

Caring Without Clinging

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Several years back, about a year after I returned to America, I was teaching meditation to a group up in Orange County and I had my first interviews. One of the people in the retreat started her interview out by saying, “Buddhism: It’s all about love isn’t it?” And I was taken aback. I said, “Well, no, it’s all about freedom.” And *she* was taken aback.

We come from a culture in which love is very highly valued—not only as a social virtue, but also as a religious virtue. So it’s a little shocking when we come to another tradition where it’s not valued so highly.

The Buddha talks about dispassion, disenchantment, equanimity—and to us it sounds cold. But everything in the Buddha’s teachings is put in the service of freedom. As the Buddha once said, all of his teachings have a single taste: the taste of release. This means that all of his teachings on goodwill on the one hand, and equanimity, dispassion, disenchantment on the other, are all put in the service of freedom—realizing, on the one hand, that we have a certain freedom of choice in our actions right now, and that if we learn how to exercise that freedom skillfully, we can come to an ultimate freedom, total freedom, with no limits on the mind whatsoever.

So it’s good to keep that in mind as we think about the Buddha’s teachings on equanimity and dispassion. He’s not teaching people simply to be uncaring. He’s asking us to look: In what ways are we slaves to the idea of love, or the enjoyment of the emotion of love—or the enjoyment of happiness, or the enjoyment of sorrow? We do enjoy these things, the ups and downs, although when we take the downs, we often console ourselves by say, well, if we didn’t have the downs, we wouldn’t have the ups. Which is true. But the Buddha calls our values into question: Do we really want those? What are we getting out of them?

And when he calls for equanimity as a skill in the practice, is he saying that we should have no emotions at all? Or is he talking about our relationship to happiness and sadness, as they come? The answer is the second alternative. There are things that we like, things that we don’t like. Even the Buddha: There were things he liked and things he didn’t like. But he learned how to keep his mind from being overwhelmed by them. When people would come to study with him, some of them would listen to him but they wouldn’t follow through with his teaching, and they didn’t get the results. Of course, he didn’t like that. But he said he established mindfulness so that his mind was not overtaken by his sense of

dissatisfaction. And when the students *did* follow his teachings, and *did* gain awakening, it's not that he didn't like that. He did like it, but he didn't allow the sense of satisfaction to overcome his mind. What this means is that the mind has to learn how to look at these things and not get sucked into them.

This is another one of those issues around becoming. In fact, the Pali word for emotion, *bhāva*, is like *bhava*; *bhava* means "becoming." Then you make it *bhāva* with a long *a*, and it becomes "emotion." We like to get into the emotion. We like to taste it. But then we become slaves to it. We get addicted to the taste. We want to taste it again and again. We like getting wrapped up in it, without realizing that we've just allowed ourselves to become enslaved to these things and placed limitations on ourselves.

So it's not that the Buddha asks us not to be feeling, but he tells us to learn how to be free in the midst of these emotions. Learn how to observe them, step back from them, and don't get deluded by them. It's easy to get swayed by something when we're happy. We pick up all sorts of deluded ideas from it. What you want to be able to do is learn how to observe.

This is where his analysis of equanimity is important. He says there's equanimity that's based on multiplicity and equanimity based on singleness. The equanimity based on multiplicity is simply learning how to keep yourself from getting pleased or displeased by things that you see or smell or taste or touch, listen to, whatever. But it requires an act of the will and it doesn't have a foundation, which is why it's hard to maintain.

Equanimity based on singleness, however, comes from getting the mind into a good solid state of concentration. As we chanted just now, getting to the point where the breath gets more and more refined, the mind settles in, your sense of awareness fills the body, the sense of breath energy throughout the body feels connected and open, so there's a less and less need for the in-and-out breath, till you finally get to the point where the in-and-out breath goes still. That's purity of equanimity and mindfulness. That's your foundation for equanimity based on singleness.

And it gives you a point from which you can look on things. There's another interesting word-play in Pali. There's *upekkha*, which is equanimity, and there's *apekkha*, which means "looking on." The two are very similar. You look onto things from your state of equanimity: When they arise, you see them arise; when they pass, you see them pass away; and you realize you don't have to get caught up in them. They can happen—it's not like you're trying to prevent them from happening—but you want to make sure that you don't get caught up in the delusion that comes along with these things: the idea that when you're happy,

everything in the world is going to go fine. Actually, you know there are problems in the world. Or the delusion that when you're sad, everything in the world is miserable. Well, you know that things can often work out. You can't let your emotions cloud your vision and get you to make thoughtless generalities. You realize that each emotion is a state, and from within the state it's going to have a particular point of view. But you can't trust that point of view.

Things are a lot more trustworthy when the mind is really solid. After all, it was when the Buddha was in the fourth jhana that he was able to gain all the knowledges of his awakening. Not that the fact that he was in the fourth jhana guaranteed the truth of everything he saw. He saw his previous lifetimes, he saw beings arising and passing away: That wasn't yet his awakening, because, after all, those visions could've been wrong. But then he saw the truths of suffering or stress arising, passing away, and seeing why it arose and why it passed away, and what he could do to bring it to total cessation. Seeing that from a really still and equanimous mind: That's when he really knew. And that was the knowledge—seeing things in terms of the four noble truths—that allowed him to find something that was beyond equanimity and beyond the four noble truths. His knowledge of the total ending of suffering was the guarantee. But if he hadn't been able to bring his mind to that equanimity to begin with, he wouldn't have been able to open up to that other dimension.

So when the Buddha teaches equanimity, dispassion, disenchantment, he's not simply teaching us to have a stiff upper lip or to try not to feel anything at all. That's not what the purpose is. The purpose is to free the mind. Disenchantment, *nibbida*, can also be translated as distaste, disgust, revulsion; it relates to the fact that we're constantly feeding on things. We have to get to a point where we realize we don't want to feed on them anymore. The dispassion means that you don't allow the mind to be colored by these things, so that your vision isn't obscured.

All this is for the purpose of freedom, a true well-being that doesn't have to depend on feeding, that doesn't have to depend on the ups and downs of emotions. And being in that state doesn't mean that you're uncaring, it simply means that you don't need to feed anymore. And the compassion and the goodwill that can come from that state are very different from the compassion and goodwill that come from someone who needs to feed. When you need to feed, compassion has a clinging aspect; goodwill has a clinging aspect. And when there's clinging, there's a fear of allowing the thing being clung to to have its freedom.

This is what's revolutionary about the Buddha's ideas on goodwill and compassion. If they come from a heart that's totally free, then they're genuine goodwill and genuine compassion. But this is very different from the goodwill and

compassion that we're used to, where there's the element of clinging and holding on—enslavement. So it's important that we not mistake the warmth for what it's not. The warmth we often feel sometimes has this element of feeding. Which is not what we want. And the compassion that comes from someone who's not feeding on us: Don't think of that as cold. It's liberating.

When we can look at things from this perspective, then it's a lot easier to understand what the Buddha is getting at. We can sort out the various emotions in the mind, but it does require the skill of learning to get the mind to be centered and still, really centered, really stilled—feeding first on its concentration, on that equanimity based on singleness, then finally getting the mind to the place where doesn't need to feed at all. And that really is liberating. As Ajaan Lee says, you're not only liberating your own mind, but you're also giving freedom to everything else around you. That's why equanimity, dispassion, disenchantment, are things that we really want to work for. They're not to be feared.