Brahmavihāra Practice - Equanimity (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

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So I would like to offer a few reflections about equanimity.

Equanimity is a quality of balance of mind. Other words that may resonate: non-reactivity, impartiality, acceptance, ease, non-contentiousness. It's a balance of mind that is connected to understanding.

It is said that there's a kind of equanimity based in delusion. In one of the suttas it talks about equanimity based on the household life, which is basically where you're equanimous because you don't understand what's going on. That's not what we're pointing to here. This equanimity is fully aware of what's happening, and the mind is balanced.

And yet that balance of mind is not indifference. My niece would sometimes, when she was being corrected about something, say with a roll of the eyes, "Whatever." That sounds like it should be equanimity, but with the roll of the eyes, it's not equanimity. It's not indifference; it's not "whatever" in that way.

This equanimity is fully understanding the situation. Understanding that what is here is arising based on causes and conditions. The conditioned nature of experience—the classic teaching of equanimity is really tied to the teaching of karma, the understanding that our happiness and unhappiness is connected to our actions, our choices.

In this moment, in this actual moment, what's arising right now, what we are experiencing right now, is a consequence of choices and conditions, of causes and conditions from the past, but is also related to how we are relating to it right now. This is really where the possibility for non-determinism comes into this whole cause and effect chain. How we are in this moment radically affects what is shaped going forward.

The same thing could be arising based on past conditions, and our relationship to it now can be very different—one of greed, aversion, and delusion, or wisdom, compassion, and kindness. These shape very different futures.

The classic reflection on equanimity is connected to that understanding that things are unfolding in a lawful manner. It's not a mistake, and there is some possibility of choice in the moment—stepping into how we are in this moment, stepping into the future. There is some agency, not an agency of self, but agency of this being in this moment to make a choice based on skillful tendencies, based on wisdom.

So this equanimity is rooted in understanding, rooted in insight, rooted in this deep understanding of conditionality.

The mind of equanimity allows the heart—it kind of ties the other brahmavihāras together in a way. It allows the heart to hold, deeply hold, all the joys and all the sorrows without being shattered by them, sucked under by them, drawn in, but also not indifferent, not stepping back like, "Oh yeah, no problem."

There's a way that equanimity creates a more intimate connection with what is happening. Compassion isn't really complete without equanimity. Equanimity is what's needed for the heart to fully open to suffering without resistance. Equanimity is what's needed for the heart to fully open to all the joys that are happening. Sometimes it's hard to hold the joys and the sorrows together, but that's what equanimity helps us to do. We celebrate the joys and feel the sorrows more deeply with equanimity. So it's definitely not a "whatever" or an indifferent kind of quality of mind.

In classic equanimity practice, we do it very much the way that we've been guiding in the mettā and in the compassion. The classic instructions around the brahmavihāras say that you start where it's easiest. In mettā, we tend to start with either self or the easy being. With compassion, we start with someone who is suffering, because compassion depends on our meeting suffering, and so we pick someone dear to us perhaps, where it might have an easier inroad.

In equanimity, it's said that the neutral person is the easiest person to have equanimity about. We explore the possibility of having equanimity about the unfolding journey of that person, that being. Your actions are dependent upon your choices. All beings are the owners of their actions. Your happiness and unhappiness depend upon your choices. It's that kind of reflection.

And so when we come to all beings, reflecting on that, it's almost like we're looking at the collective karma of beings. We can think of it that way—kind of collective choices that have been made. And the practice of equanimity is a recognition that whether beings are happy or unhappy is not so much about what is happening, but again, the relationship, how you are, the choices you're making.

In reflecting on this situation right now, and for me again, maybe we can play with this a little bit in our meditation, but just reflecting on the conditions of where this arose, how it happened—it's conditioned. The transmission of the virus is conditioned. It's not personal. It's just causes and conditions unfolding. And how are we with these causes and conditions? Do we become distraught, add a second, third, fourth arrow? Or do we explore opening to it with some wisdom?

In opening to the situation with wisdom, when the heart is really open, when we're exploring this possibility of being open to the conditions, the unfolding of conditions, the response of the heart that is open in that way will respond with compassion when the situation is of suffering. And will respond with joy when the situation is connected to success or well-being or happiness.

And so I think we can explore this blending—at least today that's what I'd like to see, how it works—just

explore this blending of particularly compassion and equanimity, because they're not really so separate. True compassion has got to have equanimity in it. And true equanimity will meet suffering with compassion.

When we come in, some hearts are more attuned perhaps to wisdom, or some hearts may be attuned more to the brahmaviharas. But they meet. Whichever doorway you come in, there's a bridge to the other quality.

For me in my own journey, wisdom has definitely been my doorway. And the brahmaviharas were pretty difficult for me in the early years of my practice. I didn't quite understand what the feeling of compassion was about. And yet, I just kept practicing and exploring, understanding the conditioned nature of experience. When I would sit down with people and talk to them about their practice or about their experience, I was meeting them from that place of just conditions unfolding. And so that was my experience—this sense of really being able to hold, not being afraid, not shrinking from whatever conditions were in front of me.

I was surprised when people said to me, "I so feel your compassion." This went on for a while and I kept thinking, "That's not my experience. I don't know what compassion feels like." When I talked to several of my colleagues and other teachers about it, several of them just said, "Oh, it's there, don't worry about it." That didn't work for me.

And then I had a conversation with Philip. He was so perceptive. He said, "Your mind is orienting towards wisdom and emptiness when you're meeting with people. Try orienting to the relationship, the connection."

It was stunning. The next time, and I had an opportunity ten minutes later to try it, it wasn't hard. I understood what he meant when he said I was orienting towards emptiness. And when I sat down in front of this other person, it was really simple. All I had to do was think, "I'm sitting in front of Julie. I'm sitting with Julie." The compassion was there.

That was a lesson for me around the connection of wisdom and compassion. It was there, but it was important to understand and feel that it was there.

I think the same thing can happen on the other side. If we cultivate compassion and really can hold with compassion what is happening, equanimity is being cultivated. Wisdom and understanding are being cultivated as we explore compassion, because compassion is meeting suffering. That meeting of suffering, the not shying away from suffering, the understanding of suffering—it's the first noble truth. It's intimately connected with wisdom. These two are just two sides of a coin.

So I'd like to explore—I've never done this before, tried a guided meditation like this—we'll see how it goes. Let's just settle into our postures and body, finding as comfortable a position as possible.

And letting your attention rest in the area of your heart, in your body, in this general region of your torso.

We'll begin with ourselves, holding ourselves—whatever sense of yourself is available, whether a physical sense or perhaps an image of yourself. Since we're going to start with compassion, the instruction is actually to connect to some aspect of your experience that is a little tender or challenging. Something that's not so easy. Bringing or calling dukkha into mind.

And exploring with that, calling that to mind, exploring the possibility of the wish—I'm going to change the language here instead of using "I"—may this being be free from suffering. Free from this suffering.

You can be more specific at times with the practice. It doesn't have to be "free from suffering." It can be "free from this struggle," or "may I have ease with this struggle." Holding yourself with that wish for freedom from dukkha, suffering, stress.

We'll do this in a radiating way now. Simply allowing your attention to radiate outward and take in that there are other beings near you. And knowing the kinds of things going on in your experience these days, we can extrapolate—there's some struggle going on in the beings around us. May we be free from stress.

Remembering it's the wish, not the result here. That's the piece of exploration. May we be at ease with this stress. If being free from seems impossible at this moment—we certainly cannot wave a magic wand and have the coronavirus disappear—and yet, if it were in your power, would that be your wish? That's the depth of the connection to that wish of compassion. It's the wish, not the expectation that the wish be fulfilled. It's the heart that's open to that wish. May we be free from suffering.

Allowing attention to take in all of us together in this room. Perhaps expanding to include the other retreatants who aren't here at this moment, and the managers and staff who are on the land. All of us human beings facing these concerns and uncertainties. May we be free from suffering.

And expanding further, allowing your heart to get as open as it can to take in all beings. Let's start with human beings—all human beings on this planet. Those all over the world struggling and suffering with this worldwide situation. We are joined together by this, intimately connected.

Recollecting the families who are losing people, or people in quarantine finding difficulty with food, or who are lonely and isolated. All different flavors of struggle around the planet. People in physical distress with difficulty breathing. People in fear, afraid they'll become ill. Can the heart open and hold that with this wish? May we be free from suffering.

Remembering it's the wish, not the result.

And while you're holding that—all beings, including yourself, with their struggles, stress, suffering—see what happens if you bring in an equanimity phrase: Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature. Things are just as they are right now. May I accept this as it is. May all beings accept this as it is.

Noticing for yourself what happens with that wish. The heart may become more contracted, or it may relax a little, or maybe not much is happening.

And now bringing back the compassion phrase: May we all be free from this suffering. Notice how the heart feels with that wish.

Things are as they are right now. May I accept this as it is.

May all beings accept this as it is. May all beings be free from suffering. May we all accept conditions as they are. May all beings be free from suffering.

I'll fall quiet for a while and let you play with this alternation of the compassion phrase and some version or flavor of the equanimity phrase. Explore this alternation, being aware of how the phrase lands or affects your heart, your body, your mind. If one or the other is more resonant for you, you're welcome to linger with that one for a little while, and then maybe just sprinkle in the other every now and then. See what happens. Just be attuned to how these wishes land.

When I'm exploring practice for all beings, I often find it helpful to hold the idea of all beings while letting images of beings come to mind—imagining situations with beings around the planet, specific beings—which helps me connect more fully. You could play with that as well, not just keeping it at the abstract level of "all beings," but allowing the mind to circle the globe and land somewhere, considering what might be happening there. Let an image come in and express the wish with that representative of all beings.

I'll close with a quote from Nyanaponika Thera about equanimity:

"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."

Thank you for exploring this today. May our practice be of service and support for the happiness, well-being, and freedom of all beings everywhere.

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