Mature Equanimity

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Sometimes you hear “mindfulness” defined as non-reactive awareness, and that the Buddha’s basic teaching is learning just how not to react to things. That cuts through the process of dependent co-arising, purifies your past karma. But one, the Buddha never defined mindfulness as non-reactive awareness. It literally means the ability to remember things. Sati kamsamsarati, to remember. There are two kinds of remembrance mentioned in the text. One is just the ability to remember things for a long time, especially remembering what you’ve done and said and thought for a long time. Secondly, it means keeping something in mind. Both meanings are relevant to the meditation. If you’re ever going to learn any kind of skill in your meditation, you have to be able to remember what you did in the past that got good results. So you can apply that lesson to what you’re doing right now. And that’s for keeping something in mind. If you’ve got a topic, if you’ve got a frame of reference, you want to keep that frame in mind—the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, and so on. You keep that frame in mind. Refer all of your experiences to that particular frame, whichever one you’ve chosen. For example, if you’re working with the body as your frame of reference, try to relate everything to bodily experience. Even mental events can be experienced in the breath. Say anger arises. There’s going to be a change in your breathing. When you’re taking the breath as your frame of reference, focus on that aspect. Where is there a tightness in the breathing? Where is there a change in the rhythm, a change in the quality, a change in the texture of the breathing? Focus on that. Work with that. That way you maintain your frame of reference and don’t let yourself get carried off with the content of the angry thought. Also, you find it a lot easier to deal with the anger once you can deal with the physical side of it, the physical reaction to the anger. It’s because we have these physical reactions that are so unpleasant that we feel we have to act out of the anger to sort of get it out of our system. But if you learn to attack the anger through the back door, notice how it affects your breathing. Instead of repressing it or denying it or acting out on it, you decide to diffuse it by consciously breathing in a way that’s comfortable, that doesn’t allow the sense of tension or tightness or restriction to build up in the body. You can even do this with sights and sounds. You notice that certain sights or sounds affect the breath energy in the body. This is one of the reasons why they have such an impact on the mind. So again, consciously breathe in a way that doesn’t get affected by those sights and sounds and other sensations. Keep your sense of the breath in the body full. In the texts, they give an image of a solid door. If you throw a ball of string at the solid door, it doesn’t make any indentation in the door at all. The solid door stands for mindfulness immersed in the body, mindfulness filling the body. One of the ways of doing that is to get the breath energy filling the body as well. So that’s what mindfulness means. It’s coupled with alertness. You’re alert to what’s going on in the body as, at the same time, you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath energy throughout the body. Keep your awareness filling the body. The combination of mindfulness and alertness, together with what the texts call ardency, the ease of the qualities, that you bring to the practice. These are the qualities that establish mindfulness. When mindfulness is established, that gives you the topics or the themes of your concentration. The practice of the satipaṭṭhāna is not something separate from jhāna. Many times it’s mentioned together in the texts. In fact, there’s one passage where it says that the themes of right concentration are the four establishings of mindfulness. They’re not separate things. It’s just that when mindfulness gets really solid and strong, it all turns into concentration. It turns into absorption. So if this is mindfulness, what’s the place of nonreactive awareness? Nonreactive awareness is actually another way of translating equanimity. It’s one of the qualities that’s developed. It’s one of the four brahmaviharas. It’s one of the seven factors of awakening. It’s one of the qualities you want to develop in the practice, but it’s not the only one. Notice that when it’s listed in these various lists, that one, equanimity in and of itself is not enough. Secondly, it comes at the end of the list. It’s not your first approach. Last night I was talking to someone who’s suffering from some illness. She said, “Well, I’ve got to learn how to practice equanimity about this illness.” I said, “Well, first you’ve got to go see the doctor. See what the doctor says. See what the doctor can do. If nothing can be done, then you practice equanimity.” In other words, equanimity always comes after your attempt to be skillful in other ways. In the case of the brahmaviharas, you start out with goodwill. You don’t just start out by saying, “Well, to hell with everybody. Things are just going to be the way they’re going to be.” That’s not skillful. To be skillful, you have to start out with goodwill for other beings, and then you have to act on that goodwill. When you see people are suffering, you try to help them if you can. If you see that people are happy, you try not to be jealous. When you’ve developed these qualities, and even when you do have fully developed goodwill, compassion, and sympathetic joy, even if there’s not enough to be done to help people, that’s when you practice equanimity. In other words, if you see there are people that are suffering, but you can’t help them, that’s when you have to practice equanimity. If you see people enjoying the fruits of past actions, they’re getting complacent, and you can’t help them out of their complacency, that’s when you have to practice equanimity. It comes after other attempts to be skillful, because it’s only after attempting to be skillful that you begin to get a sense of the range of skillful action. If you switch immediately into the equanimity mode, you miss a lot of important lessons. The same holds true with the seven factors of awakening. You start with mindfulness, this ability to keep things in mind, and then the second factor is analysis of qualities. It’s a very active factor. In other words, figuring out what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. This is followed by right effort, acting on your understanding of what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. To eliminate unskillful qualities from the mind is to develop skillful ones. In one of the texts, the Buddha talks about how that simple process leads to the practice of jhana, the practice of good, solid concentration. First you eliminate unskillful thoughts, you promote skillful ones. Thoughts that are not imbued with sensual passion, thoughts that have no harmfulness to them, thoughts that have no ill will. And then you notice that even when you’re thinking these good thoughts, these nice thoughts, they can tire out the mind. So the mind tends towards growing centered, letting them go. What this means is you don’t develop equanimity about the state of your mind, “Well, this happens to be the state of my mind. I’ll just watch it.” You have to get actively involved. Even in the Mahasattva Upatthana Discourse, the Buddha talks about watching the mind when unskillful qualities arise, watching it when they go away, watching it when skillful qualities come, watching them when they go away, and then doing your best to eliminate the unskillful ones and to promote the skillful ones. You have an agenda. It’s not non-reactive awareness. You really are getting involved. It’s only as you get involved with more and more skill that you can bring the mind to equanimity of a proper sort, the sort that comes when your job is done to the best of your ability. And even then, equanimity isn’t the end. The balance has to get more and more and more precise. Your ability to detect unskillful qualities has to get more and more refined. Finally, you can bring the mind to a state that’s called non-fashioning, attamayatha, is the Pali term. In order to do that, you really have to be very, very observant of what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. That understanding can only come by getting involved. If you start out by being Aquinas about whatever happens, no matter what, without working on developing skillfulness. John Cha called that the equanimity of a water buffalo. The water buffalo, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen one, but they’re kind of dumb. They stand out in the rain. Even though there’s shelter, they don’t go into the shelter. They just stand where they are. When it’s hot, they stand in the heat. It’s basically laziness, when you come right down to it. There’s a story of a monk, half of his roof blew off one time in the rainy season, so he just said, “Well, I’ll just learn how to live with this, in which I’m living with a blown-off roof.” John Cha found out about this and immediately had him fix the roof. It’s only if there’s nothing that can be done, that’s when you have to develop equanimity. The only way you can know whether something can be done or not is to give it a try. This is why we work at our meditation, why we work at concentration. It’s not something that just may happen to happen or may not happen to happen. You just sit here hoping that it’ll come and visit you every now and then. That’s not developing anything at all. It may be developing patience, but it’s a lot of other qualities that are needed in the practice as well. An understanding comes when you get involved, see what works, see what doesn’t work, and you get more and more skillful at managing your own mind, until the point when you actually can come to equanimity of a mature sort, the equanimity that comes when your job is done. you

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