Saturday's Short Sitting & Dhamma Talk: The Power of Upekkhā

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:15:33

Again, welcome to everyone.

We'll begin this session with a short sitting, about ten minutes, as a way of settling back into our practice, into our bodies. And then I'll be offering a talk during this time.

So take a comfortable meditative posture. Relax, but not casual. And we begin by taking a few deep breaths. This is a way of settling into and inhabiting the body. If it's helpful, you might use the phrase "there is a body." This is a way of guiding the attention, the awareness, into the feeling of the whole body sitting. And then connecting with the feeling, the sensations of the body breathing, with the intention to feel each breath, each half breath, from beginning to end. So it's reminding oneself to steady the attention in a relaxed way, and letting each breath manifest just as it does without controlling or wanting it to be a certain way. Just feeling each breath as it comes, as it goes.

If it's helpful, you can use a soft mental note, a mental label—very soft—"in" and "out," or "rising" and "falling." It's just a way of staying connected to the actual felt sensation of the breath.

And if there are other sensations which become predominant and call your attention away from the breath, open to and become mindful of those sensations. Sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant, whatever they may be—simply become aware of them, feel them, notice their changing nature. And when they're no longer compelling, return to the feeling of the whole body, the breath.

We can be with each breath, be mindful of it, suffused with appreciation. Each breath is giving us life. So can we appreciate that with every breath we take?

When you're ready, you can open your eyes and reconnect with what you're seeing in the world around you.

Today I would like to speak about one quality of mind that plays a critical role in the happiness of our daily lives, but also in the unfolding of our practice for awakening. From one perspective, we could say that the whole path rests on the maturing of this one quality. And that is the mental factor of equanimity.

Equanimity is the English translation of the Pali word *upekkhā*. It refers to one of what Buddhist psychology calls the universal beautiful qualities. That itself is a wonderful category—universal beautiful

qualities—which means that equanimity and the others arise in every wholesome mind state. So equanimity is always present in wholesome states of mind, along with qualities such as confidence, mindfulness, non-greed, non-hatred, and pliability of mind. There are many of these universal beautiful qualities.

What's important to understand about all of them is that these wholesome, beautiful, universal qualities create happiness in our lives. They are the source. They are what constitutes the happiness that we can experience and find in our lives. So equanimity is one of these beautiful universals.

It's described as a neutrality of mind. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great American translator of the Buddhist texts, said *upekkhā* could be literally translated into English as "there-in-the-middleness." This is a little bit of an awkward English phrase, but it may conjure up for you some aspects of it—there-in-the-middleness. It's the quality in the mind of evenness, of impartiality. And when it's highly developed, it becomes the basis for an unshakable balance of mind.

We need to take a little bit of care in understanding the experience of equanimity. In English, when we speak of neutrality of mind, it might suggest, at least to some people, a feeling of indifference or apathy or of being disengaged from life. "Oh, the mind is just neutral." But all of these—whether it's indifference, apathy, or disengagement—are what are called the near enemies of equanimity because they are really unwholesome imitations of it.

As we explore how equanimity manifests in our lives, and the many ways that it does, we see that it is not indifference at all, but rather a spacious impartiality. We begin to understand why equanimity is called a beautiful state of mind, and it would be hard to overestimate its importance. Even though it's not spoken of perhaps as much as mind states like wisdom or love or compassion, equanimity has an equally powerful role in the unfolding of our lives, the unfolding of our path.

The first way we can experience the cool, restful quality of equanimity is in the peace and balance it can bring to our daily lives. I think we would all appreciate this. Each one of us, as you know, is touched by what the Buddha called the eight great vicissitudes of life.

These are the endlessly changing conditions that affect us all: gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain. These are the kinds of changes that are continually arising in the course of our lives as they unfold.

When equanimity is developed, we ride these inevitable waves with balance and with ease. Without it, in the face of all these inevitable changes, we are simply tossed about and often crashing into the changing conditions of our lives. Right there, we can see the potential for equanimity to create a much greater space of easefulness as we navigate our lives in the world.

We can see the play of gain and loss in so many different aspects. We can feel their effect whenever we're invested in or attached to a particular outcome, or in any situation when we're taking something to be "I"

or "mine." If we're attached to a particular outcome, I think it's a setup often for frustration or difficulty or unease, because we are not ultimately in complete control of how things unfold. Many different forces in the world contribute to how things happen. We can do our part with our aspiration, with our hopes. But if we're attached to the outcome, and it doesn't happen as we wish, it's going to be the source of difficulty, of challenge, of unhappiness.

One of my favorite examples of wonderful equanimity is expressed in a short poem by Ryokan. He was an eighteenth-century Zen master, hermit, and poet in Japan. There are many stories of him living in the mountains, very poor, with almost no possessions. He would just go around the mountains playing with the village children, leading a Dharma life. The story goes, expressed in one little haiku, that he came back one time to his hut and the few possessions he had—maybe his cooking pot or his begging bowl, whatever few possessions he had—had been stolen. As the story goes, and as the haiku expresses, this is what he reputedly said: "The moon at the window—the thief left it behind."

That's quite an amazing response. Imagine coming back to your house one day and all of your prized possessions were stolen. Would that be your response? Probably not—unless equanimity has really been cultivated to a very high extent. I love that story because it points to a possibility. We may not all be quite at that level yet, but his things had already been stolen. What would have been the usefulness of his getting upset or ranting and raving about it? It would not have served any purpose at all. Instead: the moon at the window, the thief left it behind.

We can see another impact of gain and loss that is, I think, very current now for many of us—the impact of gain and loss in the intense political dramas that are playing themselves out. If in your daily life you follow the political news closely, do you notice all the ups and downs of your mental states as various political dramas unfold? When our views prevail, we become exhilarated and happy. When our particular points of view are frustrated, we become depressed or discouraged. Gain and loss.

Equanimity does not mean that we should disengage. That's not the implication. Whether it's what to do when our possessions have been stolen and only the moon remains, or we're dealing with a political situation or any other, it doesn't mean that we disengage. Equanimity means understanding the difference between reactivity of mind and responsiveness of mind.

This is a really important distinction, because these two words reflect very different mindsets. Reactivity creates agitation within us. Responsiveness is the basis for a balanced and compassionate engagement. This difference was expressed in a short Taoist phrase that says, "Non-action is not inaction." That's a really concise way of expressing it. Non-action means non-reactivity of mind as we face different circumstances in our lives, different aspects of gain and loss. Can we be non-reactive? But non-action in this sense does not mean inaction. It means we can be with the situation, assess what needs to be done, and then hopefully respond in the most skillful and compassionate way.

In this sense, equanimity offers a great gift to compassionate action because it imbues these

compassionate responses with qualities of calm and steadfastness and patience as it seeks to alleviate different kinds of suffering. And of course, these are the qualities—the calm, the steadfastness, the patience—which will allow for our actions to actually be more effective and more sustainable. One Zen master called these qualities of constancy and patience "the long enduring mind." It's that quality of steadiness in the face of changing conditions, and this is precisely the quality that equanimity fosters and nurtures within us.

We can also observe gain and loss playing out right here on a meditation retreat. We have a calm, concentrated sitting, and the thought may come: "Oh, now I've got it. My practice is going to be like this from now on." We expect it to stay. We expect the next sitting to be just like this one was. But the next sitting, or the next day, perhaps the mind is restless, the body uncomfortable, and we're bored. Loss. Thoughts come: "What did I do wrong? How did I lose it? I must not be a good meditator."

Gain and loss. If we're reactive, we're simply tossed about by these reactions. If we have developed equanimity to some extent, then we realize that these changes are a natural part of our meditation practice. As you know, practice goes through many ups and downs. It's not linear in one direction. It's more like a sine curve—going up and down, up and down—but the slope of the curve is rising if we persevere. Gain and loss, untempered by equanimity, by balance, by being in the middleness, keeps us in servitude to the inevitably changing conditions of our lives.

So this is the first pair of the vicissitudes: gain and loss. We want to take these inevitable changes as part of our practice, particularly being mindful of how we're relating to them. Are we relating with reactivity? If so, we should notice that and be mindful of it. Are we relating with equanimity, with balance, with impartiality?

The next pair of vicissitudes is praise and blame. This can become very clear when we pay attention. Notice how you feel when somebody praises you. Then notice how you feel when somebody blames you for something—especially if it's in front of other people, if it's public in some way.

I had a wonderful practice opportunity with praise and blame after my book *One Dharma* came out. In the publication of a new book, naturally one is enthusiastic and excited and interested, so I was reading the various reviews on Amazon—which was probably a big mistake. But it was a perfect experience of praise and blame.

Here are a few of those reviews. "Concise, enlightening, takes one to the core of Buddhism." Another: "A practical, enlightening book that is a pleasure to read." Praise. And then: "One Dharma is not emerging in this book; not as significant a book as the title might suggest." And one of my favorite blame comments: "This is pretty silly stuff."

So from enlightening to silly in one move of the cursor.

When I first read the reviews after the book came out, I could feel my mind glowing when the comments

were praising. And then I could feel the glow dimming when I came to the blame ones. Fortunately, dharma practice came to the rescue. Remembering the universal nature of this—everybody goes through it, even the Buddha was the recipient of praise and blame—I began to see the humor in the whole situation.

As a side comment, a sense of humor is so helpful on the spiritual path, where we learn to hold things a little more lightly and don't take our minds quite so seriously. When I could have a bit of a sense of humor and remember the universality of praise and blame, my mind relaxed, my heart relaxed, and I could rest much more easily in equilibrium, taking in both.

The Buddha expressed this unwavering capacity of equanimity in one of the verses of the Dhammapada: "As a solid mass of rock is not moved by the wind"—just see if you can visualize this—"as a solid mass of rock is not moved by the wind, so a sage is not moved by praise and blame."

So the practice of equanimity is not just to be done on our cushion or in our formal meditation. It really is a daily practice in our lives, because it greatly enhances the quality of our lives in the world. It's truly a source of tremendous ease and balance.

It is important to remember that equanimity is a practice, and until we're fully enlightened, it certainly is not going to be perfect. But even when we find ourselves in the middle of reactivity—caught up in wanting or not wanting, trying to avoid or trying to hold on, being reactive in some way—if we can remember and remind ourselves of the possibility and the value of equanimity, then it gives us the opportunity to gradually guide ourselves back to it.

So gain and loss, praise and blame. The third pair of the vicissitudes is, in some ways, just a more generalized form of praise and blame: fame and disrepute.

Now the great lesson here—and this is one that has been so helpful for me over many, many years—the great lesson here is that even though we may hanker after fame or shrink and shrivel in the face of disrepute, they really only exist in other people's minds. If we are well established in the non-remorse of good sīla, of ethical action, of non-harming, then that is the foundation for us to remain unmoved in the experience of fame or disrepute. We remain equanimous in the face of these external projections.

Years ago, in the early years of my practice with my first teacher, Munindraji, he said something which has just saved me so much dukkha in my life. In regard to praise and blame, fame and disrepute, he said: "You can't take responsibility for other people's minds. You can take responsibility for your own."

That was so freeing, because it made me realize that we don't have control over what other people are thinking or feeling. That's going to depend on their own experience, their own conditioning. We can't take responsibility for that; they have to take responsibility for their own minds. And likewise, in acknowledging that we can't take responsibility for other people's minds, we realize we do have to take responsibility for our own.

That's why, to remain equanimous in the face of praise and blame and fame and disrepute, there is such importance in having confidence in the wholesomeness of our own mind states—in our own commitment to sīla and to non-harming. Because that is the condition for non-remorse in our lives.

The last of the vicissitudes, just part of the winds of change that blow through our lives—and this is a powerful one that affects us all—is the alternation of pleasure and pain, or happiness and sorrow, pleasant and unpleasant.

For most of us, there's a deep, almost hardwired conditioning in the mind to want and to hold on to what's pleasant, and to avoid what's unpleasant. Of course, this seems so natural. If we went up to anybody and asked, "Do you want what's pleasant?"—of course. "Do you want to avoid what's unpleasant?"—of course. It seems so natural, just the natural way to live. And because of that, because this is how it's commonly understood, we rarely investigate this conditioning or explore other possibilities.

There's a Burmese teacher, a wonderful teacher who has been teaching in recent years in the West, with a wonderful approach to practice and a wonderful way of communicating the Dharma. This is one of the things he said: "You only want good experiences. You don't want even the tiniest unpleasantness. Is this fair? Is this the way of the Dhamma?"

I think he's just calling it out—that this alternation of pleasure and pain, pleasantness and unpleasantness, is simply the nature of life. There's no one who experiences only pleasant things. And I think there's no one who experiences only unpleasant things. But because of our deep-seated conditioning to want to hold onto the pleasant and to want to avoid the unpleasant, it's precisely this reactivity that powers the rollercoaster of hope and fear in our lives. We're just living with this agitating energy of always hoping for what's pleasant and fearing what's unpleasant.

But with increasing clarity and increasing wisdom, we begin to understand and to see deeply that these changes are inevitable, that they're not a mistake. It's not that pleasant feelings go away because we've done something wrong. It's simply the nature of all conditioned things to change.

But for me, it's a slightly unusual English phrase, and because of that, I find it makes the truth of it very vivid. The phrase found often in the texts, when talking about change, is that things are always *becoming otherwise*. Becoming otherwise. Pain becomes pleasure. Pleasure becomes pain. This cycle continually goes on. Everything is becoming otherwise all the time.

The Buddha offered a reflection on this in a more macro way, not so much moment-to-moment. And he gave such importance to this reflection that he suggested we actually reflect on it daily. It's really simple, but it also uncovers some deep conditioning within ourselves. I saw that very much in myself.

The reflection has to do with reminding ourselves that what has the nature to grow old will grow old. What has the nature to become ill will become ill. And what has the nature to die will die. And here's the main point: *I am not exempt*.

I love that tagline—"and I am not exempt." Because even though we know the truth that what has the nature to grow old, to become ill, and to die will do so, even knowing that and teaching it over the last fifty years, I can feel deep within myself some subterranean feeling as some of these aspects manifest. A sense that I should be exempt. Or thinking that I am exempt, and then wondering what just happened.

I could be going for a walk and all of a sudden, I don't know, maybe my knee starts to hurt. And I can see often my very first reaction, my immediate reaction: "Oh, what just happened? Why did it happen?" And then, at this point very quickly: "Oh, and I am not exempt. Things are always becoming otherwise." Just that is enough to bring my mind back from this upset reactivity to a place of equanimity.

So there are ways, and this reflection is one of them, to really develop this strength within ourselves, because it's reminding ourselves of what is true. Again, from the Buddha: "Praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute come and go like the wind. To be happy, rest like a great tree in the midst of them all."

It's a beautiful image. If you just think of a great tree swept by the winds—the wind comes and goes, but a great strong tree can just stay steady in the face of that.

So the first type of equanimity is this evenness and composure in the midst of life's changes. There's another whole arena in which we can practice equanimity, and that's as the fourth of the brahmavihāras—those mind states called the four immeasurables, or the four divine abodes: mettā, loving-kindness; compassion; empathetic joy; and equanimity.

Now, equanimity has a special role in the brahmavihāras. We could say the gift of equanimity to the others allows us to express these beautiful feelings of love, compassion, and joy impartially, to all beings equally, to include all beings without prejudice, without bias, without preference. Equanimity keeps us unmoved in the face of praise and blame, and so we can have mettā, we can have compassion and joy, even for those who blame us when equanimity is strong.

This was expressed beautifully in a short haiku by the poet Issa, expressing how equanimity enhances or makes possible the fullness of the other brahmavihāras. The haiku reads: "In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger."

That's a beautiful expression. And we can see this quality at work sometimes if we are familiar in some way with great teachers like Dipa Ma or the Dalai Lama, and just watch how they relate to people. It's as if they are living in that place of middleness, allowing them to connect with all beings equally.

Reminiscent of Issa's poem, the Dalai Lama once said—and this itself would be a beautiful practice—"I try to treat everyone I meet as an old friend."

Just think what that would be like. If we could practice going through life treating everyone we meet—those we know well, those we may hardly know, those we may just meet in passing—what would it

be like if inwardly we treated everyone we meet as an old friend? What a warm and engaging way, what a responsive way to live one's life.

And when we meet people or see people, not only those like the Dalai Lama and Dipa Ma—sometimes it's very ordinary people in our lives who just have this quality of openness and impartiality and equanimity, which allows the other brahmavihāras to manifest.

So there's the equanimity as a balance in the vicissitudes of life. This equanimity as expressed as the Brahmavihara is impartiality, embracing all.

The third manifestation of equanimity takes us deep into the experience of meditative awareness. This is really the wisdom aspect of equanimity. There's a teaching from the Third Zen Ancestor in quite a well-known text called "On the Faith Mind." The opening lines have been translated in many ways, but I think this one will be familiar to many of you. He says, "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When attachment and aversion are both absent, everything is clear and undisguised."

The great way of liberation, of awakening, is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When attachment and aversion are both absent, everything is clear and undisguised. This is really the quality of equanimity—of non-preferential awareness. And this quality of equanimity, this wisdom practice, supports all of the other factors of enlightenment: investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration. Equanimity is the foundation of them all.

When that becomes strong, we begin a deeper and deeper exploration of what the Buddha called the three characteristics of all existence. Most of you are probably familiar with these three characteristics. The first of them is the truth of change or impermanence. We begin to know through our practice, not that things change simply on a conceptual level, but we begin to experience it in a very direct way, seeing the continual arising and passing of different phenomena. Sometimes it's on the macro level—the big changes that are going on in the world, in our lives. And sometimes in our meditation, it's on the micro level. We're really seeing just the momentary arising and passing.

At this point in our practice, we become less concerned with what it is that's arising and more attuned to the process of change. In a way, we're going from content to process.

There are many stories in the texts of people getting enlightened by hearing just one phrase, which I'm about to say. So this could be your chance. It's very simple, but really take it in: Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

This is the universal truth of impermanence. But can you intuit the implications of that teaching? Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, attachment is simply going to be the cause of suffering in our lives. What would it be like if we really took that in and applied that teaching in our lives, remembered it in our lives?

We also experience the truth of dukkha—that is, the unreliable, the ultimately unsatisfying, and sometimes painful aspects of conditioned phenomena. Again, all of this is made possible through the power of mindfulness and equanimity, so that we're seeing things clearly and undisguised.

One definition that I recently came across of dukkha, which I really love and feel expresses the broadest meaning of that Pali term, describes it as "the inevitability of unwanted experiences." What a concise way of describing this aspect of conditioned existence! We can really understand change and impermanence clearly, but we may sometimes be trying to avoid the experience of this universal truth. This short phrase encapsulates it: the inevitability of unwanted experiences.

Given this truth, and given that it comes in our lives—things happen to us that we don't want, or things that we do want go away—this process is just going on all the time. Without equanimity, it results in a lot of suffering. With equanimity, we understand it with wisdom. We say, "Yes, this is just part of life, part of being alive." And so we can learn to relate to it with much greater ease and much less suffering.

Then we experience the truth of selflessness, because we're seeing that nothing lasts long enough to be called self. All of our experience is just a passing show. As our experience deepens, we even see that consciousness itself, the knowing faculty itself, is continuously dissolving along with every object that's being known. Even that, which is sometimes the last holdout of the sense of "I," of self—"Well, I'm the one knowing it all"—but when the equanimity is strong, safe, and profound, then even consciousness itself is seen as arising and passing, not to be held onto. There's no place left for the self to take a stand.

As each of these insights into impermanence, unreliability, and selflessness matures, we also pass through various stages of meditative experiences. These stages themselves are a field for developing equanimity, because some of them

We're filled with exhilarating rapture when we see for the very first time in our practice, when we experience for the first time, the very rapid arising and passing away of phenomena. It's happening so quickly, and the mind can become so exhilarated, so radiant at that point. It's a very blissful state.

And then at other times, we go through periods of really profound distress in our meditation. This is not a mistake. It's part of the natural unfolding of the path. We see that nothing at all in our experience provides true and lasting happiness because everything is continually disappearing and dissolving. How many beautiful and wonderful experiences have you had in your lives? Probably countless. Many moments of happiness and pleasure and wellbeing. And yet, where are they now? It's not that they were not to be experienced and enjoyed in the moment, but we must always remember that they're not the source of lasting happiness precisely because they don't last. The Buddha was pointing to something beyond that, a kind of happiness beyond.

If we persevere through all of these different experiences in our meditation as the path unfolds, we then come to a maturing of these insights into impermanence and dukkha and selflessness in a stage of practice

called equanimity about all formations. This is a very mature place of development. It's said to resemble the mind of an arahant—this is the kind of mindset that an arahant, a fully enlightened being, abides in. Of course, we're not yet arahants, and so we may experience this stage for some time, but it also is not permanent. Yet it provides the field, the very balanced foundation, for moments of true awakening, the experience of nirvana, the highest peace, to emerge.

I want to read a description from one of the Thai masters describing this place of equanimity, equanimity about formations. He wrote: "At some point, the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content and all is seen as simply mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own, a perfect balance of mind with no reactions. There is no longer any doing."

I hope you've gotten some sense of the value and the power and the quality of this enormously beneficial mind state of equanimity. The question then is: how do we develop it? How do we strengthen this incredibly beneficial quality in all of its various manifestations, both in the midst of worldly activities and in our meditation practice?

I'll go through a few suggestions and touch on them briefly. The great Thai master Ajahn Chah had one example which we can bring into our lives in so many different circumstances. One time he was talking to a group of disciples—nuns and monks and lay people that were practicing with him—and he held up a cup like this. He asked, "How should you relate to the cup in a wise way?" Then he answered: "You should relate to the cup as if it's already broken." This so clearly captures both the importance of taking care of the cup in whatever way is appropriate, but also not being attached to it, because at one point or another it will be already broken. It is going to change.

Can we relate to all the aspects of our experience in this way? We can bring in both a profound seriousness about it and also a sense of humor—I think that combination can serve us well. Can we treat all experiences as already broken or already gone? Because it will be done. Then we can engage in as full a way as possible, in as loving and compassionate a way as possible, enjoying the moment but without attachment, because we're relating to it as if it's already gone, the cup is already broken.

The Buddha gave one other very practical piece of advice about establishing equanimity: it's strengthened by associating with wise and equanimous people. In a way it's such common sense. If we habitually associate with people who are very angry or agitated or greedy or reactive, if this is the environment we're living in, it makes it more difficult for us to cultivate equanimity within ourselves. We become influenced by the people around us. If we are associating with wise people, equanimous people, non-reactive people, then it's catchy. We begin to settle into that quality of being in ourselves and it actually becomes stronger. Then that becomes a gift we can offer to others.

We can also develop equanimity as one of the brahmaviharas. There is a meditative technique, just as there is with metta or compassion or mudita, empathetic joy. There's a meditation practice that we do. It

basically goes through the same sequence of working with different people in different categories. But the phrase we use in equanimity is very interesting because the phrase itself is imbued with wisdom. I think this is what gives equanimity a particular power. Along with the balance of mind, there is the understanding of the wisdom that gives rise to it. This comes across profoundly in the equanimity meditation.

The phrase is—and I'll use "people" generally, though we could apply it to ourselves or to particular individuals—"People's happiness or unhappiness depends on their actions, not upon my wishes." Just that.

It's the realization that we can have the most loving wishes for people's happiness and their wellbeing. But ultimately, their happiness and wellbeing depends on their own actions of body, speech, and mind—and mind in particular. We can wish, "May you be happy," but if people are continuing to cultivate qualities of greed and anger and covetousness and jealousy and envy, we can wish for them to be happy, but their happiness does not depend on our wishes. It depends on what they're cultivating within themselves.

And so this phrase of equanimity actually brings about the quality of equanimity. Even as we are cultivating metta and compassion with a genuine wish for happiness, we can remain equanimous in whatever their situation is, knowing that ultimately their happiness depends upon their own actions.

Here again, I want to emphasize that this feeling of equanimity does not imply that we withdraw or stay disengaged. We try to do what we can, what would be helpful to do. We try to help others cultivate wholesome actions of body, speech, and mind, knowing that that's going to be the cause of happiness. So we engage in that way, really with a heart of love and compassion, but at the same time understanding that ultimately people's happiness or unhappiness depends upon their actions, not upon my wishes.

I have found in doing the Brahma Vihara practice at different times over the years, for extended periods of time, that each one had its own particular flavor and benefit. It was very interesting when I began to do the equanimity meditation and to feel that quality of evenness, of stability, of impartiality, of openness and connectedness, but with non-reactivity in my heart or mind. It was just being open, understanding the truth of how things unfold.

Let me share one very simple way of strengthening equanimity. This comes back to our meditation practice, our mindfulness practice. It's so simple it almost feels like cheating, but it works.

Suppose you're sitting and practicing mindfulness. This is particularly a function of the tool of mental noting—and particularly noting when things are either pleasant or unpleasant. Notice the tone of voice of the note.

So you're sitting and maybe you begin to feel some pain. "Pain, pain, pain." And in the note, you can feel the edge of aversion in the tone. Or maybe something pleasant. "Oh, pleasant, pleasant, pleasant." And you can feel the enjoyment of it, the seduction of it in the tone of voice.

First, the noting is very helpful in this regard because it's highlighting these reactions in the mind that maybe we wouldn't have even noticed. The tone of voice shows us what the state of mind is. And then here's the trick: simply by changing the tone of voice of the note, it changes our mind state.

If there's some pain and you see the noting is filled with some kind of judgment or aversion—"pain, pain, pain"—and then obvious suffering, you can shift: "pain, discomfort." Immediately, as you change the tone of the note, you can feel the mind state relaxing into equanimity, into openness. I would suggest you really experiment with this because it is so simple.

I want to end with one last story, an equanimity story. It has to do with using mindfulness of the mind, mindfulness of awareness itself, as a way of cultivating equanimity. I had such an interesting experience of this that it stayed with me and has become part of my practice.

This goes back quite a few years. I was living here in Barre, Massachusetts. In the wintertime, it's really cold. One year during the winter months, some friends and I went down to the Caribbean for a week's vacation. We went to a Caribbean island and it was beautiful. At every sense door, it was pleasant—pleasant sight and sound, the warm air, beautiful ocean, everybody going around internally noting "pleasant, pleasant, pleasant." It was very delightful.

The week was over, things became otherwise. Back to Barre, Massachusetts. It was in the middle of a particularly cold spell, like twenty degrees below zero. Freezing cold, icy winds. It was so cold it was burning.

I wasn't outside much, but when I did go out, the cold was so intense that it became interesting to me. I started just opening as best I could to the intensity of the unpleasantness—the cold, the burning cold. And what I saw in that moment was so interesting. The awareness, the quality of awareness itself, did not care whether it was cold and unpleasant or warm and pleasant. Because the function of awareness is simply to know. It's like a clear mirror reflecting whatever comes in front of it, not choosing to reflect this and not that, no preference. It just reflects.

The mind, awareness, just knows. And when I saw that, it was so illuminating—the possibility, at least at times and for moments, of exploring this. Sometimes perhaps in intense experiences, or maybe in more minor ones. Simply becoming mindful of the knowing aspect of what's happening. The knowing of a sight or a sound or sensation or smell, whatever it may be. And to explore in some way that quality of knowing that is not affected by pleasant, by unpleasant, by pain, by pleasure. It simply knows. And that is the expression, the manifestation of this beautiful quality of equanimity.

As equanimity develops, as it gets stronger, there's less reactivity to changing circumstances. We know on deeper and deeper levels that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

The Buddha repeated many times in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, words that sum up the fruit of our practice and where our practice is leading, the freedom

that's possible through these understandings. It's what I'd like to conclude with.

The Buddha said: "And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world."

For me, that just evokes this place of great openness and freedom. One abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

Let's sit for a minute or two, letting the words settle, coming back into the body with mindfulness and equanimity.

May all beings enjoy the peace of equanimity.

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