Equanimity

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26:04

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So we're covering equanimity this evening, and I think that completes the four illimitables, maybe. I'm not so sure I've done compassion. Well, I'll get around to it if I haven't.

According to Ñāṇaponika Thera, who was the German founding monk of the Buddhist Publication Society, to which Bhikkhu Bodhi then became the editor—he's got a massive collection of books on Buddhism. He wrote what is still a classic, The Heart of Buddhist Meditation, well worth a read. He was a follower of the Mahāsi, like myself. And he wrote another book called The Vision of the Dhamma. In it, he states that equanimity is the most important of all virtues. And I agree.

First of all, we have to understand what equanimity is. I might extend the meaning of it just a little bit. Synonyms are things like composure, calmness. It's got this word animus in the middle of it, and that's a Latin word which covers both the heart and the mind. In Buddhism, remember, when feeling arises, perception arises. When perception arises, feeling arises. The intellect and the emotional life are always working together.

What equanimity would ask us to do is not to hold on to opinions, see them more as perspectives so we're open to other people's and undermine the sense of "I'm right and everybody's wrong." From the heart's point of view, you're overcoming things like acquisitiveness, aversion, fear, preference.

If we think of a judge, we definitely don't want him to fall victim to bribery and all sorts of personal gain. We don't want her to be swayed by the clever arguments of the lawyers. We don't want her to be afraid of threats. We don't want him or her to be biased towards the accused because they just don't like them. And they have no preference as to what the verdict of the jury comes up with. They must maintain a sense of composure, unruffled poise. This is equanimity.

If we look at something like climate crisis, equanimity would stop us from becoming panicking preppers, imagining terrible scenarios. I mean, frankly, what's happening now doesn't need the imagination so much, leaves much to the imagination. We don't get angry with deniers, and we help to maintain an attitude of whatever the outcome so that we keep to our principles.

Noreen has done a set of writings on the Stoics, which relate to situations which are desperate. In such a situation, we remain calm, tranquil, stiff upper lip, that sort of thing. Not so stiff, mind.

When we look at where it's important, it stops all the social virtues from falling into the error of their near enemy. Love has its obvious enemy—hatred. But its near enemy, of course, is attachment. And what equanimity is supposed to do is to stop you doing that. Equanimity, as it were, is supporting all our virtues. If it's not there, we slip into these subtle errors.

Compassion—the obvious enemy is cruelty, but the subtle enemy is having pity, giving preference to somebody whom you have more pity for than somebody else. If you were a nurse or a doctor or a teacher even, then of course you'd upset other people by giving other people preferential treatment.

When it comes to joy, one of the obvious enemies is jealousy, because we're supposed to rejoice in the joy and success of others. But the subtle enemy would be to over-egg it, to get all excited. And again, equanimity calms us down, keeps us on the steady path, keeps the joy true to its object.

Finally, there's equanimity itself. That also has an enemy, a subtle enemy. The obvious enemy, of course, is to become completely unruffled, to lose your composure. The subtle enemy is indifference. We think we're being equanimous, but actually we're being indifferent. We're being apathetic. We're not really caring. What we do for that is depending on the situation, we raise the social virtue. If it needs friendship, you raise love. If it needs compassion or caring nature, you raise compassion.

Equanimity is something that supports all the other virtues, stops, for instance, courage falling into foolhardiness, humility dipping into this false self-effacement, a humbly humbleness, and keeps us cool. It keeps us cool, it keeps us poised, but it also keeps us warm. It keeps us engaged.

There was an occasion when I was at two monasteries—they'd happen one after the other, actually—where I was with one monk and there was a cat in the room, had obviously been playing around with a mouse and killed it. I just said, "Did you try and stop that?" And he said, "No, it's cat kamma and mouse kamma." And I went to another monastery later on, and this cat just jumped out and jumped on this bird. And this monk got up and gave the cat a great wallop. Unfortunately, he didn't save the little bird. The bird died. And he very beautifully held it up by the wings and chanted, "All compounded things arise and pass away." So which one had equanimity, you see?

Another place we find equanimity is in the factors of enlightenment. All these factors of enlightenment are supporting *sati*, the main one, supporting right awareness. We have these qualities which balance each other. We have a sense of focus, a sense of steadiness of attention, and that needs right effort. Too much effort, you get restless. Too little effort, the mind begins to wander.

Then you have this pair—the word *pīti* is translated as joy, but it's the joy of interest. Just like when you're exploring anything, when you're interested in anything, that's a joyous mental state. And that needs calmness. Again, it stops the interest becoming excited. Too much calmness, you fall asleep. Too little calmness, you get all excited and restless.

The final two are the investigation of the Dhamma, which, when you're sitting, are the three

characteristics of existence—impermanence, how we create suffering for ourselves, the *dukkha*, and not-self, insubstantiality. And that's balanced with equanimity. It stops us trying to see something. It stops us over-efforting and it keeps us cool. It keeps us objective in our investigation.

When it comes to *vipassanā*, whenever we practice *vipassanā*, as we'll do tonight a little bit, there has to be this quality of equanimity. You'll notice that in those seven factors of enlightenment, there isn't any love, there isn't any compassion. We can presume that that's there as an underlying purpose because we want to escape suffering. So that's an act of compassion towards ourselves. But it's not directly involved in the process of insight.

But in *vipassanā*, we have this *upekkhā*, this equanimity. If we get up from a practice and we go straight into daily life, then the danger of *upekkhā* falling towards its near enemy is there. It becomes a sort of aloofness, an inability to fully engage. And the way we overcome that is by doing *mettā*.

In ordinary daily life, after you've done your hour or two hour meditation in the morning, you then bring to mind the people whom you're going to visit, you're going to meet during the day, and you offer them this loving kindness. And especially to those whom you're having some problems with. And of course, you do it again at night after your two to three hour meditation session.

Finally, there's the four worldly conditions, sometimes referred to as the four worldly winds: gain and loss, disrepute and fame, blame and praise, pleasure and pain.

When it comes to gain and loss, sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. I mean, playing games at school really helps us to become acquainted with those two mental states. What equanimity does—it stops getting excited about gaining too much and we don't get depressed when we lose. It's a way of being unruffled. It stops us overreacting, that's all.

When the Buddha, for instance, was asked how did he feel when somebody rejected his teaching, or at least didn't respond to his teaching, he said it was fine. According to him, it was the person's *kamma*. But when somebody actually did follow, he said he felt joy. So that's that sympathetic joy, the joy of knowing that somebody was on the path to liberation.

When it comes to having a fame or infamy, a good reputation, we all want a good reputation. We all want people to have a feeling that we're good people, that they respect us. And when we find somebody's slipped us a little slander, said things that even if it's only a small thing, we find it humiliating. We get angry about it and we do the same to them. But equanimity stops you doing that. You just accept it. That's the way it is. And we try not to fall into that error ourselves, of course.

At that time, they used to have these meetings on the full moon night, which were debates between the various teachers and philosophers, the Brahmins. And seemingly that was the big night out. I mean, this is before reading and writing, radio, TV, internet. I mean, what did people do before all that? Well, they used to, in the East anyway, gather on a full moon night and listen to these talks.

The Buddha warned his monastics not to get involved in these events. And this is some of the verses that he tells them:

"Desiring debate, they plunge into an assembly where each takes the other as a fool. Relying on others, they state their contention, desiring praise while claiming to be experts. Addicted to debating in the midst of an assembly, their need for praise makes them nervous. But when they're repudiated, they get embarrassed. Upset at criticism, they find fault in others. In their doctrine, if their doctrine is said to be weak, the judges declare it repudiated, the loser weeps and wails, moaning, 'They beat me.' When these arguments come up amongst ascetics, they get excited or dejected, seeing this refrain from contention. The only purpose is fame and profit."

There's the Buddha telling us not to get involved in these argumentations.

The next one would be blame and praise. Whenever you get blamed, even if it is your fault, it's not very nice. It hurts. Actually speaking, when something goes wrong, we shouldn't be blaming people. We should be asking, how did it happen? What we're looking for is a solution so that that particular incident doesn't happen again.

For instance, we had an occasion, we've had, I think, two of our rice cookers ruined because the bowl wasn't inside and the assistant just put the food straight into the cooker. So it went everywhere right into the machinery, into the electrics. We tried to save both of them. It was impossible. So now recognizing that that mistake is done, it's easy to do. We now leave an empty bowl next to the cooker so that when the other bowl is taken out to be washed and the person comes in, they recognize that there's no bowl in the cooker. And so far so good. We've got to keep our fingers crossed on that. There's no good blaming people. You have to find out how the mistake was made, how it came about, and then you just correct it, as simple as that.

On this business of praise and blame, there's a story of a Zen monk. He entered a village. He was a local monk. He lived in his own little hut somewhere, and he came into the village for alms. Suddenly, this young woman accused him of making her pregnant. He was silent. When the baby was born, they took it to his dwelling and he received it without saying anything. And he nurtured it. Well, of course, over time, especially the young woman wanting her baby back, the truth came out. So all the villagers went back and apologized and took the baby back and he gave it to them and he never said a word. So that's how we can deal with praise and blame.

The final one, of course, is pleasure and pain. We're always seeking pleasures and we're always trying to get away from pain. And these days, with our consumerism and all that and our adverts always wanting to make us excited, basically, we just want more. It doesn't matter what it is. We just want more of it. And so we tend to get lost in that greediness.

But that doesn't mean to say that we shouldn't appreciate a joy when it arises or a pleasure when it arises.

But the trick, of course, is to remind ourselves that it's over. It's gone. It's finished. It cannot be repeated. This is the big thing. You can't repeat a joy. Make something like it, but you can't repeat it. So you just let go of it. That's it. It's fine. And what equanimity does, of course, is it stops these unnecessary reactions. It rides on acceptance. This is the way it is. Things arise and pass away. You can't repeat anything. A joy will come and a joy passes. If I remember Blake's little phrase, "To kiss a joy as it flies is to live in eternity's sunrise." Well, that's the trick.

We have a little verse here from the Buddha telling us about this, the four worldly conditions or winds:

"Gain does not obsess their minds and loss does not obsess their mind. Fame does not obsess their mind and disrepute does not obsess their mind. Blame does not obsess their mind and praise does not obsess their mind. Pleasure does not obsess their mind and pain does not obsess their minds. They're not attracted to gain or repelled by loss. They're not attracted to fame or repelled by disrepute. They're not attracted to praise or repelled by blame. They're not attracted to pleasure or repelled by pain. Having thus discarded attraction and repulsion, they are freed from birth, from old age and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection and anguish. They are freed from suffering, I say."

So having gone through these qualities, the quality of equanimity, how it's part of the seven factors of enlightenment, how we use it in our *vipassanā* practice and these four worldly winds, how do we actually develop it as an exercise?

Very much the same as *mettā*. In fact, exactly the same as *mettā*. You have certain well-wishings and you offer it to a benefactor and so on and so forth. And that's what I thought we would do now. And we'll just slip into the meditation.

You can carry on doing this until we get to the refuges and precepts or just decide to do *vipassanā* whenever you think so.

What I've got here are four adjectives. And you can formulate your own, you can add, you can take away. The first one I put is may I be calm. This refers to physical realization, loosening body tensions, calming the heart with the out-breath, just relax. So that's the underpinning of equanimity.

Peace loving. This refers to an attitude of always wanting to engender an underlying sense of safety and peacefulness.

Open. This refers to an attitude of being able to receive other people's opinions and not see them as trying to indoctrinate us. It's just being open to other people's opinions. Our own opinions may be nuanced, may change, who knows? But it's about not clinging to our little "I'm right and everybody else is wrong." And to engage with people. I mean, these days, when you look at the political situation, it's just A against B, like there's no meeting place. And it's a matter of really just people relaxing around that.

And finally, composure. It's a basic posture, a serene, unruffled poise.

May I be calm, peace-loving, open, and composed. May I be calm, peace-loving, open, and composed.

I'll guide us through the various categories, and then we'll go straight into the meditation.

May I be calm, peace-loving, open and composed. Calm, peace-loving, open and composed. Calm, peace-loving, open and composed.

We can bring to mind some of our benefactors. Those who are near and dear to us. Friends, people at work, whomever we're with. There's that character, there's that neutral person, someone we see but don't know, that category.

Turning towards ourselves.

Come on, we may have some difficulty here — offering our goodwill to each other, our equanimity. May we, to all our neighbours and neighbourhoods, to all the people in our country, all the peoples of Europe, all people on earth and finally to all beings in all directions.

So *upekkhā*, equanimity, is a tremendously important quality. It's one of the *brahmavihāra*, the divine abodes, along with *mettā*, *karuṇā* and *muditā* — loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy. And it's also one of the seven factors of enlightenment, the *bojjhaṅga*. So it has a very high standing in the Buddha's teaching.

The literal meaning of *upekkhā* is "looking on" — *upa* meaning "over" or "upon", and *ikkhā* meaning "seeing" or "looking". So it's this quality of being able to look on with balance, with equanimity, not being pulled this way and that by our reactions and emotions.

Now, equanimity is sometimes misunderstood. People think it means being cold, detached, indifferent — but that's not what the Buddha meant at all. True equanimity is warm. It's a balanced state of mind that includes wisdom and love. It's not pushing away or suppressing our feelings, but rather holding them with awareness and acceptance.

The opposite of equanimity would be reactivity — being constantly thrown off balance by whatever arises. When something pleasant happens, we get excited and attached. When something unpleasant happens, we get upset and push it away. When something neutral happens, we get bored or restless. This constant reactive pattern keeps us suffering.

But with equanimity, we can remain centered whatever arises. We can appreciate the pleasant without clinging to it. We can acknowledge the unpleasant without being overwhelmed by it. We can stay present with the neutral without needing constant stimulation.

This doesn't mean we become passive or don't care about anything. Equanimity actually allows us to respond more wisely because we're not caught up in our emotional reactions. We can see situations more clearly and act from wisdom rather than from impulse.

In meditation, equanimity manifests as that quality of balanced awareness. We're neither trying to get rid of thoughts and sensations, nor are we getting lost in them. We're simply aware, simply present, allowing things to be as they are while maintaining our center.

And this is really the fruit of all our meditation practice. As we develop mindfulness and concentration, as we see more clearly the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of all phenomena, naturally equanimity arises. We begin to understand that everything is in constant flux, that clinging to anything only causes suffering, and so we learn to hold everything lightly.

This is the wisdom aspect of equanimity — seeing things as they truly are. And the love aspect is that we don't withdraw from life or from others. Instead, we engage with greater openness and acceptance, knowing that everyone is struggling in their own way, everyone is trying to find happiness and avoid suffering, just as we are.

So may we all cultivate this beautiful quality of equanimity — this balanced, wise, loving awareness that allows us to meet whatever arises in life with grace and understanding.

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