Brahmavihāra Practice

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 45:23

This is our last day on the whole sequence of the Brahmaviharas that we're presenting. Today we're going to be leading into equanimity for all beings, and that rounds out the set.

I want to say a few words about equanimity before we start. I want to begin with a story from Sylvia Boorstein, one of our dear teachers. She had a friend who came up to her from one of the classes and said, "I finally found the best way to answer the question when people ask, 'How are you?' You know, you get that question all the time and you don't know whether to be sincere or phony when you answer."

So Sylvia's student said that she found a reply which was, "I couldn't be better." And that's a true statement that works in all situations, doesn't it? I couldn't be better. So I recommend that to you for your social life back in the world. But I also recommend it as a foundation for equanimity practice.

Because in a way, equanimity, whether we're looking at ourselves or someone else or the world, equanimity says it couldn't be better. It says it couldn't be otherwise. It says the way the present moment is is the result of so many past moments and so many different causes and conditions that this present moment could not have arrived here in any different way than it is arriving.

Given the truth of that, our job as meditators is to come into harmony with it. Otherwise we're fighting with reality, and you know who wins that battle. It doesn't mean we shouldn't in the next moment go out and try to change the causes and conditions that have created this moment. There's a lot of injustice in the world and wrongs and things that need to be corrected. But we feel it's better to try to do that work from a place of a balanced mind than from the place of a disturbed mind.

So as meditators, if we can come into a peace of mind, a balance of mind with the way things are now, that not only makes our life happier, but it gives us the right platform to go out and do our work in the world. Whether it's helping other people or changing the world or carrying out simple tasks.

This quality of balance of mind is in some ways the most important and central thing we're doing through the day. And when that balance gets disturbed and we fall into a strong reaction, the basic instruction is do what's needed to bring the mind back into balance. Balance is just another word for equanimity.

So equanimity shouldn't be confused with absence of emotion. I got that impression. I looked at these stone statues of the Buddha for a long time and I thought, "Oh, he's not feeling anything. So that's the way we want to end up, is not feel anything." And then I suppressed my emotions to try to align with that ideal. And that was really painful and a misunderstanding.

It's not about not feeling. Equanimity is about allowing the feelings that are there to be there and not be disturbed by them.

In particular, equanimity is what gives the mind strength. And that strength is what keeps us from falling into the near and far enemies of the brahmaviharas. If you take a look at the whole map of these Brahmaviharas and their near and far enemies, you come up with twelve different states and they describe a very good map of the heart's movement, where the heart can go.

Briefly, the way I understand it is the Brahmaviharas themselves are refined, cultivated, developed, beautiful qualities of heart and mind that we work towards and access more as we practice. But they're not always a given in our emotional life. We have to work towards them.

The next category down are the near enemies, which look like the Brahmaviharas, but have an unwholesome component. I think we've talked about all of these: attached affection, pity or grief, overexuberance, and for equanimity, it's indifference—cutting off feeling. So I see the near enemies as the basic neurotic, egoic relationship to life. They're not dreadful states. They're just states based on self rather than consideration for all beings. So the near enemies are kind of normal neurotic reactions to life.

The far enemies are the distorted, very reactive, painful responses to life.

So what keeps the Brahmaviharas from falling into the near and far enemies is equanimity. Metta that transcends attachment needs the foundation of a balanced mind. Compassion that doesn't fall into pity or grief needs the foundation of equanimity. Appreciative joy that doesn't fall into over-excitement needs the balance of equanimity. So it's when we get to this fourth Brahmavihara that we understand how they all four work together.

And then equanimity needs the warmth of the other three. If equanimity doesn't have, underlying it, metta, compassion, and joy, then it is cold. It is indifference. It is not feeling.

So metta, compassion, and joy have to warm up the heart so that true equanimity can reveal itself. When you're in a place of very refined equanimity, there may not be a lot of emotion present. You may be sitting in quiet meditation in the hall or in your home, where the suffering of the world, the joy of the world may not be impinging on you. Then equanimity can be a very refined, spacious, cool place to abide. That's perfectly fine.

But how do you know if it's equanimity or indifference? Bring to mind someone in a place of happiness, joy, or suffering and see if the heart moves with either mudita or compassion. That's how you can check it out.

So we want this kind of balance where the heart is supple, pliable, responsive, warm. But when it rests, it can simply rest in this very cool place of balance, not disturbed by our life, by others' lives, by life in general.

This takes two developments. One is wisdom. We need to see that everything that comes arises from many past causes and conditions, and it could not be otherwise. This is an equanimity phrase if you like it: "Things could not be otherwise." And it needs this element of trust. We have to trust in life itself. We have to trust the Dharma, the laws of this universe.

So if we have both those things—understanding and trust—then we can relax and the mind can be at peace. This particular reflection of equanimity really helps steer our minds to that kind of safe harbor. So it's a very powerful practice. Once, in a long retreat, I did ten days of intensive equanimity, and it was a very wonderful experience and deep in learning. So it's a practice that we can stay with for a long time, and it really shifts our understanding of how life unfolds. I recommend it to you.

If you don't like the karma phrase, as I imagine Kate and Heather both explained, there are many other phrases. So I'm going to read alternate phrases, as I imagine they did too, just to make sure you have a full range.

The karma phrase is: "All beings are the heirs of their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their past actions more than on my wishes for them." That's the classic phrase.

But here are some variations:

"All beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature."

"All beings have their own journey."

"Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature."

"I care for you but can't control your happiness or unhappiness."

"I care about you, but I can't control the outcome of your life."

"I wish you well, but cannot keep you from suffering."

"Everything arises from past causes and conditions."

"Things are just as they are."

"This moment is just as it is."

"Things couldn't be otherwise."

So we will hold different individuals, we will hold all beings, and just use one of these phrases—the one that resonates for you without resistance—to try as you consider your life, their life, the process of living.

Let's begin the meditation. We'll start with the neutral person.

Please bring to mind your neutral person and see them as clearly as you can. If you've held them in metta,

in compassion, in appreciative joy, you'll have some sense of different aspects of their character and some of their joys and sorrows. Let yourself intuit some of their joys and sorrows.

As you hold the neutral person, reflect that there are causes and conditions for the way their life has unfolded. Different events have made them the person they are. And among those events are their own intentions, the habits of their mind.

So if you'd like to use the phrase on karma, I find it most helpful to think of it in terms of the habits of the person's mind constructing their happiness or unhappiness moment by moment. Whatever phrase you like, begin to repeat that phrase as you hold the neutral person in your heart.

"You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and unhappiness depend on your own habits of mind."

Now bring in either your benefactor or your good friend, whichever you'd like to connect with. As you bring in your benefactor or friend, you've gotten to know them well through these weeks of meditation.

So as you hold them, let yourself remember the good things and the difficult things in their life. Get a sense of their joys and sorrows. You may notice some movements of metta, of compassion, or mudita with this person because your heart is alive and responds to them. Allow those feelings to be there.

And then as you stay connected, just repeating your equanimity phrase: "Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding by a lawful nature," or "You will meet your joy and sorrow according to a lawful nature."

And then letting go of the friend or benefactor and bringing in yourself. Connecting with the image of yourself or just feeling yourself as you sit here and now. And you know really well the range of happiness and unhappiness in your life. You've touched on it through metta, through compassion, through joy. So coming in contact with the realm of your own experience, the range of it. And in touch with your deep wish for happiness, wish not to suffer.

And then can we each find a balance of mind in relation to the situation that we're in? Can we find this peace and acceptance of the way our life is today? So perhaps trying different versions of the phrase to see which one resonates with how we hold ourselves: "I am the owner of my actions. My happiness and unhappiness depends on my own habits of mind," or "Things are just as they are. This moment is just as it is. I couldn't be better."

And if you feel ready now, we can bring in the difficult person as a way to prepare for all beings. So if you like—you don't have to, but if you like to try it—then imagine your difficult person, bringing them into your field of awareness, seeing them if you can, perhaps at a distance, not too close.

And as you connect with a difficult person, remember the things in their life that are going well, the things in their life that are difficult. Remember their basic wish also is to be happy and not to suffer. And yet you

may be able to see how their very actions lead them into more unhappiness, or how they could lead to happiness.

And so repeating for them an equanimity phrase that feels appropriate: "You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and unhappiness come from your own habits of mind," or "I wish you well, but can't control your happiness and unhappiness," or "You meet your joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature."

And now beginning to open up the sense of equanimity, of balance in a limitless way. And we'll begin just with those of us in the meditation hall and perhaps just the few people who are sitting closest to you. And have a sense that your awareness can hold those who are somewhat near to you.

And as you connect with them, letting the image of different people just come into your mind for a few moments each. So you get a sense of your Dharma brothers and sisters who are sitting close by, who you've been sharing this month with. And as their face comes into view for a few moments, let yourself feel into their being and anything you felt about their joys, their difficulties in this time together. And appreciating the strength of their character continuing with the discipline of the practice.

And as you hold them in your mind, you might just feel if there's metta, compassion, joy for them. And then having a sense that this feeling of equanimity can extend outward from you and include them in their being, in their life, in their situation, in their hearts and minds. "Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature. All beings meet their happiness and unhappiness by a lawful nature. I wish you well, but can't control your happiness or unhappiness."

And then opening your awareness further to take in everyone in the hall at this time. And as you hold us all, let different people come into view for a little while. And just feel the different beings that are here. Let different images come so that this sense becomes personal. You're feeling a human life as you say the phrase.

And as different people come, let yourself feel their being, their happiness or unhappiness that you've seen or felt. With a sense of caring for all the support you may have gotten from them. And directing the equanimity phrase in a broad way to everyone in the hall: "All beings are the heirs of their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own actions of heart and mind."

Our lives are unfolding according to a lawful nature. So have a sense that the equanimity can be very wide and take in all of us, but at the same time it can become quite personal. You can think of one person and reflect on the phrase, touching them. And as you let different people come to mind, you'll feel the range of experience that a human life involves. Let the experience touch you and see if it can be held in balance.

Then opening your awareness in a really unlimited way. Open to all beings everywhere—beings on the land and beyond, beings we can see and those we can't, human beings, creatures, all other beings. Every

being that is born faces this mixture of happiness and unhappiness, wishing to be happy and not to suffer, but life is mixed. Feeling the tenderness, the difficulties, the joys for all beings.

As you extend to all beings, let different beings come into your mind for a while. Beings at home whom you've left to come here—partners, children, parents, family, friends. Let yourself feel how their happiness and unhappiness is shaped by their own habits of mind, by their own actions. And beings further away, in states of health, in states of illness, in situations of ease or distress, in poor countries or in rich countries. All the animals, those who are free physically, those who have been captured, those treated with love and those treated with cruelty. I care for you, but I can't control your happiness and unhappiness. All beings are the heirs of their karma. All beings find their happiness and unhappiness through their own habits of mind.

May all beings be peaceful.
May all beings be happy.
May all beings be liberated.

I hope you get the sense of the vastness of this practice too, that it's not just a cold and unfeeling relationship to life. It can really hold the joys and sorrows and find our own balance of mind with it all. Reflecting on the all beings reflection really tends to bring out the universal quality of the range of experience in life—how we hold that with our own balance.

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