Equanimity

May 20, 2017

We start every meditation session with thoughts of goodwill—goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for others, wishing for happiness, a true happiness. What does that mean? The thoughts themselves are not going to make us happy, although sometimes you do feel better about yourself when you can think lots of goodwill. But what does it do for others? Some people may feel thoughts of goodwill, but the happiness we’re wishing for them goes deeper than that. We’re wishing that everybody could understand the causes for true happiness and act on them. So, may all beings be happy? But then the question is, will all beings be happy? That’s one of those questions the Buddha never answered. But notice that goodwill is not the only one of those attitudes we develop. There’s equanimity, realizing that people’s experience of pleasure and pain is going to depend on their actions. And their actions are their actions. In other words, you can’t force people to be skillful, and you can’t make them skillful, no matter how much they want to be skillful. They have to do it themselves. So if our happiness is going to depend on seeing other people happy, we’re going to suffer, which is why we need equanimity. Equanimity doesn’t mean you don’t care, but it means that you’re not going to make your happiness depend on theirs. You have to find an independent happiness. When you come right down to it, independent happiness is easier on all sides, both for you and for the people around you. If your happiness depends on other people having a certain attitude or a certain way of thinking or a certain feeling tone, the way you act on it is going to be very different from if your attitude is, “Okay, I’m happy inside, and I want you to be happy.” But my happiness doesn’t depend on yours. You’re not leaning on that person to be a certain way. So in one sense, you’re giving them a little bit of freedom. You’re also giving yourself freedom. And you put yourself in a better position to see, “Okay, what does this person really need?” If you’re anxious, look at that anxious quality of their happiness. If you’re anxious for their happiness, that anxious quality is going to affect your relationship with that person. So you’ve got to find an independent source inside. This is why we practice meditation, to give you that independent source. As Ajahn Fuen once said, if goodwill doesn’t have the equanimity of concentration, or the equanimity of jhana, it’s going to cause suffering. So we need to have this independent source of food inside. And you notice, as the Buddha describes, the states of jhana. You start out breathing in a way that gives rise to pleasure, and then you work that pleasure through the body. You stay with the breath. You don’t leave the breath, but you notice how certain ways of breathing feel more comfortable than others. And when there’s a sense of ease, you think of it spreading. This requires a type of concentration which is the opposite of what we’re used to. It’s the way most people concentrate. You notice a lot of people say, “We’ve got to concentrate on this problem.” Their brows get furrowed, and they try to squeeze their mind into one point. But here, as we focus on one point in the body, our focus is actually expansive. Instead of confining things, we’re thinking about liberating things that we’re focusing on. So if you’re focused on the head, liberate the sensations of the head. If you’re focused on the chest, liberate the sensations of the chest. For some people, this comes naturally. For other people, it’s something you have to work at. But whether you have to work at it or not, it’s worth it, whatever work goes into it. Because then you can be with something and not clamp down on it. And then you can bring that attitude to the way you’re with other people. You can be with them, but you’re not clamping down on them. You’re not forcing them to be a particular way, demanding that they be happy so that you can be happy. So think of this as giving some freedom to yourself and to others. Focus on things in a way that gives them freedom. It starts with the breath. Give the breath some freedom. If you’re not sure what kind of breathing would feel good, experiment. Or you can just pose that question in the mind, “What does the body need right now?” and see if it responds. Sometimes it requires a little nudge. You ask yourself, “What would longer breathing be like?” Deeper. “What would it be like if the breath energy wasn’t coming in through the nose but was coming in through other parts of the body?” Hold that perception in mind and see what it does. See how the body responds. And you’ll find that the body can respond in lots of ways you wouldn’t have expected, simply by thinking in a way that allows it to do something it hasn’t normally been doing. See if you can bring a sense of ease to your focus. The focus should be steady but easeful. There was a person who taught tracking—in other words, how you find tracks of animals in the woods and how you follow them. It had something called scattershot focus. In other words, you were centered inside yourself, but your range of vision was as broad as possible. Because the animal tracks could be anywhere, and they could go off in any direction, and you wouldn’t have a wide range of awareness. But yet you wanted to be centered and still. That’s precisely the kind of focus we’re trying to develop here. The Buddha talks about jhana as a full-body awareness. Once there’s a sense of ease and pleasure, you work it through the entire body. When there’s a sense of awareness, you try to work that through the entire body. So your foundation is strong. It’s solid. There’s a word that’s used to describe concentration, ekagatha, which is sometimes translated as “one-pointedness.” There’s a lot written about how it has to be just one little point. Sometimes, even to the point of not being aware of your body. Your ears go deaf, your awareness of the body is gone, and there’s just this tiny point of awareness. But the Buddha never described it in that way. None of the analogies he uses to describe the state of concentration have things reduced to a single point. It’s always a full body, a whole lake filled with the cooling waters of a spring, or a lotus plant which is totally saturated with water from its roots to its tips, or a person’s body covered with a white cloth that extends to all parts of the body. So we’re trying to get a full-body awareness here. That word that’s translated as ekagatha, which they translate as “point,” can also mean “gathering place,” which seems to be a better translation. Your mind has a single gathering place. You’re gathered around the breath. Your whole awareness is gathered here. You’re not aware of the body, but your awareness is broad. That gives you a good foundation. If your concentration is a single point, then as soon as the point moves, your concentration is destroyed. But if the frame of your concentration is your whole body, then things can come and go within the context of that frame. But your frame stays solid. It’s like the difference between standing on tiptoe and standing on your full feet. There are people who can stand on tiptoe, but they have to jump and run around. Just standing there is very unstable. We know how bad it is for the posture. But if you stand on your feet, you’re more solid. You’re grounded in an open way. What we’re trying to do is give the mind a chance to settle down. Then things will come up. In the beginning, you’re not going to pay attention to them, but eventually you’ll find that you can pay attention to the thoughts. You can begin to see where they’re coming from, where they’re going, and not get sucked into them. This is a skill that’s useful not only when you’re doing concentration, but when you’re dealing with other people. That frame of equanimity that we’re trying to create. Therefore we have a sense of well-being inside, and our happiness doesn’t depend on people outside. It allows us to be with them, but not sucked into their stories, so that we can sympathize with them without having to suffer along with them. We use the words “compassion” and “being passionate with someone,” or “sympathy” and “having pathos with them.” They’re not the same. But the quality we’re trying to develop has nothing to do with the words. It’s a quality of trying to understand the person, wishing that person well, but realizing that our pleasure and pain and their pleasure and pain are two very different things. You can’t feel somebody else’s pain, no matter how much politicians tell you they feel your pain. You can see that they’re in pain, but you don’t have to recreate the pain inside you. That’s the sympathetic response that some of us have that’s really not all that helpful either side. If you really want to be helpful to somebody else, you have to be in a position where you can be solid. You don’t have to go through the ups and downs that they’re going through. And when you’re coming from this solid place, it’s a lot easier to find the right word or the right insight that might be helpful. So equanimity is not unfeeling. It’s simply independence. This is a quality we’re trying to develop here. But it’s a broad independence—solid, well-founded. It’s not blocking things out as much as it is learning how to be imperturbable, as it is aware of what’s going on. This is a good quality to develop as you’re sitting here, and a good quality to carry with you as you go into the world. Because the world has its ups and downs. When the Buddha talks about the qualities of the world, he reduces them to eight. There’s gain and loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. That’s pretty much it. And you see how people in the world go up and down, up and down, up and down. Then we suffer because of that. One of the signs of a really well-trained mind is that, as the Buddha said, when touched by the ways of the world, the mind is imperturbable. Because that has a happiness that doesn’t have to depend on these things. Love this grounding, and its influence will be good not only for you, but also for all the people you touch, through your thoughts, words, and deeds.

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