Wrong Equanimity

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We’re here practicing mindfulness, but there’s a lot of confusion about what mindfulness means. Sometimes we’re told that mindfulness means simply being accepting of whatever comes, not interfering with things that arise in the present moment. That’s actually equanimity. Mindfulness is something else altogether. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. Like when we’re focused on the breath, you focus your attention continually on the breath. You remember to stay with the breath. And you remember to look at the breath in a particular way. You establish mindfulness by looking at the breath in and of itself. In doing that, you develop lots of other qualities as well. There’s the mindfulness that keeps the breath in mind. There’s the alertness that watches the breath. And there’s the element of effort that you put into maintaining mindfulness, maintaining alertness. These three qualities have to work together. Then there’s the question of what you want to do with the breath. The Buddha gives instructions for breath meditation. The first two are simply watching to see the length of the breath. From there, you can extrapolate to look at the texture, the speed, the range of the breath. In other words, whether it’s narrow or broad. Then on in, he says, you train yourself. In other words, there’s an element of will. We often think that we’re here just to watch the breath in and of itself and not to interfere with it at all. But that’s not what the Buddha says. Be aware of the whole breath, the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Allow the breath to grow calm. There’s got to be an element of will here. There’s an element of effort. This is where the Buddha’s teachings on karma come in. The Buddha says there’s always an element of choice in the present moment, always an element of will. Otherwise, you wouldn’t experience the present. So what you’re doing is learning how to train the will. Get more sensitive to how you can affect things right here in the present moment. In other words, if the breath feels uncomfortable, you don’t just sit there watching uncomfortable breathing. You think about changing it to make it a better place to settle down. When pains come into the body, you’re not just sitting there watching the pain, allowing it to do whatever it wants to do. First, you try to see what’s causing the pain. If you don’t participate in the present moment consciously, all your potential anticipation becomes subconscious, and you don’t know how much of your own mental activity is creating that pain or contributing to the pain unless you try changing that activity. How about breathing this way? How about focusing on the breath that way? How about thinking of the breath doing this, thinking of the breath doing that? When you’re thinking these ways, you begin to discover there are all these subconscious sensations that never got questioned, that were actually contributing to the pain. So remind yourself, you’re always doing something in the meditation, so you might as well do it consciously and do it as skillfully as possible. You’re not here totally passive. There’s got to be an active component in what you’re doing. Otherwise, you don’t really know what’s going on. As I said, if you’re not consciously active, all the activity becomes subconscious. It’s never called into question. It’s never pushed around. If you don’t push it around, it doesn’t show itself. Then it just keeps operating on that subconscious level. You never gain any insight into it. But if you start thinking about, say, the breath going to the different parts of the body, the breath going through the pain that you may feel on your legs, wherever, you find things happening that you didn’t expect. Then the question is, “Well, why didn’t you expect them?” Well, you had certain assumptions. In this way, the experience of the meditation questions your assumptions by your being consciously active. Of course, equanimity does have a place in the practice. But if you notice in the different lists that include equanimity, for example, the Four Divine Attitudes or Sublime Attitudes, or the Seven Factors of Awakening, equanimity comes last. There’s a lot of more active participation first. Then you allow the mind to settle down in equanimity. In other words, you do what you can. In the case of the Sublime Attitudes, if you feel goodwill for yourself and others, well, you want to help them. Help yourself. Help others. Do things to alleviate pain. Wherever you see pain, you try to alleviate it. Wherever you see happiness, you’re sympathetic to it. You try to maintain it. It’s only in cases where you can’t alleviate the pain or the happiness can’t last. That’s when you develop equanimity. The equanimity on this level is actually the lowest level of equanimity. In other words, you just try to keep your mind on an even keel and not let it get affected by things that come in by way of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. You may try to maintain an even keel in spite of the waves that come at you. That, the Buddha said, is the lowest level of equanimity. The next level is the one that comes at the end of the four jhanas. When you’ve been able to develop a sense of rapture, you’ve been able to develop a sense of ease. They saturate the body, and there’s a sense of satisfaction, a sense of fullness and refreshment that comes. Then when the body gets refreshed, then you can let things go in a state of perfect equanimity. Again, it comes after activity. The same holds true of the seven factors of awakening. You start with mindfulness, which, again, is keeping the breath in mind, or keeping whatever your meditation object is in mind. Then there’s your analysis of skillful and unskillful qualities of the mind, your persistence in trying to get rid of the unskillful ones and encourage the skillful ones to the point where it does give rise to a sense of rapture and ease, just as in the jhanas. In fact, the seven factors of awakening are basically another way of looking at jhana practice. Only then, after concentration gets established, the mind is allowed to settle down in equanimity. This is a higher level of equanimity than simply even-mindedness. It comes from a sense of fullness, a sense of satisfaction and refreshment. But even that’s not the highest level of equanimity. There’s still a higher level that comes through discernment. When you start seeing through all the things that stir the mind up into creating stress and suffering for itself, then the mind is finally freed from all of its unnecessary suffering, and then it really is secure. It brings on a deeper level of equanimity. It comes out of being in a state that they call non-fashioning. It’s the point where your present input into the system finally does stop, because everything comes to a point of balance. There’s nothing you have to do. And this busy, busy mind of ours finally gets to stop. Then the equanimity that comes from having attained that state, that’s the highest level of equanimity. So notice, the Buddha doesn’t start out by saying, “Okay, have equanimity first.” He says, “The thing is to do first, so you can bring yourself to a state of equanimity.” So the way he teaches meditation is in terms of active participation. And as I said earlier, the reason he teaches it that way is that a lot of unstated assumptions or unquestioned assumptions lie under the surface of the mind. And they’re not going to get challenged unless you actively think of different ways of relating to the present moment, different ways of participating, different ways of trying to affect what you’re experiencing. The purpose of meditation instructions is to get you to think a little bit outside the box. That’s when the Buddha talks about breath sensations flowing through the body, where John Lee mentions manipulating these sensations. And many of us come to the practice and say, “What? What is he talking about?” Well, you sit and look and watch. Give the instructions a fair chance, and you begin to realize that you’ve got all kinds of strange assumptions about the energy flow in your body and what it can do for you. When you learn to question those assumptions, then things begin to open up in the mind. Light begins to come into the cellars of the body, cellars of the mind. So keep this point in mind while you’re meditating. It’s not just simply passively watching whatever happens. There’s got to be an active participation. It has to be conscious. So you’ll really start understanding the principles of cause and effect in the mind, and questioning those unquestioned assumptions that lead to a lot of stress and suffering that’s not really necessary. It’s only in this way that the meditation can become a skill. And the equanimity that results from it is not a forced equanimity. It comes naturally from having done everything you can. We know that the Buddha teaches contentment, but again, it’s not simply being content with whatever’s happening. He says, “Be content with your requisites of life, the situation around you that you find yourself in. But don’t rest content with a miserable meditation. Question it. When things aren’t going well, look around to see what you can change in what you’re doing.” When he stopped to think about it, the Buddha was an extremely demanding person. What did he want? He wanted total happiness, unconditional, something that we’re all told. “It’s totally unrealistic. Stop thinking about it and just satisfy yourself with what the world has to offer.” That kind of equanimity is dangerous. It places all kinds of limitations on us. Unfortunately for us, the Buddha didn’t accept those instructions. He worked and worked and worked and did everything he could, not only in terms of effort, but also in terms of developing the sharpness of his discernment until he finally did break through to an unconditional happiness. That’s the point where you can really rest. Until then, there’s work to be done. It’s a question of learning how to balance your desire to do better and your realistic realization of what you can do at any one particular time.

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