Guided Meditation on Equanimity

Sharda Rogell · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 45:49

Tonight, I'm going to introduce the fourth of the Brahma Viharas, the practice of equanimity or upeka.

We decided to do two evenings on upeka because it really is very much a support of the practice that we're doing here. When we emphasize examining the attitude of our mind, which we've been emphasizing in the instructions, when we are actually bringing our mindfulness to how the mind is inclining in wholesome or unwholesome ways—really, this is a support for bringing the mind to equanimity, to some balance. The practice we're doing is really to decondition the reactivity. It's one way we could talk about our mindfulness practice: to begin to understand the patterns of mind that give rise to the contractions of the contracted mind of reactivity. And the Brahma Vihara practice is another practice to decondition the reactive mind.

We might even say that when we think about ego self or our self, the self in a difficult state is a contracted reactive state of mind where we get caught in our grasping and aversion to things we want and we don't want. When we speak of equanimity, we're pointing to the stillness of mind, the still mind that is not moving in reactivity, in grasping, in craving, in aversion.

One of the ways that the equanimity practice in terms of the Brahma Vihara works is really through the practice of acceptance. When we are bringing the mind to balance, to stillness, this comes about through accepting the way things are. So we might even say that equanimity is a kind of unconditional acceptance. No matter what's happening, I accept this. I accept this the way it is. Equanimity is a state of mind where we start to feel an unwavering balance—where I am not going to react, I'm not going to hold on, I'm not going to manipulate and control. I really am going to allow things to be as they are.

This practice has been a very important practice for me, which is also one of the reasons I wanted to teach this tonight. Mostly from the times of my travels in India, the months and over the years that I've spent there. I've mentioned before in my talks how very challenging that was for me, particularly not having been in an undeveloped country before midlife and living a fairly comfortable and somewhat privileged lifestyle. Going to India and really seeing the way many people live on this planet was very, very difficult for me—particularly being in North India, in one of the poorest and in some ways most corrupt places, and just seeing what really goes on.

I would be in constant reactivity. I would see how my mind would get angry or feel some kind of self-righteousness. Things should be different. People shouldn't have to live like this. Children shouldn't have to live like this. This very strong sense of: it shouldn't be like this. And then seeing that I couldn't really do anything about it, I would fall into states of helplessness and hopelessness and grief. I could see

how my mind would just be pulled around by these very, very difficult mind states.

It really was the practice of equanimity that helped me begin to come into some kind of acceptance for the way things are. My equanimity phrase that I used when I was traveling was: "No matter how much I might wish for things to be otherwise, things are as they are." When I would say that, there was a way that I could come back to myself and just feel what was happening within myself without the mind moving out, trying to blame or judge or control or manipulate. I would just come back to myself, back to my heart. Things are the way they are.

It's not an easy practice because the ego mind really wants to try to make things different or try to make people different or situations different—but not necessarily from a place of wisdom, from a place of connection and true engagement. Rather, from a place of reactivity, from a place of caughtness, of demanding and expecting and getting very reactive about the way things are.

I want to offer this tonight to see if, as you work with these phrases and words, you notice what happens in your heart, in your mind. The words themselves can be very impactful as you say them. As you repeat the words to yourself, it's an interesting alchemy, the way the words start to work on the force of mind that wants to change things and have them be otherwise.

One thing that we might notice sometimes, particularly in Buddhist practice, is there can sometimes appear to be a very high value on a kind of quiet, what might even appear as a disconnection or a disengagement with the way things are. It's a very slippery slope from equanimity to what we would call indifference or withdrawal or disengagement. With all the Brahma Viharas, our intention is to stay in connection with what's happening, not to disengage, not to cut off. We want to stay connected in that connection with the way life is, the way life is moving.

But with our practice, we might see that sometimes we can feel like we can just kind of rest back into a stillness or a quiet, and what can happen in that is also a disengagement—which is actually what's called the near enemy to equanimity. It looks like equanimity because there's not the reactivity in it, but there's not the engagement. There's not the connection. We are actually withdrawn and pulled back, almost with an attitude of, "Well, it doesn't really have anything to do with me, so I'll just kind of not stay so present here."

We have these Buddhist images, images of the Buddha and Kuan Yin, and it can seem like there's a real detachment from the world and the way things are.

And so we can sometimes think that's what we're supposed to embody somehow—this detachment. But true equanimity is really engaged with the world. It's engaged with our own inner experiences as well as with people and situations and the world. It's not a withdrawal from the world.

So sometimes when we're doing the practice or saying the phrases, we want to actually notice the quality of the mind, to see if there's a withdrawal, a disconnection where we're not actually that present with

what it is that we're holding in our mind around the equanimity. We'll practice with it so you'll get a sense of it. When we do the equanimity practice, we really want to bring as much caring and sincere interest in the engagement as we can.

In the same way with compassion, we might find how the mind can slip off because the situation can feel too painful to engage with. The mind just slips away and doesn't want to be near the painful object. And it's really the equanimity that underpins the compassion that allows us to stay present in a difficult situation and allows the heart to open in compassion. So compassion and equanimity interplay quite a lot.

By keeping the mind balanced and awake and engaged, it allows the heart to open in compassion and in mettā and in joy. It allows for the expression of the other three Brahmavihāras. And it also has its own quality and its own integrity.

As we begin the practice, we can begin with a reflection—a reflection on how life is. That all beings have their ups and their downs, their joys and their sorrows. This is the way life is. There are what are called the eight worldly winds: praise and blame, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain, gain and loss. This is the way life is.

So we allow this in, this wisdom reflection, that pain and pleasure in life arise and pass away. That's the nature of things. They pass away on their own, and it's unavoidable—pleasure and pain, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame—the way the winds of the world blow. And we can reflect that all beings have their own journey. Whether I would like people's journey to be otherwise, all beings have their own journey.

If you're not already sitting in a meditative posture, settle into your posture now.

Just as with the other Brahmavihāras, you want to keep a certain amount of present attention with the body—feeling your body and feeling your heart and what happens in your heart as you reflect on equanimity. Also being attentive to your mind and the attitude in your mind. Noticing if the mind moves in reactivity or withdrawal. And then coming back and reconnecting with the words, with the phrases.

With equanimity, there isn't necessarily one good phrase that I can teach you. I'm going to give you a number of different phrases because you want to see what phrase really works for you and resonates for you, what really speaks to you as you enter into the practice.

We'll begin by reflecting on a situation or someone where you feel some difficulty. There may be some ripples in the mind around this person or situation. Somewhere where you'd like to have more equanimity, more balance of mind.

The first time, be sure that you don't choose somebody that's too difficult. Because as you bring your mind to this person or situation, you might instantly feel the charge of the reactivity. It's good to have some reactivity when you're doing equanimity practice because that's really what it's for.

So it might be somebody here. It might be a situation that's occurred here, either in the hall or in the dorms or in the yogi jobs. It might be a friend that you've had some ripples with, or a family member—a son, a daughter, a child, a parent.

Take a moment or two, bringing a situation or a person to mind. Have a feeling for this. Maybe even feel the charge, where the charge is for you. Let yourself feel that in your body, in your mind. If nothing very strongly comes, just find something very simple. Maybe even some irritation you might have felt with a yogi here coming and going, or sneezing, or whatever it is. Find something.

As you settle in, remember that we are working with our own mind and heart. This particular Brahmavihāra is different in that we're not sending equanimity to another person. We're actually working with the alchemy of our own mind and heart so that we feel more in balance, less reactive—not wishing for somebody else to be more equanimous.

Bring the attention back again to your own heart and mind. As you bring the situation or person to mind, I'll say some phrases. Bring the words, the phrases, to your own mind and heart, and see what words resonate for you so that you can choose a phrase, pick up some words that can be yours—one phrase that you'll repeat.

As you imagine this person or situation, try these phrases: May I open with great care to how things are for you right now. May my heart be big enough to hold the way things are for you right now. May I accept things the way they are. May I let go of my struggle. All beings have their own journey. This is your journey. Or perhaps a simple phrase: Things are as they are.

Check what happens in your mind, your heart, and let the phrases be infused with care. May I open with great care or balance to how things are for you now. May my heart be big enough to hold the way things are. May I accept things the way they are.

Sometimes you may find that you don't want to have any words, but rather you want to incline your mind towards acceptance through the feeling of acceptance itself. May my heart open with care. Be very gentle, particularly if it's a difficult situation—maybe a person who's in a lot of pain. It's hard to accept. Say the phrases and see what happens. You might feel a shift in your consciousness towards letting go, or you might even feel more charge as you bring the situation in.

If you feel a lot of charge, then go to yourself. Just go back to yourself with kindness, saying: May my heart be big enough to hold the joys and sorrows without being overwhelmed. Or: May I hold the conditions of my mind and my body with grace. Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a natural law. Letting go.

Take a little time and find the words, the phrases that resonate for you, repeating them to yourself. All beings have their own journey. This is your journey.

See if you can stay connected and engaged with vitality in the mind. Notice if the energy is sinking or disconnecting. Reconnect with the image, with the person. No matter how much I might wish for things to be otherwise, things are as they are.

Now I invite you to bring yourself into the field of equanimity, holding yourself as well as you can with this balance of mind towards yourself, finding the words for yourself. All beings have their own journey. This is my journey. May my heart be big enough to hold the joys and sorrows without being overwhelmed. May I hold the conditions of my mind and my body with grace. Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a natural law.

Let your body be relaxed and breathe naturally. Notice what's happening with your breath as you stay engaged and connected. May I let go of my struggle and hold the conditions of my mind and body with grace. Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a natural law. May I open with great care and balance to the way things are.

Whether you find words or you just incline the mind towards acceptance, this is the practice of equanimity.

Now I'd like you to open the field of equanimity to all the people here in the room and in the building, embracing the community that you've been spending your time with, repeating phrases of equanimity that resonate for you. All beings have their own journey. May my heart be big enough to hold the way things are. May I accept things the way they are. May I open with great care to all the people here, with care and balance of mind.

If at any point you become overwhelmed, come back to yourself.

Just holding yourself with care.

All beings have their own journey. Things are unfolding according to a natural law.

Taking another half minute.

I'd like to end the meditation with some metta. Collecting the energy in the heart center, bringing your awareness back to your heart. Feeling what's happening in your heart right now. With this balance of mind—not craving or reacting—just allowing whatever feeling is there, whatever mood is there.

Surround yourself in a field of metta, a field of loving-kindness, feeling the warmth, the lightness of the loving-kindness. Extending metta to yourself. Hold yourself with kindness.

Then extend the metta to somebody near you, embracing them in this field of loving-kindness, extending the warmth, the caring to this person.

Then extend the metta out further to more people in the room, eventually including the whole room. Each person touched by your embrace of metta—behind you, in front of you, to each side, above and below.

Letting your loving-kindness extend out in all directions, including all the other people in the building, the other people on the land, all the beings on the land, the creatures seen and unseen.

Extending out even further to include your family, your friends, in this embrace of warm metta. Loved ones. To all beings everywhere, in all directions, in all the realms.

May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be liberated from pain. May all beings be free.

I've put the equanimity phrases on the notice board for you because I know it's not necessarily easy to remember when there are so many variations. You can find a phrase that really suits you, that resonates for you, and work with that. You can also change it, work with some other phrases, or as I said, maybe for you it's more of a quiet equanimity where you feel the quality of acceptance and the words may even interfere. That feeling is important too—working with that sense of balance and stillness of mind in relationship to a person or a situation or yourself.

See what happens. It's a practice that develops like the others, but this one is really very unique in the quality of mind that arises as we practice equanimity.

Thank you.

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