Equanimity

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Equanimity plays an important role in the practice. In fact, it plays many roles. The Buddha talks about equanimity in different contexts and has a slightly different meaning in each context. There’s what might be called social equanimity. It’s part of the Four Sublime Attitudes, like the chant we chanted just now, a reflection on the principle of karma. There are certain areas where you simply can’t make changes. There are good people you’d like to help, you try to help, but they’re still suffering. There comes a point where you realize you can’t do anything more for them. And then there are people whose motives seem downright evil, and yet they seem happy, and there’s nothing you can do about that either. That’s where you try to develop sympathetic joy. It’s not easy. You don’t want them to suffer. In either case, you have to develop equanimity. That’s kind of a social equanimity, and it applies to yourself as well. You see areas where you just simply can’t make changes, and you have to regard them with equanimity. The purpose of this is so you can focus your attention on areas where you can make changes. Equanimity doesn’t simply mean accepting things as they are and not trying to improve them. It’s more a selective practice of learning to put aside the things where you can’t make changes so you can focus your energies on the areas where you can. And even here, there are different kinds of equanimity. You try to develop equanimity towards the changing sensations of life. There’s pleasure, and there’s going to be pain. If you get too attached to the pleasure, too attached to wealth, too attached to status, too attached to praise, you know you’re setting yourself up for a fall. And so you learn how to be more equanimous about these things as they come, as they go. This is the basic equanimity of folk wisdom. I had a friend who was teaching English and Java, and he was asked to explain to me how to direct a play as a way of teaching the kids English. Because he had a background as a musician, he ended up with the idea of having them do a musical. And as he worked through the idea, he came up with the idea of taking the musical Fiddler on the Roof and transporting it to a Javanese setting, which meant changing a lot of the details. But as he was going through the script with some of his Javanese friends, he got to the relationships within the family and the kind of folk wisdom that the parents were teaching their children. He’d say, “Is this something a Javanese parent would say?” And his friends would say, “Yes, that’s what they say all the time.” Like the song “Sunrise, Sunset, The Year Has Passed By.” We have happiness and we have tears, and you have to be aware of the fact that it’s going to be both. There’s kind of a bittersweet quality to it. And learning how to accept the good with the bad, that’s what a lot of folk wisdom is about anywhere in the world. You don’t let the good things get you too excited because there’s a possibility for a change. You don’t let the bad things get you depressed because, again, there’s a possibility for a change. Basic folk wisdom. For the Buddha, that’s about the lowest level of equanimity, though, because it’s predicated on the idea that things don’t get better than this. You might as well not try and just learn how to accept things as they come and as they go, and learn to be at ease with their comings and goings. The Buddha called that equanimity based on multiplicity. That’s not very stable. When you think about it, it’s a very pessimistic kind of equanimity, based on the idea that there is no such thing as true happiness or total happiness. But the Buddha didn’t stop there. He said, “There is such a possibility, and it’s something we can work towards.” That’s what equanimity is all about, learning to be equanimous about the things we can’t make a difference, but realizing that there is a possibility for ultimately true happiness, total happiness, through our own efforts. That’s why it’s so important that we learn how to focus our efforts on the practice, because that’s the path of action that gives the best results and leads to the truest happiness. It so happens that one of the factors that is in that path is right concentration, and one of the factors in right concentration is equanimity. Here it’s more of a feeling tone. The first description is in the third jhana. First you go through states of rapture and pleasure. In other words, as the mind begins to settle down. If you’re settling down in a skillful way, there’s a sense of fullness that comes as you stay with the breath coming in, stay with the breath going out, and you’re going no place else. You allow the body just to be as it is. You’re not pushing and pulling it here and there. There’s a nice sense of ease and stillness of being undisturbed. If you look carefully, you notice that when the mind forms a thought, it’s already disturbing the nervous system in some part of the body. There has to be a pattern of tension in order to hold that thought in mind. When you’re working with the breath, the breath itself is the main object, so you don’t have to imagine something. You don’t have to create this thought pattern. It’s a very subtle level of tension that goes with this focus on the breath, but much subtler than the tension that comes with having to think about the past, think about the future, think about someplace else. As you’re not squeezing or pulling the different parts of the body in different ways, there’s a sense of fullness that comes as you simply allow the sensation of the body here in the present to blossom. There’s a sense of fullness, a sense of refreshment, a sense of ease. As you go through the deepening layers of concentration, when you hit the third layer, there’s a sense of equanimity, followed in the fourth layer by a sense of neither pleasure nor pain. This equanimity is much more solidly based. It’s not based on the kind of folk wisdom that keeps pains in mind when you’re experiencing pleasure. It keeps pleasures in mind when you’re experiencing pain. It’s another alternative entirely. We would call it the middle way between the two. There is a sense of pleasure, but it’s not the typical worldly pleasure that you know, that you can indulge in. “This is a pleasure,” he says, “that has no drawbacks.” As you stay with it, there comes a sense of evenness. That’s the equanimity that comes through concentration. It’s part of the middle way. But even that isn’t the case. The goal. It’s part of the path. And it’s reminding yourself that it is part of a path with more elements than just a simple sense of even keel, or a sense of evenness, a sense of equanimity. There are other aspects of the path as well, the virtue and the discernment that make the path. They make your concentration the right concentration. So even though you can gain a sense of equanimity in the practice, you have to remind yourself that’s not the goal. There’s more to be done. As the Buddha freely admits, there is a sense of disappointment at that point. You’d like to be able to be finished right here. Some people actually say that having goals is immediately setting yourself up for a fall because then you’ve got something you haven’t attained. Well, that’s assuming you don’t attain it. Or that it’s bad to have a goal and bad to have a sense that there’s more work to be done. The Buddha’s approach was different. He said, “Have a mature attitude towards the goal.” In other words, if you have a sense of dis-ease over the fact that there’s more to be done, don’t think of it as more to be demanded of you. It’s more a sense that there’s a greater happiness to be found if you look more carefully. Think of it in that way, and then start looking. The sense of more to be done should be a motivating factor for you to act more, do more, look more carefully into what’s going on in the mind. Seeing the nature of the actions you’re making right now, the choices you’re making right now, which ones cause stress, which ones don’t cause stress, and as you really look carefully, you’ll find that you peel away layers of dis-ease, layers of stress that you were hardly aware of because there was so much in the background, so constantly there, that they didn’t register. Our eyesight is very much like that of snakes. They say that snakes don’t see stationary objects. All they see is motion. This is the nature of our attention. We pay attention to things that change and things that are in the background we hardly notice. But as your gaze gets more patient, has a more solid grounding, you begin to see even that what seems to be a steady sense of stress in the background actually has its variations. It comes and it goes, comes and goes, comes and goes, and you begin to notice patterns in its comings and goings. You realize that you’re doing things that are causing stress. Very subtle things in terms of identifying with a particular voice in the mind, identifying with a particular mental activity, and having a very deeply ingrained sense that this is a particular habit that you’ve got to keep up. You can’t imagine not thinking or acting in that way. But when you see that it’s causing stress, as the Buddha said, it’s not necessary, and you do your best to let it go. To stop that activity and see what happens. As you work through these layers of stress in this way, you finally open up to something totally beyond. As the Buddha says, there’s a different sense of equanimity that comes as a result of that, a total sense of peace. But it is a different kind of equanimity from the ones that he discussed before. Many times we feel like we’d like to clone that kind of equanimity. You can’t clone it. It’s something that comes only when very deep changes have been made, very deep realizations have been made as a result of the practice. The other kinds of equanimity you can develop. You can develop the folk wisdom type of equanimity, the sunrise/sunset kind of equanimity. You work on that, it’s part of the path. You work on the equanimity towards the principle of karma as a way of focusing your efforts in areas where they really are productive. You work on the equanimity that comes with concentration. These are things that you can work on, things that you can create. The equanimity that comes from having completed the practice isn’t something you create. Because after all, the goal of the practice isn’t something you create either. It’s something you find. And once you’ve found it, the other equanimity is there. So what you work on are these different types of equanimity that form part of the path, that take you to where you want to go. The question arises here, would you conceive the path as something that takes place over time, that we’re not there yet, and it’s going to be sometime in the future where we’re going to finally get the goal? Or should we look for the goal right here, right now? It’s a false dichotomy. You work right here, right now, focus your attention right here, right now, on the path. And at some point, the path will open up into the goal. It’ll be right here, right now, when it happens. So you don’t look anywhere else. It doesn’t do you any good to look down the road, down how many years it’s going to take. That creates unnecessary burdens for the mind. It’s like going to a mountain on the edge of the horizon. You focus on the road that takes you there. You glance up occasionally to make sure the road is going in the right direction. But the main focus is right on what you’re doing right here, right now. So we focus on the equanimity that forms a part of the path. Because you can clone the path. The Buddha describes the path, and you can create those states of mind through intentional activity. You can’t clone the goal. Because whatever you clone is an intended action, and that has to be part of the path. The goal itself is something that’s totally outside of intention. It’s outside of karma. So you work on creating the goal, creating in the mind the states that form the path. And when they’re mature, when they’re ripened, they’ll yield the results you want.

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