Brahmavihāra Day 22: Cultivating Equanimity (Upekkhā)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 49:04

We'll use this period to cultivate the quality of equanimity in our own hearts and minds. I want to talk a little bit about equanimity and how it works as this kind of practice.

First, by equanimity, what we mean is a specific mental factor in Buddhism—a quality of mind, just as compassion is a specific mental factor and muditā is a specific mental factor. Mettā comes under non-hatred, under a broader realm, but equanimity is a specific mental factor. The word in Pali—one I really like—is *tatramajjhattatā*, which basically means keeping in the middle of all things. I have this image of the human standing in the middle of heaven and earth, all things in equipoise. This mental factor, which goes into upekkhā equanimity, is considered present in any wholesome state of heart and mind. There are quite a few mental factors that are always present in such states, and equanimity, *tatram ajjhattatā*, is one of them—this perfect balance of mind. It's associated with pure consciousness. It affects the balance of the mind that's really present but not pulled into reactivity by whatever circumstances are arising.

In terms of cultivating this as a brahmavihāra, what we're doing is calling up that quality, inclining our mind in that direction, and then strengthening it with the same focus we've been doing with the other three. As we keep bringing attention to that inclining, to that quality, it gets stronger and stronger until it can begin to, as they say, radiate in all directions. It becomes boundless in that way. As it strengthens into brahmavihāra, it becomes what is called an unshakable balance of mind.

So equanimity, *tatramajjhattatā*, being something that arises whenever there's a pure heart-mind, is something we all experience. But this strengthening into the unshakable quality—where it comes to the forefront and we really experience it—is something we focus on in the equanimity brahmavihāra. Of course, in vipassanā practice or other one-pointed practices, it would also be arising and strengthening. You'll hear tonight when Bonnie talks about the seven factors of awakening—equanimity is one of those as well. So it shows up in different ways in how we talk about our experience.

Here, as brahmavihāra, it's a little bit different in the way my mind conceptualized doing it from the other three. We go through the same beings in slightly different order, but it's not so much that I'm wishing you equanimity. When I was first doing it and trying that approach, it didn't make any sense. What we're doing is cultivating that quality of really loving connection that is standing in the middle of all things, that's non-reactive—towards ourselves, towards any being. To be honest, it sometimes is a little bit

challenging.

Let me read something from Nyanaponika Thera. He says equanimity is the perfect, unshakable balance of mind. It's rooted in insight, rooted in wisdom. It's not disconnected, heartless, "who cares?" That's not equanimity—that's the so-called near enemy: indifference. When you really feel equanimity and then go into indifference, you can tell the difference, just like with all the near enemies and the beautiful states. It's really obviously different. But until we recognize it, it's so easy to slide into indifference and still be thinking it's equanimity.

I've noticed this actually in my life, even more than as a brahmavihāra practice. There will be a period, however long, where equanimity is rooted in wisdom. The heart is open. The mind is connected to oneself, to whatever's occurring, or if it's about a being, to that being. There's definitely that sense of connection and a tendency to feel what's happening—it's not like, "Oh yeah, that's kind of tough that happened. Well, we're all the owners of our karma." That's the phrase, and it's easy to slip into that. But there's this radiant calm, really connected. The subtle disconnect can come in at first without noticing.

I've had periods in life where I'm feeling really connected, and all the joys and sorrows of my life and the people I'm connected with come, and you feel it but don't really get thrown off balance—really equanimity. As time goes, it changes. That's always going to happen. And maybe the wisdom factor goes down, the energy goes down. I start to think, "Yeah, well, the mind's equanimous. It's all cool."

I'm just flowing with it. And that little extra awareness, the living awareness that always accompanies wisdom, starts to fade. It's like you're coasting—coasting on the wisdom of the day before. Can you relate to that at all? Yesterday, it was all happening without any effort. So that's how it is now. But it isn't like that now.

As it starts to slide into indifference, I often wouldn't notice it. Then suddenly I'd realize—not so suddenly. Maybe after an hour. After three months, really. I'm not exaggerating. Sometimes everything is mellow and I think, "Oh wait, it's really disconnected." It's moved into a state where I'm not really touched by things anymore. That's not equanimity. That's indifference.

So it's subtle. We explore this in the Brahmavihara practice and in our broader practice, because equanimity is really the culmination of wisdom. It's rooted in wisdom. The far enemy of equanimity is reactivity. And one of the effects of this practice—what can sometimes make Brahmavihara practice challenging—is that the far enemy often gets highlighted. You may have noticed that in the other practices as well.

Sometimes I'll offer certain phrases and you'll see how reactivity could get triggered. And sometimes it does. "What do you mean, you're the heir to your actions and my wishes can't make you happy? What do you mean by that? What's the point?" And the mind goes off into reactivity.

This is where it becomes really important to recognize: this is the practice of cultivating equanimity in

relationship to ourselves or another being in a particular circumstance. But it's really about seeing that quality in our own mind and heart—not so much "I wish it for you," but rather seeing how I am with you in this experience, recognizing that I can't control your happiness and suffering.

I have found that coming to touch this in intensive practice, at times it's fantastic, it's so beautiful. And at other times, it really brought up in me a kind of reactivity, or almost a fear, which is a kind of reactivity. It seems so bald, perhaps. So this is how it is. The classic phrase is: "I, you, all beings are the heirs, the owners of your actions, of your karma. Your happiness and unhappiness arises from your actions, not from my wishes for you." It's a long, drawn-out phrase, although I came to really appreciate it. I'll offer you a few others, and on the notice board there's a list of different equanimity phrases, so you might find one that connects for you.

Nyanaponika describes equanimity as the perfect, unshakable balance of mind rooted in insight—but it is not dull, heartless, or cold. The perfection is not due to emotional emptiness, emotional disconnect, or not caring, but to the fullness of understanding, to its being complete in itself.

In a way, as James alluded to this morning, when we talk about the four Brahmaviharas, one way of thinking about it is that equanimity is the factor that brings the vastness and the unconditional all-beings nature to the other three Brahmaviharas.

With metta, for instance, people often say, "How can we wish 'may all beings be happy'? That's impossible." You've all thought that as soon as you start thinking about it. Equanimity doesn't make it possible that all beings can be happy. Rather, it's seeing the vastness. We can't understand the vastness, but at some point, any being has happiness. At another point, any being has sorrow. At another point, we wish well for all beings. Equanimity brings in this vastness, knowing we can't control it. It's not going to ever all be the same for everyone. But there's this vastness of seeing.

From the Buddha's point of view, he's seeing aeons and world cycles coming and going in incredible vastness. We don't have to go there. I suppose if one could really see on that level, it gives a kind of vastness to our momentary sufferings and happinesses. But it's not that. It's just knowing that we're all going to experience all of it at different times—not the same for all of us and not in equal measure, God knows. But that equanimity brings the vastness.

The knowing rooted in wisdom allows us, at times when there's so much suffering that we're opening to, not to drown in sorrow or reactivity. Equanimity gives us that vastness of "this is how it is now," which allows the heart and mind to be present.

With appreciative joy, again, it's equanimity that allows us not to just get totally lost in "woo-hoo, isn't this fantastic?" and then plummet the other way. Instead we can hold the awareness that this person's happy, but that person's not—just that vastness. I'm saying many different things here. I don't want you to think about it too much. I'm just trying to paint a different picture of equanimity, of its vastness.

The wisdom that's often described, or the experience that's often talked about with equanimity, is in very simple terms the recognition that we all go through, at different times, what the suttas describe as the eight worldly winds. Probably many of you have heard of this. The eight opposing conditions: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, praise and blame, fame and disrepute—being really well thought of, or being completely dismissed with everyone saying "oh yes, they're so bad."

You can see how these can flip back and forth for any one of us, and sometimes really quickly. And again, it's back to the first noble truth. When we're having praise and it flips to blame, it's so shocking. How could that happen? But it happens all the time. We don't even have to go to Twitter and online platforms to see this. I feel so sorry now for famous people, because as soon as they're famous, it's almost like they're set up to be shot down. Who can find something bad to say? And then it's all over the internet.

But it's useful—fun may not be the right word—but when you tune into watching this in your own life without taking it so personally, it really starts to bring in the equanimity. In terms of being in this seat, with our job being to teach and share things, there are times... I remember years ago doing an interview group in another country, and for some reason the people in the group were feeling quite free to share their opinions. One started, "I really didn't like your talk. I really didn't like the humor." They went on and on, and I'm going, "Okay." And then the next person said, "I really loved the humor"—the very thing the other person was hating. You can't land on any of it. This is equanimity. You don't land, you don't make praise and blame, pleasure and pain into something solid. It can flip just like that.

So equanimity is the vastness of wisdom, the vastness of heart that can recognize it all and can be with the joy and be with the sadness and be with the flatness and be with the beauty without falling into reactivity. That's just what we're cultivating.

There's one more piece. There's a sutta where the Buddha is giving advice to his son Rahula, who became a monk at a young age. He's giving him advice about these four brahmaviharas. He said to Rahula: the practice of mettā abandons the habit of ill will in the mind; that of karunā, compassion, abandons the habit of cruelty; that of muditā, appreciative joy, abandons the habit of discontent; and upekkhā, equanimity, abandons the habit of aversion. I don't actually think it's that limited, but it's interesting to see these subtle differences.

So that's all I want to say in introducing it. The way we practice equanimity as a brahmavihara follows the same form. We start with the neutral person, then we go to ourselves, and then we go through the same groupings—self, benefactor, friend, difficult person, and all beings.

When I first was doing it, I'd been practicing intensive mettā and then the other three brahmaviharas, and then equanimity. So I was trying to radiate to that person "all beings are the heirs of their actions"—trying to radiate that wisdom out to them. It didn't fit, because that's not what it's about. It's really connecting to the person, to the sense of the person, just like we've been doing. And then, rather than thinking about it conceptually, it may be easier to hold the whole person with the awareness: "Your happiness and your

unhappiness arise from your actions, not from my wishes for you."

It depends on my wishes for you. And so when I was doing it, at first that was a really long phrase. I'll say it again: All beings are the owners or the heirs of their own actions or karma—karma just means action, intentional action. Your happiness or unhappiness springs from your actions, not from my wishes for you. That's the classical phrase.

So that's one that often triggers reactivity. We offer other phrases because if you go right into reactivity, it isn't helpful. Of course, reactivity may come up later, and we play with that, we explore that. But anyway, when I first started with that phrase, I found it long. But then—and this may not connect for you at all—I came to love it because I found that one phrase included all four Brahma Viharas in it.

So when I'd start with "you"—that's the neutral portion—"you're the owner of your actions," that was the connectedness of metta, just connect. Yes, you're the owner of your actions. But I'm not saying it as a punishment; I'm actually feeling in my own heart, you're the owner of your actions, your happiness—and then I would feel mudita. Or your unhappiness—I would feel compassion. It comes from your actions, not from my wishes. "Not from my wishes" is like the letting go that somehow I can control or fix, but it's not the letting go of disconnect. Do you get a sense of what I mean? Just play with it. I know I'm saying a lot. Don't overthink it.

So it may be that you connect and feel a sense of the whole person. That's fine. Another way could be, whether it's neutral—where you may not know so much specific—or when we come to ourself and then benefactor, if we get that far today, you connect to yourself, connect to that person, and there may be a specific aspect going on in their life that pops into your mind. It may be a suffering aspect, a happy aspect, or something you wish they would kind of clean up their act. You know, whatever it is—you've been through all of that with a person in all the other ways. So let that come up, and then we're holding the sense of really connecting to them, including this aspect. But the equanimity is like really knowing: your happiness and unhappiness, I can't control by my wishes; it arises from your own actions. Still, I'm here with you.

I wrote down a couple other phrases. "I care for you, but cannot control or keep you from suffering." But equanimity also includes happiness—it's not just about suffering. "I wish you happiness, but cannot make your choices for you." These are more modern ones. Some people find this works: "Things are as they are right now." Just this simplicity of being fully present with the sense of the person, whatever's going on, staying really connected. Things are as they are right now. "However I might wish otherwise, I cannot control your suffering. I cannot change this for you."

This is not about what we do or don't do. This is cultivating this quality of radiant, connected presence that isn't pushing and pulling, but that's really there in connection with someone. "I care for you, but I cannot control your happiness or unhappiness." "May I accept things as they are right now." "May I be—or may we be—undisturbed by the comings and goings of life." "I care for you, but cannot keep you from

suffering." "I care for you, but cannot make you be happy." You get the idea. Those are the main ones, and there are some others out there. Find what works for you.

So it may be that you have a sense of the whole person or your whole self. Or when you come to self, maybe it's a particular thing going on. And notice, it doesn't have to be a suffering thing—it could be a happy thing that we're getting all attached to. And that's also reactivity.

So, you know, just okay—may I be with things as they are. I care for myself, but... And it's a little trickier when it's with ourselves. It's more like, may I accept things as they are. Even for ourselves, our happiness and unhappiness arises from our actions, not from our wishes—which is what we've hopefully been seeing really clearly here.

Now, that's going to make you confused. When we're saying with metta, "may I be happy," it feels like a wish, right? But it's an action of mind. It's actually inclining the intention of mind away from "this is hopeless" to "may I be happy." That's an action of mind. A wish would be sitting down and saying, "I wish I would just quit liking chocolate. I just wish I would." And then we go and eat as much chocolate as we want. "Oh, I wish I would quit liking chocolate." We don't do anything about it. That would be about my wishes. It's not about my wishes—it's about my actions. But anyway, don't overthink it.

All right, so let's just start simply. We start with the neutral person, and then we'll come to ourselves. Just have patience with it, because it's not such an immediate big emotional feeling. We're looking for this radiant calm. Find the way that you have been just landing here in this moment.

Of course, starting with simply however the body feels, however the heart and mind feels. It's like this right now. It's just like this. That cool connectedness of non-reactivity is what takes us into the deepest peace of awakening. It's what allows for that. So just simply connecting.

We do start by bringing to mind whoever you've been using as the so-called neutral person. Whatever helps you connect—just connecting with them as a whole being in metta, or focusing on some aspect of their happiness, or their suffering, and the other two. See what comes up for you now in terms of bringing into heart, to mind, this person, this so-called neutral.

What we're cultivating is this even-mindedness—really connected and even, able to be with all aspects. I care for you, but I cannot control your happiness and unhappiness. You are the owner of your actions, the owner of your kamma. Your happiness and unhappiness springs from your actions, not from my wishes for you. May I be with things as they are.

So now, just taking some time exploring what it's like to do this for a little bit. Remembering, though, the first step is that connecting. It's not a disconnected "ah, whatever." Really connecting. You're the owner of your actions. May I be really present with you, knowing your happiness and unhappiness does not depend on my wishes for you.

If you feel like exploring, move to yourself. Maybe go back and forth if you get too involved, but just see how it is. With ourselves, it may be something particular—maybe there's a particular incident going on in our mind or in our life. Don't go looking, but something that pops up, or maybe just the way you're feeling right now, whatever.

Connecting with yourself, whether it's the classic phrase—"I am heir to my actions, my happiness and unhappiness springs from my actions, not from my wishes"—or "May I meet this with balance, may I be with things as they are," or just simply, "Things are as they are."

Exploring meeting this sense of ourselves with this connected balance of mind. Just playing with it, exploring. If you get lost, if it doesn't feel energized enough, if you're just lost in thought, take a moment to stop, reconnect. You could go to the neutral person again if you get lost in stories about yourself. Come back, just exploring this possibility of being really present with this steady, accepting wisdom quality of heart, of mind.

May I accept things just as they are right now.

May all beings know peace and the causes of peace.

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