wholesome mind states, and equanimity is cultivated along with them.

Sometimes when we hear about equanimity, one of the descriptions is that it leads to a neutrality towards beings—there's not reactivity one way or the other towards beings. When we hear that it's a kind of neutrality, we think of flatness, of non-responsiveness. But equanimity is not a flat emotion. I do think of equanimity as an emotion, one of the beautiful emotions of an open heart, along with the other brahmaviharas: metta, karuna, and mudita—kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. These four form the emotional map, in a way, of the heart that is free from clinging.

So this emotion of equanimity is not one of flatness or indifference. It is the emotion that allows compassion and mudita to deeply experience the joys and the sorrows of this world without being swept away by them. Equanimity allows us to touch life more deeply. It's anything but flat and indifferent. It is not indifference or apathy.

Another misunderstanding about equanimity is that it means simply settling back and being with things as they are—that one doesn't take action. But equanimity is not necessarily associated with non-action. The quality of compassion engages us to act in the world, engages us to meet suffering and do something about it. Equanimity supports that action and allows us to be balanced around the results of that action. Causes and conditions come together in this world from so many different directions that we cannot guarantee our actions will produce the results we are aiming for. Equanimity allows us to be at ease with this.

The quality of equanimity is not something we can cultivate directly in a way. It's supported by conditions. It grows out of the practice. It's a result of the practice. I'd like to talk about some of the ways that equanimity does grow out of the practice.

The first way is by studying what gets in the way of equanimity, what counters it. This is one way we can study equanimity—by understanding its opposite. We can also cultivate conditions that directly support equanimity, cultivate wisdom that supports equanimity. And then there's the formal practice of equanimity, which we'll talk about perhaps briefly tonight, but then again on Tuesday night.

The practice of cultivating equanimity really does begin when we first sit down on the meditation cushion and start to see how reactive our minds are. We study what gets in the way of balance of mind by studying reactivity—reactivity to things as they are. This is one of the things the Buddha pointed to as the difference between an ordinary person and a well-instructed person. The ordinary person does not discern gain, praise, status, and so forth as it actually is. The well-instructed disciple discerns gain as it

actually is.

This term, "as it actually is," is a translation of the Pali term *yathā-bhūta*, which means something like "as it actually is" or "as it has come to be" or "things as they are." The present moment is given. It is as it is. It is things as they are. And in meeting the present moment, we rebel against it. We either want it to be different in some way, or we want it to stay. We want to hold on to it. We often struggle with things as they are, wishing they were some other way.

From Ajahn Sumedho: "It's a great relief to accept things the way they are, because the only real misery is wanting to see them in some other way."

So we push away things as they are. We're averse to them. There's that kind of reactivity. Or we hold on, wanting it to stay a certain way, trying to keep things arranged so that we can maintain the gain, the praise, the pleasure. That holding on, that clinging, actually obstructs the true meeting with that experience. In some way, that clinging actually separates us from the experience. It obstructs the balance of mind that understands this is a phenomenon that will arise and pass away.

So much of our practice has to do with meeting this reactivity. And we are cultivating equanimity every moment when we're meeting this kind of reactivity. Sometimes this is hard to see. It's hard to really take in. We're so often oriented around looking at our struggles as being what we're paying attention to that we're not noticing that along with that mindfulness of the difficulty, mindfulness of the struggle, beautiful qualities are being cultivated—the quality of mindfulness, the quality of faith, the quality of equanimity.

In fact, you might even say that during the times of difficulty in practice, the mind is actually growing much stronger. When we meet those difficulties with mindfulness, there's much more cultivation of wholesome qualities going on than when things are easy. Kind of like that story Will talked about last night—the story of the mistress and the servant, where the servant wanted to test her mistress's patience of mind. Without those tests, we don't meet the difficulties that allow us to expand our capacity for equanimity.

So we practice by meeting this, meeting these difficulties. And as we practice this, we get little glimpses of what equanimity means. We notice in observing some kind of reactivity, a wanting, that as we bring our mindfulness to it, there's a little bit of space around it. And it's not such a problem. Seeing that difficulty through a spacious mind, there is balance in the mind. And there's a shift. I know you've all experienced this kind of shift. This shift is a movement towards equanimity.

It's a beginning of seeing that quality of equanimity. Or perhaps in observing reactivity, you actually see in a moment when the reactivity vanishes. And then you get a deeper taste of this quality of equanimity, the vanishing of that reactivity. The mind opens to that space of non-reactivity.

On one retreat, I was exploring wanting, the quality of wanting in the mind, particularly when I was doing walking meditation. I was doing walking meditation out front here a lot in the early part of the

three-month course, and I really noticed, as many of you have probably noticed, that I really wanted to look at people while I was doing walking meditation. Initially, I was being a good yogi and just had blinders on—I'm not going to look—just forcing myself not to look.

At some point I realized that wanting was arising, and that since that was what was coming up, I should observe that. It took me ages to actually realize that that was what was happening and that's what I should be doing, as opposed to trying to force myself to stay with the walking while wanting was arising.

So I began to explore the wanting, to explore that quality in my mind and in my body. I didn't look—I still refrained from looking—but I began to get interested in how it arose and how it operated in my mind. I would notice that as I was doing the walking meditation, if somebody appeared in my peripheral vision, the wanting would arise as soon as that person appeared. I wouldn't look up, but I just felt the wanting. It felt like this magnetic pull. Oh, I want to look. I so wanted to look at that person. But I didn't. I just watched them in my peripheral vision, so I couldn't really tell who they were. And then they walked in front of me, up the stairs, into the building. As soon as the door closed, the wanting was gone.

That was pretty cool—to see that release from the wanting. And so for some number of days, I kind of got into watching this wanting, feeling the wanting and almost waiting for the person to disappear from my sight so I could watch the wanting disappear.

After some days of this, I finally realized that I was actually holding onto the wanting in order to see it disappear. Somebody was walking, and I noticed there was just this subtle holding onto the wanting in order to see it disappear when they walked around the corner or whatever they did. I saw in that moment that there was no need to hold onto the wanting, and the wanting vanished like that. It felt like being released from a vice grip.

This release, seeing this release from reactivity, feeling like you've been released—this is a taste of equanimity.

Through the practice of observing reactivity, as this example demonstrates to some extent, the mind begins to learn its own contribution to the reactivity. Partly we are blessed in a way because our minds actually want to move towards happiness; we just fundamentally misunderstand how that happiness is to be found. When we bring mindfulness to our experience, when we bring mindfulness to reactivity, the mind begins to understand that the reactivity is created in its own place, that the mind itself is creating that reactivity. It sees that the reactivity is the source of the suffering and that it is creating its own suffering. When it sees that, when the mind sees that, it lets go.

As the mind starts to understand this through the mindful attention to wanting and aversion, it begins to let them go slowly. It's a slow process. Over time, what we might call the gravitational pull towards greed and aversion, towards the habits and patterns that we have around pleasant and unpleasant—that gravitational pull begins to weaken. And instead, the gravitational pull to balance of mind, to

non-reactivity, grows stronger.

I remember feeling this. It was almost like feeling a rubber band at one point. I was walking back to my room on one retreat, and I saw somebody over in the woods on the side. There was an immediate sense of wanting to look at them and judge them. Even though I had no idea what they were doing or who they were, there was this feeling arising of wanting to judge them, this pull to look at them and judge them. As that pull happened, there was a stronger pull back that was like, don't need to go there. A pull towards non-reactivity, non-judgment. It just felt like a rubber band was pulling me back to center.

The practice of bringing mindfulness to reactivity is one that you're all quite familiar with at this point. In my daily life, this practice of noticing when the mind starts to move into reactivity is a huge part of my practice.

Mindfulness is relatively at a low level operating much of the time. And so if there's any movement towards reactivity, the mindfulness is often right there. What's begun to happen is that it feels almost like there's a rising of energy around the reactivity—a sense of a welling up of something. "This isn't right. I've got to change this. I've got to do this. I've got to fix this." There's a rising of energy.

And the mindfulness, it feels to me, kind of moves in and connects with that energy, like you might jump on the back of a wild horse. That energy is just a very strong movement towards reactivity. The mindfulness can meet that like jumping on the back of a wild horse—like an Aikido move in a way. The mindfulness meeting that energy and then, with a quarter turn, redirecting the energy elsewhere. The mindfulness meeting that reactivity can then be fed by the energy of that reactivity, and the mindfulness can grow and strengthen. It's quite an interesting exploration. It takes not being reactive to reactivity—just the willingness to meet that reactivity, to jump on it like jumping on a wild horse, to simply connect with the reactivity.

One powerful support for the cultivation of equanimity is mindfulness of feeling—attending to whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We've talked about this in various ways. Joseph talked about the qualities of feeling in one talk, and I referred to it in the talk on dependent origination, in which when we pay attention to feeling, we can short-circuit the seemingly automatic movement to craving. If we can bring our mindful attention to feeling tone, we can greatly support this non-reactivity, the movement of non-reactivity or non-movement of reactivity.

This is a really beautiful place to explore in our practice. It can short-circuit the movement in that chain of dependent origination. And in that seeing of feeling as it actually is—meeting pleasant, meeting unpleasant, meeting neutral with mindfulness—craving does not arise. When craving doesn't arise, clinging doesn't arise. When clinging doesn't arise, becoming doesn't arise. When becoming doesn't arise, identification doesn't arise. And nor does suffering. This is a very powerful place to practice—a direct cultivation of the quality of mind, the meeting of feeling tone that supports non-reactivity.

When we neither reject what is unpleasant nor try to hold on to what is pleasant, we are beginning to come into alignment with the truth of things as they are. And this alignment with truth allows us to simply be at ease. When we actually settle into the truth of the way things are, there's a way in which our whole system just relaxes. It's not a problem.

We can also begin to explore the terrain of equanimity through noticing what might be called its near enemy. I've just been talking about its far enemy—the far enemy of equanimity being the reactivity of greed and aversion. The near enemy of equanimity is something like indifference.

Indifference may result from a slight disconnection from experience, from just not really being there with experience. Indifference might result from a kind of not knowing, or it might result from a slight aversion to the experience. One of my friends, in exploring this in her own experience, said to me, "I've come to the understanding that the quality of equanimity isn't one of 'I don't care.'" She said, "If my mind is saying 'I don't care,' there's a little bit of pushing away there." She said the feeling of equanimity is more like, "I don't mind this." I thought that was a beautiful way to understand the distinction between indifference and equanimity.

Exploring this in your own experience, it can be subtle at times—equanimity versus indifference. Delusion can be a great mask and have us think that we're equanimous when actually there is a cloud in front of our minds. Sometimes this is called the equanimity of not knowing. In the Visuddhimagga, this is the term used for the near enemy of equanimity: the equanimity of not knowing. This not knowing is not knowing the truth of impermanence, of unreliability, of ephemerality—of anicca, dukkha, anatta.

For instance, we might feel like we're equanimous about some of our possessions, but that equanimity, that feeling of equanimity, might be based in a subtle or not so subtle feeling that we have control over our possessions. And if something happens to point out to us that we don't really have control over our possessions, that equanimity will be revealed as false equanimity.

Another way to explore this—think of it as an analogy. You have a relationship with somebody, and you feel like you're pretty balanced around that relationship. And they die. They're killed in an accident. And you don't know this.

You're still feeling a sense of balance, of peacefulness, of calm around your relationship with that person. Then say a week later, you find out that they have died. There may be a shift in your feeling to one of grief, frustration, sorrow, perhaps anger. In the week intervening, that equanimity was the equanimity of unknowing. It was not based in understanding the truth of things as they are.

What I've been exploring has been the things that are in the way of equanimity—exploring the reactivity, exploring the indifference. Now I'd like to talk about another way to cultivate and explore equanimity, and that's to understand the conditions that help bring about equanimity and to cultivate those conditions.

One of the main supports for equanimity, for the quality of equanimity to arise, is concentration. If we look at the list of the seven factors of awakening that Greg talked about, concentration precedes equanimity. So let's explore this a little bit. How does this work? How does the practice of concentration support the understanding and the experience of equanimity?

As the mind gets concentrated, settled, stabilized on experience, one of the hallmarks of the concentrated mind is that the hindrances are suppressed—the hindrances of sense desire, of hatred, of sloth and torpor, of restlessness, and of doubt. Those reactive qualities of mind are at bay when the mind is concentrated. This is one of the reasons why concentration feels so good, because those qualities of mind are not present. The mind without hindrances is a mind that is not reactive. And so you can get a taste of that flavor, the taste of equanimity, through concentration.

Now, this is a constructed kind of equanimity. It's not the equanimity of understanding. It's the equanimity of conditions coming together such that the hindrances are suppressed for a time. But it gives you a flavor of what it's like for the mind to be non-reactive. So cultivating concentration supports this quality of equanimity.

The cultivation of mindfulness also supports equanimity. As I mentioned earlier in the talk, wholesome consciousness includes—every wholesome consciousness includes—mindfulness, non-greed, non-aversion, equanimity. So the cultivation of mindfulness brings along this quality of equanimity, the continuity of mindfulness. This is perhaps talking more about the open, spacious awareness, the choiceless awareness, not necessarily about the concentration that comes from one-pointed attention on a single object, but the stability of awareness over time. With continuous mindfulness over many moments, the quality of equanimity will begin to be felt more strongly.

In a way it's kind of like this: you're experiencing just moment after moment of arising experience—a pressure, a sight, a breath, a sound, an emotion, a thought—just moment after moment of rapidly changing experience. With the mind right there with each changing experience, there's no room for reactivity. So you can get a taste, a flavor, of this balance of mind.

Some of the key supporting conditions for equanimity are wisdom and insight. There are two main understandings that are said to really deeply support equanimity, and they are an understanding of karma, which Rebecca talked about a few nights ago, and the understanding of not-self. I'd like to briefly talk about each of these and how these understandings support equanimity.

Karma, just to remind you or review a little of what Rebecca said the other night, is a natural law of cause and effect. When our actions are motivated by skillful intentions, it leads us towards happiness, towards non-suffering. When our actions are motivated by unskillful intentions, it tends to lead us towards suffering. When we choose skillfully, happiness tends to follow. When we choose unskillfully, suffering, dukkha, tends to follow.

We have these moments of choice, and oftentimes, if we're not able to be mindful, these moments of choice are not seen. Habits and patterns make our choices for us. Greed arises and makes the choice to do something. Aversion arises and makes the choice to do something. As we become more and more mindful, we begin to see that there can be a kind of insertion of wisdom into these choice points, and we can steer the ship—or rather, wisdom can steer the ship. It's not really us steering the ship, but wisdom can steer the ship in a different direction.

So how does this understanding support equanimity? I think there are two parts to how it supports equanimity. First, there's the understanding that essentially how we are experiencing the present moment—the feeling of the present moment—arises as a result of our past choices. The feeling tone, the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of the present moment, is determined by our past choices. We can't change the past. So this is part of the understanding of karma that supports equanimity.

At first glance, it may not seem to. It may seem like if I'm experiencing something in the present moment that's unpleasant, then regret would be the result of understanding karma. I made bad choices.

We seem to think that beating ourselves up in the present over something we did in the past is somehow an effective way to help us not do those things in the future. But the understanding of karma is an understanding that we can't change the past.

The second piece of it is that our response to the present moment is what creates our future. The response to the present moment is how we step forward into the future. So we have some degree of agency. As I said, wisdom can arise. When wisdom arises in the present moment and responds to that moment of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral with balance of mind, without reactivity, we are moving towards happiness instead of unhappiness.

When we deeply understand how karma functions, it supports equanimity. It's a deep recognition that it's like this due to causes and conditions.

So that's one understanding around how the understanding of karma supports the movement of equanimity in our own arising experience. There's another understanding around equanimity towards beings. The equanimity about other people, other beings, is supported by understanding that all beings are subject to the same law of cause and effect, the same law of karma, and that their happiness and unhappiness also depends upon their own choices. We can't make their choices for them. We cannot choose to make them happy. They need to make that choice. And with that understanding also comes a sense of balance of mind around the happiness and unhappiness of other beings.

It's interesting to think about and reflect on how the causes and conditions between people interweave. I had a really clear example of this on one retreat. I was doing a lot of meditation in my room, and because of my back problem, I had put a futon on the floor. I was doing most of my meditation lying on the futon. I was in a single room with my bed there, and the futon took up most of the rest of the space.

About halfway through the retreat—it was a month-long retreat—I opened my door, and there was somebody sitting on the futon on the floor in my room. There was instant confusion. I closed the door. I looked at the number on the door. Yep, it's my room. I went back in, and she said, "This is the room they assigned me to. The retreat must be full."

I said, "There's some mistake." Indeed, the manager had told her she was in my room. She had gone into my room, seen the futon on the floor, and thought, "Wow, this retreat must be really full. They're putting two people in single rooms." And she decided to move in. She had unpacked all of her things and made the bed.

I got it straightened out because I had been a manager at Spirit Rock, so I knew where to find her room assignment. The manager was off for the afternoon, so I found her correct room and got her settled.

But I kind of reflected on the amazing confluence of events that had led to this. If I hadn't been doing lying meditation on my floor, she would have walked into somebody else's room, seen there was somebody there, and gone back to the manager saying he gave her the wrong room number. If the manager had been a little more diligent and careful, he would have written down the right room number. If she hadn't been so open and willing to sleep on the floor, she never would have moved in. It just stunned me. It was like, wow, look at all of these pieces that came together, all of these threads that created that experience.

I was pretty balanced around it. I wasn't angry. I wasn't reactive. I was just amazed at how these threads interweave. Our reactivity around circumstances—typically what we do is blame somebody. Somebody else is at fault for these things. But the happiness and unhappiness of our experience, the reactivity or non-reactivity, is entirely in our own minds. It doesn't have to be at the mercy of other people's choices.

This is really the good news of karma, and the reason it supports an understanding of equanimity.

Then there's the understanding of not-self, which supports equanimity. As we begin to see very clearly that there isn't a continuous being here that chooses, decides, feels, but rather a process of choosing that chooses, a process of feeling that feels, a process of knowing that knows—we see that there is no one to defend, to protect.

There's no reason to defend or protect. There's no need for reactivity when we see that it's just a process unfolding.

The degree to which we understand this truth of not-self is the degree to which we experience equanimity. Equanimity unfolds in degrees for us. At times we feel more equanimous than others. Our practice can be looked at as an unfolding or a deepening of this understanding of equanimity. We get little tastes of it at first, begin to get a flavor, an understanding of the flavor of equanimity. We may get some more extended periods of time of equanimity.

These wisdom teachings—the teachings of karma, the teaching of not-self—can support the cultivation of

equanimity through reflection. Before we have the full understanding of these teachings, they can be used as reflections to support a movement toward equanimity. The Buddha actually teaches this. One of his main reflections is on not-self. He says often that things should be understood as they are: This is not me. This is not mine. This is not who I am. To me this seems to be encouraging this as a reflection, and I've used this in my practice at times. An emotion arises: this is not me, this is not mine, this is not who I am. We can bring in this wisdom as a reflection and it can open a little bit of spaciousness around the experience, allowing us to meet it with a little more balance of mind, a little more equanimity.

So we can use reflections on these teachings to support the cultivation of equanimity—reflection on causes and conditions. One of my favorite reflections was offered by Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "This is nature." To me, this encapsulates both karma and not-self—the process of seeing an arising experience just as a natural phenomenon. This anger is arising as a result of causes and conditions. It's simply a process, a flow of change. The seed of anger had been planted and the tree of anger is growing. This is nature. When I used this on my first retreat with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, I found it quite supportive for opening the mind to this quality of equanimity, just creating some space.

So we can use the reflection on these teachings to support equanimity. And the insights into these teachings—when we actually see clearly karma unfolding, how it works in our direct experience, not as a thought, not as a thinking about, but the direct experience of the unfolding of karma; or as we see in our experience the truth of things just being a flow of change, a flow of changing experience, no one here doing anything, choosing anything, experiencing anything, just experience experiencing—that too, that insight leads to equanimity. It opens to equanimity.

The final stage of vipassanā meditation before full awakening is said to be equanimity toward all formations. This quality of equanimity, this place of balance of mind—this is the place where, non-reactive, just meeting experience from that balance of mind, the mind can release into freedom.

I'll close with a quote from Nyanaponika Thera: "Equanimity is a perfect, unshakable balance of mind rooted in insight. But in its perfection and unshakable nature, equanimity is not dull, heartless, and frigid. Its perfection is not due to an emotional emptiness, but to a fullness of understanding, to its being complete in itself. Its unshakable nature is not the immovability of a dead, cold stone, but the manifestation of the highest strength."

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.