Brahmavihāra: Equanimity

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:52

This afternoon we're going to complete the series of the Brahmavihāra instructions with instructions for equanimity, which is the fourth of the Brahmavihāras. In a way it's rather an odd Brahmavihāra, because it's not in itself emotional. It doesn't have that quality of love, compassion, or joy that the other three possess. So it kind of sticks out, and you might wonder what it's doing in the Brahmavihāras, but I'll explain that as we explore it more deeply.

Equanimity is one of the highest mundane states in the realm of the Buddha's teachings. The highest state is the non-mundane or supramundane or transcendent state of nibbāna—the unconditioned, the goal that the path of liberation leads to. But short of that attainment, equanimity is probably the highest state on the journey to nibbāna. It is the last of the Brahmavihāras. It is the seventh of the seven factors of enlightenment. It is the tenth of the ten pāramīs. In the Progress of Insight described by the Visuddhimagga, it is the last stage before enlightenment in that sequence of unfolding. So it's a very highly regarded quality of mind in the teachings of the Buddha.

So what is it? When I first heard the term and explored equanimity, I thought it meant absence of emotion. I thought it referred to a kind of deadness, the sort of feeling you might associate with a stone Buddha—about as much feeling as a stone Buddha would have. That's equanimity. But that's a real misunderstanding.

Actually, a better word to get into the feeling of equanimity is balance—balance of mind. If you look back over your experience of these five days, when your mind was in balance, how did that feel? And let me ask by contrast, when the mind is in balance, what's not happening? What's absent? Reactivity.

Usually the mind is caught up in these swings of grasping or aversion, of liking or disliking, and that's what creates the sense of being tossed around on the turbulent waves of our emotions. When the reactive formations of grasping and aversion die down, then the mind is said to be in balance, and we're not subject to so much push and pull.

In those times, does that feel good or bad? It feels pretty good, doesn't it? Because it brings in a quality of peace that we don't always have in daily life. When your mind is in balance, is mettā more or less accessible? It's more available, isn't it? When grasping and attachment aren't swinging us and the mind can rest, isn't there a natural ease with mettā, with compassion, with joy?

This quality of balance, rather than making the mind dead, makes it responsive, makes it sensitive, makes that natural flow of love, compassion, and joy easy—makes them open up in a really unforced and

uncontrived way. So this is the role of equanimity in the Brahmavihāras. It supports the emergence of the other three. When it's not there, it's hard to find the other three. But when it is there, they can come out easily and naturally.

Also, because of the peace and calm of it, equanimity prevents the other Brahmavihāras from tipping over into their near or far enemies. So equanimity supports the purity of the other three Brahmavihāras and discourages the hindrance aspects of the near and far enemies of the other three. It's really needed as we deepen and strengthen this practice.

The word equanimity is a translation of the Pali word upekkhā. And you'll see it on the name of the fourth dhamma hall: mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā. The etymology of upekkhā is "looking on." So you get that sense that it's a kind of meditative state that's looking on. It's in touch with things that are coming and going, but it's not being thrown around by them all because there's this quality of observation that's happening.

That's the sense—that upekkhā is settled back, looking on to everything that's going on, but not caught in it. It's a mind that's not caught in the arisings. So there's a kind of coolness in upekkhā, a kind of cooled-out quality. One of the synonyms for nibbāna is coolness. So you can see that it's getting close in the mundane realm to that transcendent quality of peace, the peace that can't be broken or disturbed.

But if it gets too cool, then it fades into its near enemy, which is indifference. As a Brahmavihāra, the near enemy of upekkhā is indifference—"Okay, I'm not moved by what's going on, so I don't care about it."

So somebody could be suffering next to me, but I'm cool. I don't mind. It doesn't bother me. But that lacks compassion—it lacks the warmth of compassion. So that's indifference.

True upekka has the support of the other brahmavihāras. So if someone is suffering, the movement of compassion comes through. If we look on someone who's suffering and the movement of compassion isn't felt, then there's some quality of indifference going on, and compassion has slid into its near enemy.

So just as metta and compassion and appreciative joy need upekka to support them, upekka needs metta, compassion, and joy to warm it. Otherwise it gets too cooled out and too laid back. We're really looking for a balance in the mind that has warmth and balance at the same time. That's the critical role that upekka or equanimity plays in all the brahmavihāras.

All the brahmavihāras can be practiced intensively the way that you're practicing metta this week. Someone asked about this in an interview today. We could do a seven-day retreat on compassion. We could do a seven-day retreat on mudita. We could do a seven-day retreat on equanimity. Those are powerful things to do.

I once took a six-week period where I spent ten days on each of the four brahmavihāras. It was very interesting. This practice of equanimity especially was so insightful because it is basically a wisdom

reflection.

Equanimity in vipassana practice is mainly developed around not being so moved by pleasant and unpleasant experiences at the sense doors, the six sense doors. But in brahmavihāra practice, equanimity is about not being so disturbed by what's happening in the lives of sentient beings—ourselves and others—as it alternates between pleasure and pain.

We apply it to the same people that we've applied our metta practice to, in compassion and joy. We notice how, as beings meet their joys and sorrows, they go through stages of happiness and unhappiness in response to the joys and sorrows. And we get either elated or distressed about what they go through as well as what we go through. Those are the near and far enemies of compassion and joy.

This practice of equanimity—what we're doing is looking at the ways people meet their joys and sorrows and finding our own peace of mind in relation to it. It doesn't mean that everything terrible that happens to somebody, we say, "Oh, that's okay that that happened." You know, somebody took advantage, hurt someone else, stole from them, robbed them, assaulted them. "Oh, that's okay that that happened." It's not that—that would be the deadness of indifference.

But we find an ability to remain at some peace in ourselves, even as we look at all the different joys and sorrows that happen in the world. That peace or balance gives us greater ability to act appropriately in the world, whether it's to speak to someone who's causing harm or to take action for social justice, environmental justice, and so forth. Again, it's not a deadening or a turning away, but it's a strengthening with balance in the midst of the joys and sorrows of life.

The classical phrase used in the teachings to develop equanimity is a challenge for most Westerners, but I'm going to give it to you straight up. No pulling punches with this group. The classical phrase is: "Beings are the owners of their actions. Their happiness or unhappiness comes from their past actions more than from my wishes for them." This is a statement of the law of karma.

It's saying that basically beings meet happiness and unhappiness based on their karma. Now I want to say that as I understand this, this is a very broad brushstroke teaching. The Buddha never said that everything that happens in a person's life is because of karma. We might think that. You get ill and a friend says, "Oh, that's your bad karma coming back." You ever have friends like that? Not accurate. The Buddha never said anything like that.

But very broadly speaking, you can see, especially in the realm of the heart and mind, the habits that we act on over and over again become the direction of our hearts and minds. Someone who acts from loving kindness and compassion and generosity—the mind becomes brighter and happier. Someone who acts from greed and hatred and confusion—the mind becomes darker. So it's in that general sense.

But I would never say something like, "Well, every baby who was born into the Holocaust and was killed, that was because of their bad past karma." We can't—I could never know that, and the Buddha never said

anything like that. So don't take karma as a rearview mirror.

You know, something happens now, and we think, "Oh, let me look back and think about what might have caused that." It doesn't work for us to do it. We can't see, we can't know. Take karma as a forward view, a pathfinder. This is the forward GPS. If we act in loving, kind, generous ways now, then positive results will come back to us in our lives, and we can trust in that.

So in that broad brushstroke, you can see how to some extent beings meet their joys and sorrows according to the unfolding of their past actions, especially their mental actions. But for a lot of people, this just doesn't make sense. It's too cold and distant. So there are lots of other ways to talk about the equanimity phrase.

Another nice one is to say, "Beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature." And we understand there are lots of laws operating in this nature. The law of karma is one, but there are physical laws, there are chemical laws, there are biological laws, there are laws of physics. If a car hits a person, the person ends up not feeling so healthy. So all these laws play in, and it just illustrates that what happens in our life comes from many, many causes and conditions.

What that does when we see it is it takes out the idea that I can control this. We have this underlying assumption. Ego has this underlying assumption: I should be controlling my happiness or unhappiness. But it doesn't work. As you can see from this week, we don't have much control over what goes through our hearts and minds. But we understand that our hearts and minds are formed from many past causes and conditions. And the equanimity practice is built on that acknowledgement and deepening of that insight.

So the classical way is to mention the teaching of karma, but there are other ways to say it that don't have to depend on karma. So I'll just mention a few. "Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature." Or, "All beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature."

An even simpler way is, "Things are just as they are." This is a great equanimity phrase. Who can argue with that, right? Things are just as they are. Yet it brings that sense of acceptance or being at peace with.

Another way to say it, doing a Brahmavihara for someone is, "I care for you, but I can't control your happiness or unhappiness. No matter how I might wish things to be otherwise, things are just as they are."

A very simple way to say it is, "May I accept things just as they are? May I accept this just as it is?" All these phrases have the flavor of equanimity, and that's the important thing—to bring our own heart and mind into some acknowledgement of the truth of what is now. It doesn't mean we don't work to change that in the future, but right now to come into peace with it, we develop this quality of equanimity.

Another difference with equanimity as a Brahmavihara is we're not sending it to other people. We're not trying to make them equanimous. We're trying to find equanimity ourselves in relation to their life.

So then you can start to see how it offsets the near enemy of compassion, which is despair or grief about the overwhelm of suffering. "May I come into balance myself with the way things are for this person?" Or with mudita, the far enemy of envy, when somebody seems to be doing a little too well, a little too happy in their life, then this quality of balance lets that be the way it is. And understand that maybe there were particular laws that brought those conditions into effect for that person.

So this is the understanding behind the equanimity practice. As we get into the meditation, I'll mention the phrases again so you don't have to remember them all. And then they'll be posted along with all the others on the board outside so you can take a look at them later.

So, ready to dive in? Okay.

And I have to say, I find this a really powerful practice. When carried out, it does have the quality of bringing more peace into the mind. With all the different Brahmaviharas, we start where they're easiest. And where equanimity is easiest is for the neutral person. So, it's true, isn't it? That's who we'll be starting with.

So, sit comfortably. Just let your awareness come into the body. Feel yourself breathing.

Coming into the heart center, connecting with the breath there. And then invite in your neutral person. If you can, get a picture of them. Remember where you've crossed paths. You may not know them well, but let yourself feel what you know of their character and any intuitions about what might be making them happy, how they might be meeting with sorrow.

Appreciate again that the neutral person is a whole universe of life experience and meaning—a whole range of happiness and unhappiness. Then you can begin to repeat this equanimity reflection.

I mentioned the classical phrase and a few alternatives. "You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness or unhappiness depends on your past actions more than on my wishes for you." Or "Beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature." As you say this, remember that the laws include karma and a number of other laws—physical, chemical, biological, environmental.

"I care for you, but can't control your happiness or unhappiness." "Things are just as they are. May I accept this just as it is?"

Try on a few of these phrases and see which one you resonate with most. Then select one phrase that you'll use in your equanimity practice. Try to hold your neutral person's felt presence as you say the phrase so that it really applies to a person—to this person.

Now bring in either your friend or your benefactor, wherever you feel a stronger connection right now. As you connect with this person whom you know better, let yourself remember the range of happiness and unhappiness in their life right now—things going well, things that are difficult. Then repeat your equanimity phrase for your friend or benefactor.

"You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and unhappiness depend on your past actions more than on my wishes for you." Or "I care for you but can't control your happiness and unhappiness." Or "Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature." Or "May I accept this just as it is?"

If you'd like to try this, bring in your difficult person. If you'd rather not, just continue with your friend or benefactor. If you'd like to try a few minutes with your difficult person, bring them into the equanimity.

As you connect with them, also get a feel for the range of happiness or unhappiness in their life. Has their mind been shaped by compassion, by love, by generosity? Has it been shaped by more painful obscurations—selfishness, hatred, fear? Then reflect with your equanimity phrase: "You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and unhappiness depend partly on your past actions. Beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature. I care for you but can't control your happiness or unhappiness."

Finally, bring in yourself as a subject for equanimity. Come in touch with yourself through your felt sense here and now, through the body and mood, or bring in an image of yourself—a memory or photo.

As you connect with yourself, bring to mind the range of joys and sorrows in your life at this period. In recent times, what things have been going well? What things have been difficult or painful?

I hope you can feel how the other brahmaviharas all help to hold this range of joy and sorrow. You can look at them through the eyes of metta, of compassion, appreciative joy, and hold them in that way.

Then repeat the equanimity phrase for yourself: "I am the owner of my actions. My happiness and unhappiness depend on my past actions more than on my wishes for me." Or "I care for myself but can't control my happiness and unhappiness." Or "Things are just as they are."

Anyone want to run out of the room screaming? Sometimes it can be hard to get in touch with. Was it interesting for you? It can be a really interesting reflection.

I find it a useful meditation with family members who are having a hard time, because with family members we can feel the pain and naturally want to go to compassion for them, but we also feel this huge responsibility: "I must be able to fix this. If I just do the right thing, I'll sort out my sister's life for her." And we can't do that.

And so this meditation reminds us of that. One way that I sometimes share as an equanimity phrase is: "All beings have their own journey." This just kind of bows in that direction. Everybody has their own journey, and the amount that one person can influence another's is limited. It's really about our own individual choices. So with family members, often combining compassion with equanimity gives us a good way to hold the big picture.

Do you have any questions or comments?

"Maybe I'm picking the wrong phrase, but I like the one that starts with 'for myself'—you know, 'I can care for myself, but I can't control my happiness and unhappiness.' Not having mastered impulse control and still having some reactivity left, I just kind of want to tweak the happiness part. I assume you're talking about not the moment-to-moment happiness, but a deeper happiness and unhappiness. I want to say something like... it kind of reminds me of the phrase 'you can't control what happens, but you can control how you respond to it.'"

So her comment was about this phrase applied to herself: "I care for myself, but I can't control my happiness or unhappiness." If I can interpret it a little bit, it seems like it abdicates too much responsibility, because another phrase that she likes would tweak it in the direction of saying, "I can't control what happens to me, but maybe I can control how I respond to it."

Just to remember that there is always free will in responding to the moment—but we can't always control that response either. Even with the best of our intentions, the freedom of choice isn't there, the balance of mind isn't there, the spaciousness isn't there. And so we find ourselves reacting in ways that bring unhappiness in the moment and then maybe in the future.

In the deepest sense, we are all not at a level where we can control our happiness and unhappiness thoroughly. An enlightened being can, because they've trained their mind in that way. So this is just an acknowledgment that even on a moment-to-moment level we can't always control it, but we get better at influencing it.

"I find myself at times, when I experience equanimity, sensing a certain attraction and grasping for it because it feels so grounding and so wise—and then it just disappears immediately into desire or something like that. Do you have a reflection on that?"

The comment is that when he experiences moments of equanimity, very soon there comes a grasping or attachment or clinging to it, and then that dissipates the equanimity—because grasping is actually the far enemy of equanimity.

This is actually the case for all the subtle meditative states that arise in practice. We have to develop a new kind of talent—letting the beautiful states be there without clinging, because the clinging dissipates them. So whether it's equanimity or tranquility or concentration or even loving-kindness, if we hold on too tight, that will dissipate them.

Early in practice, it's just a matter of collecting enough attention that the beautiful states start to come into being—so that's happening, which is wonderful. Then the next level of skill is how to trust in that, knowing we don't have to do anything to make them linger. So we just get more and more confidence that we can rest there without having to do anything about it. But that's the level of learning we have to do next.

So just look at that with all the beautiful states that come: "Can I just allow this to be?" Sometimes just

saying "Trust in the Dharma, let things be as they are" will incline us in that way. It's a skill that we develop gradually.

"It's easy for me to feel compassion for something going on in the world, or a friend, and then also to understand equanimity whenever I have it. But I think for myself, I have a second dart when I'm feeling some kind of emotional response that perhaps I think I shouldn't be feeling. And then that just gets me more tight and bound up."

I wouldn't go quite as far as absolute control. Meditation is a mind training, and as it develops more and more, we get more and more influence over our reactivity. Control is the wrong word because it's not coming from... control makes it sound like there's a controller, an entity within that starts to manipulate. But it's not felt like that.

It's more like wisdom—the growth of wisdom and loving-kindness holds the reactivity better so that it is smaller and doesn't lead into action so much. So I like to think of it more as influence. All along the path, we get more and more influence about our response to things in life. But until we're really free, we don't have complete choice. So we still get humbled sometimes by the way our responses come out, and we just want to accept that too.

Especially looking at all the craziness that goes on in the world, we're going to have a lot of emotional reactions to that for a long time.

So we just want to then accept that—okay, let me hold this with compassion. Sometimes in doing an equanimity practice, it's good to bring in another Brahma Vihara. "Oh, let me hold this with compassion."

A student asked about the far enemy of upekkhā, and then shared: "I found myself caring, knowing that I can't control others' unhappiness and happiness. I felt like it was a little bit of struggle to do with family and friends, but I found a complete roadblock when I was supposed to turn it to myself because I felt like it was paradoxical. If I can't control my unhappiness and happiness..."

This echoes the earlier question we explored. First, the far enemy of upekkhā is attachment and aversion, or you could say agitation—agitation born of attachment and aversion.

Regarding the second question about not being able to control our own happiness or unhappiness—well, then what can we control? You could even ask, what's the point of meditation then?

This phrase "I cannot control your happiness and unhappiness" is not a classical formulation. It's something we've developed to capture the feeling of the equanimity practice. What meditation and the whole Dharma teach us is how happiness and unhappiness come about.

What we learn is that happiness and unhappiness arise from conditions. If we want to have happiness in our life, we have to start planting the seeds in this moment that will let that grow. For instance, by planting a seed of mettā now, you're laying the foundation for happiness to arise a little bit now but also

even more in the future.

We come to understand that if we want to grow happiness in our own life, we have to plant lots of little wholesome seeds. In life in the world, these seeds generally take the form of dāna, sīla, bhāvanā. Dāna is generosity, sīla is ethical conduct, and bhāvanā is mental training—especially in this field, the training of loving-kindness.

In lay life generally, a life that is really built on generosity, ethical conduct, and loving-kindness will bring a lot of worldly happiness. It doesn't necessarily bring the wisdom of liberation, but it brings a lot of human happiness. If that is our goal, we know how to develop that. We know how to act in that way.

But we also understand it takes time for those seeds to get planted and to grow. So we start to develop confidence that we're building in our life the happiness that we want, and we're refraining from the actions that lead to unhappiness. But we have to be patient with the growth of it.

The understanding is: I can't always control it right now, but I gain, through this practice, a greater and greater ability to make that happen and to trust in that.

Another student offered: "I use modifiers, like 'I cannot fully or ultimately control it.'" That's helpful. I wouldn't even use "ultimately" because ultimately we can—but it's a way down the road.

Another student raised an important point about using the phrase for the difficult person: "It kind of came out as, well, this is what you get."

There's an element of truth in that perspective. When we see that to some extent we're responsible for the creation of our own state of mind through many, many moments of mental habits we've reinforced and acted on in the past, it brings a level of individual responsibility for our well-being that is kind of radical in the Western way of thinking.

Western culture doesn't have a good understanding of how a mind gets to be the way it is. It looks random or like luck or good fortune. But in the teachings of the Buddha, our states arise because of having planted these seeds of action for many, many years.

What we acknowledge is that people who are in an unhappy state—and often the difficult person makes their suffering easy to see through their anger or aggression or fearfulness, confusion—we see how that perpetuates their own suffering.

But what's not in the law of kamma is "you deserve to suffer." That's not there at all. I just look back on the character of the Buddha. If he could have met everyone he encountered and simply taken away their unwholesome qualities of mind and brought them to liberation in the moment, he would have done that. There was no sense that beings deserve to suffer. It's just that by the laws of the mind, we do suffer sometimes from our own actions.

To think that's not going to happen would be like thinking that an apple would ripen and come off the tree and not fall to the ground. So we start to hold even the difficult person's state and their responsibility for that state with compassion. Instead of what's actually a touch of cruelty perhaps—enjoying their suffering—we can hold their suffering with compassion at the same time as we understand their responsibility for it.

A participant offered a comment reflecting on the previous evening's discussion: "It must be painful for some of these people to walk around so angry all the time." Yes, it is painful for them to constantly live in that state, just as it is painful for us to be exposed to them. That's the reflection—we tune into the pain they're going through that makes them act in that way. Painful for them, painful for us.

I'm curious—did the karma phrase resonate for some of you? Good. This is indeed the classical expression, and if it works for you, there's a lot of insight in it. Whatever phrase works for you, I hope it will bring that kind of equanimity, acceptance, and peace to balance and support the other brahmaviharas.

Thank you for trying this practice and for exploring how we can hold both compassion and wisdom when facing difficult people. The cultivation of equanimity helps us respond with greater balance, seeing clearly without losing our capacity for love and understanding.

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