

Equanimity

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

I have a recurring conceit that amuses me. It is that I have identified the single ingredient that makes vipassanā “work”. It becomes the topic of my thoughts for a short period until I notice some other aspect which then becomes the one key thing. Recently it’s been equanimity. Equanimity is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “calmness and composure, especially in a difficult situation”. Apparently, it derives “from Latin *aequanimitas*, from *aequus* ‘equal’ + *animus* ‘mind’” and also has the sense of “fairness, impartiality” as we would expect of a Judge presiding over a trial. If you’ve done a retreat with me, you may remember me defining suffering as “wanting things to be other than they are”. This is the opposite of equanimity; it’s the disturbance of the mind trying to make experience fit the ideal, the rejection of the present. Another way of defining equanimity, then, might be as “contentment with things being just as they are”. But this appears to carry the invalid suggestion that we should be content with things like poverty and hunger, ecological collapse and war. So, maybe, instead of “contentment” it should be “allowing things to be just as they are”? But the problem with “allowing”—with its connotations of “permit” and “let”—is that it suggests too much control. We see from meditation that we are not in control. If we were, we would choose not to have incessant destructive thoughts and strong emotions like fear and anger arise. Equanimity is something of all of these, though. In the Vipassanā Guidelines we read on retreat, we are encouraged to examine our experience “without any interference whatsoever, ... simply watching” in a way “that does not control or manipulate ... judge or question”. What this is really pointing out is the kind of needy manipulation of experience we habitually make. Whatever our experience, we interfere because we want it to be different; we control and manipulate because we want it to go a different way; we judge and question from a place of imagined superiority or inferiority. This wanting things to be other than they are is the fundamental dissatisfaction the Buddha labelled “*dukkha*”. The work of meditation is finding a way where our relationship with experience isn’t one of habitually interfering like this, isn’t automatically wanting things to be other than they are. It’s clear that there is something in the relationship we have with experience that makes it dissatisfying. When this relationship is based in “greed” (wanting something to bolster our sense of self), “ill-will” (wanting something to diminish our, or somebody else’s, sense of wellbeing), or “delusion” (not caring), it results in dissatisfaction, *indukkha*. We know that when we don’t react to difficult situations, when we give ourselves time to calm down, to get perspective, we generally handle them better. It is this same mechanism that these vipassanā instructions develop. They contain all we need. We simply watch, without any interference whatsoever—without controlling, manipulating, judging or questioning—whatever arises in our experience. It is in this way that we develop equanimity, and with more equanimity there’s less *dukkha*. So this is why my topic of the month is equanimity. But as I write this, it occurs to me that,

without awareness, without mindfulness, we would find it difficult to develop equanimity. Hmm, so maybe mindfulness is that one key thing then ...?

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