Equanimity as a Skill (outdoors)

August 21, 2022

There are a lot of things in the world that we cannot control, and those are the things for which we should have some equanimity so we can focus our energies on the things we can control. After all, the Buddha set out our duties. If you want to put an end to your suffering, there are four things you have to do. One is comprehend suffering and stress. Two is to abandon the cause. Three is to realize the cessation of suffering by developing the path. Things outside of that are not our duties. And if you waste your time on things that are not your duties, then you’re wasting precious time. That’s why we have to have some equanimity about the things that we simply cannot change. But there’s a skill in developing equanimity. If you just tell yourself, “Okay, I don’t care about this,” it becomes a small-hearted equanimity. You basically give up on the world. And that equanimity tends to the resentment, something you wanted to change but you couldn’t change. And you just tell yourself, “You’ve got to accept that.” There’s no joy in that equanimity, there’s no pleasure. If you want to develop equanimity that’s a skill, the Buddha says that you do it in such a way that first you give the mind a sense of well-being. And if you can’t find a sense of well-being outside, you learn how to create it from within. And you can do that in one of two ways. One is through concentration, the other is through discernment. With concentration, you focus on the breath right here, right now. And tell yourself to stay with nothing but the breath, wherever you feel it in the body. Try to be sensitive to it. You become sensitive to the breath as a whole-body process. You breathe in, the whole body’s breathing in. You breathe out, the whole body’s breathing out. Any place where there’s a sense of tightness, or tension, you allow it to relax. So it feels like the breath is flowing easily. And as you fill the body with that sense of well-being, after a while things begin to calm down. Things can get very still inside. That’s equanimity tinged with pleasure. Because you’ve fed yourself well. The other way to feed the mind is through discernment. Suppose there’s something that’s really weighing the mind down. And you remind yourself that all things in the world are inconstant, stressful, not-self, whatever arises is going to pass away. So whatever the burden is that’s weighing the mind down, someday that’s going to go, as with all things in the world. And when you think that, it lightens the mind. And you remind yourself that you don’t have to weigh your mind down with that. Because there are certain aspects that are totally beyond your control, so why bother? You’ve got better things to do. Sometimes there’s a sense of joy that comes with that, a sense of relief. That’s another kind of equanimity that’s a skill. The important point being is that you can’t let your happiness depend on things outside. You have to be able to develop a sense of well-being inside. And how are you going to do that? What are the resources you have inside? Actually, you’re trying to do it all the time, as the Buddha points out. We don’t just sit around passively and then react to things outside. The mind is actively shaping its experience. They’ve done studies to show that the calories that we take in through our food cannot account for all the calories that we expend in the course of a day. Where does that extra energy come from? It comes from the mind. As the Buddha points out, we are already shaping our experience. In three ways. What he calls bodily fabrication, which is your breath; verbal fabrication, which is direct thought and evaluation, which is basically the way you talk to yourself; and then metal fabrication, which is perceptions and feelings. Perceptions here are the metal labels you apply to things. Feelings are the feeling tones of pleasure, pain—neither pleasure nor pain that you focus on. We create these things and shape them, and through them we shape the rest of our experience all the time. That’s the energy we put into things. The Buddha is simply showing us there are better ways of doing it. He even teaches us how to breathe. “Breathe in a way that you’re aware of the whole body,” he says. “Breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure, makes you sensitive to rapture. Breathe in a way that calms the mind down. Breathe in a way that gladdens the mind. Breathe in a way that steadies the mind. Breathe in a way that releases the mind.” That’s your verbal fabrication. You can talk to yourself about the breath, talk to yourself about the mind dealing with the breath, and all the different ways he gives you of thinking about the world so that you don’t get worked up about things that lie beyond your control. Then finally there are the perceptions. You read the suttas and they’re full of analogies. Those are the perceptions the Buddha has you apply. Say that someone says something really horrible to you. He says, “Try to make your mind like earth.” People throw trash on the earth, but the earth doesn’t get disgusted. So when people throw the trash of their opinions on you, remind yourself, “Earth doesn’t react. It’s not bothered by these things.” Then you use some verbal fabrication to remind yourself, “But what they say is their karma. It has nothing to do with you. You’re the one who’s sucking it in.” Or as the Buddha says, “Make your mind like space. People can try to write words on space, but they don’t stick. Our problem is people say unpleasant things to us and we remember them. That’s letting it stick. Then we carry it around. Who are you going to blame then? You’re the one who’s carrying these words around inside. But if you make your mind like space, they can say what they want and it just disappears. So there are ways of fabricating your experience where you don’t have to suffer, where you can develop equanimity, skillful equanimity. Because remember, the Buddha never teaches equanimity on its own. Sometimes it’s in conjunction with the other brahmaviharas, like universal goodwill, universal compassion, universal empathetic joy. These are thoughts that lift the mind. Sometimes he teaches that as part of the practice for awakening you start with mindfulness, your ability to analyze what’s going on in the mind, the effort and energy you put into the practice, and then the rapture that comes, followed by calm, concentration, and equanimity. In every case, you feed the mind well first. So that equanimity comes not with a sense of resentment or resignation, but from a sense of fullness. You’re not hungry, trying to feed on parts of the world that resist feeding. You’re not wasting your time. So whatever excess energy you have, you can devote it to things that are good, things where you can make a difference. But it all starts inside. As I was saying this morning, the mind has to be its own refuge. And it can be its own refuge only if you train it. The Buddha is giving you instructions on how it’s done. He can’t train your mind for you. He can give you ideas. It’s up for you to see. You see the necessity to train your own mind, taking advantage of the fact that you do shape your experience, so you might as well shape it well. Turn your breath into a path. Turn the words that you speak to yourself in the mind into a path. Turn even the labels and feelings you have inside, turn them into a path, a path to the end of suffering. For most of us, we follow different paths. Some of the paths go down, some of the paths go up. But they all go up and down, up and down. The Buddha is teaching us how to shape these things in a way that they form a path to something that doesn’t change. And the equanimity that comes with that is the most solid of all. It’s because your internal needs for happiness have been totally met. And that’s for the rest of the world. You don’t have to feed off it anymore. You can still have your desires for things to go well. You can still have your compassion for others to try to do things to help them. But because the mind is not feeding off those desires, it’s not going to suffer. It’s like someone who’s well-fed, who has extra food left over so they’re happy to share. That’s the best place you can be. You can put your mind. And it is something you can do, given the resources you already have.

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