

Injustice

September 18, 2009

Equanimity is one of the factors of awakening. And it's a quality of mind that we try to develop. But it's important to realize that it doesn't mean being totally passive, totally unable to recognize what's right or wrong. What it means is being able to keep the mind emotionally on an even keel—recognizing right actions, recognizing harmful actions, preferring skillful actions over harmful actions, but not getting knocked off kilter when things don't go well.

When you're working from equanimity, you're actually coming from a stronger place. If you come from anger or from greed, you end up doing and saying and thinking lots of unskillful things, even if you mean well.

Say you see injustice going on in the world and you want to put an end to it: It is possible to work for the end of injustice when you're coming from an equanimous mind state, a mind state that's solid and balanced.

The important point to notice here is what you're feeding on at any given time. If you're feeding on anger, it's like really spicy food: It may taste good but it's going to be bad for your stomach, all the way down through your intestines. You can feed on equanimity and do no damage to your intestines, and yet you can still act. That's an important skill to master.

Practicing the Dhamma doesn't mean becoming a doormat, or becoming totally oblivious to the problems of the world. Practicing the Dhamma means trying to develop a skillful attitude toward them.

Meanwhile, your emotional feeding habits have to be taken away from the world and focused more on skillful qualities of the mind inside. When you're feeding well inside, then your actions outside tend to be more skillful because you're not trying to find emotional gratification out of changing the ways of the world or changing other people. That kind of feeding tends to lead to disappointment—because there are a lot of people that don't want to be changed.

And you do have to recognize your limitations. This is why equanimity is never listed as a quality all on its own. It's always balanced out by other qualities.

In the brahmaviharas, you start with goodwill, the desire for happiness: your happiness, the happiness of all others. When you see that people are suffering, goodwill turns into compassion: wanting for that suffering to end.

When you see that other people are happy, you have empathetic joy for their happiness. You're not jealous; you're not resentful.

But then you come across cases where someone seems to be happy and

fortunate, prosperous, and yet they don't seem to deserve it. Whereas other people are suffering when they don't seem to deserve it, either. But you can't do anything about it for one reason or another. That's where you have to develop equanimity. It's a balance for the other three qualities, so that your goodwill doesn't burn out and you can focus your goodwill on areas where you really can be of help.

In other words, if you see there are areas where you can't bring about a change for the better, then you just have to let those areas go, realizing the limitations of karma: Your own karma and the karma of other people sometimes puts up obstacles. When you can recognize those obstacles—when after you've tried to help you find that you can't—you have to develop equanimity for those areas and focus on the areas where you can be of help.

Now, being exposed to the modern news media makes this difficult, because you learn about all kinds of problems in the world. It's bad enough reading the American news media. You read the *Guardian* you hear about all over the world: problems in Africa, problems in Asia, and there's only so much you can do. We have an information system of the gods but we're still stuck with our human limitations.

So you have to choose your battles, the areas where you can be of help: Those are the ones you want to focus on. As for the others, you have to develop equanimity toward your limitations, realizing that if you push hard in areas where you can't be of help at all, you're wasting energy that could otherwise be used more effectively in training your own mind, in helping people who you really can have an influence on.

This means looking at the areas where you feel aversion, where you feel upset over the injustices of the world, and you have to learn how to bring your mind to equanimity in areas where you can't be of help. Even where you *can* be of help, you have to be coming from equanimity. This doesn't mean that you don't care. It means that you've got to keep the mind on an even keel.

So when you feel anger coming up, you've got to recognize it not as the motive force that's going to bring about meaningful change in the world, but as an obstacle to skillful change, skillful action. Anger blinds you. You say things that you later realize were not skillful; you do things that you later realize were not skillful. But at the time, your sense of shame, your sense of compunction, your sense of what's going to be effective, gets blinded by the desire to say what would feel good to say or simply to lash out.

So you've got to learn how to deal with the anger, seeing that it's not helping you. It's not the energy you need to fight. It's actually going to waste your energy and waste you away.

You start first with the body. Even though anger doesn't come from the body and it's not going to be solved at the body, when an emotion like this comes up it affects both the body and the mind, and you get into a vicious cycle.

As thoughts of anger come into the mind, they trigger certain hormones in the body, and the effects of those hormones last for quite a while. Even though the thought of anger may have passed away, the hormones are still doing their work.

Something in the mind takes that as a sign: "Well, look, I'm still angry." And so you go fall back into the anger again. That churns out more hormones. You can keep going like this for a while until you're totally drained.

One way to break the cycle is to focus on where's the tension or tightness in your breathing that goes along with the anger, because it's through the breath that the mind can have an effect on the body. It's through the breath that the body can have an effect on the mind. So you consciously try to breathe in a smooth and even way—in a way that releases the tension, clears up all the blockages. Maintain that type of breathing as long as you can. That then puts you into a better position to actually look at the situation: what needs to be done, what can be done right now, what would be the most effective thing to say or to do.

Because you're not feeling the squeeze from the body, it's a lot easier to think through the situation properly. Again, the anger may still be there in the mind but then you turn on that, one, trying to see, "What is the anger doing to me right now?" Then, remembering times in the past when you were angry and you ended up doing and saying and thinking stupid things, you can remind yourself of the drawbacks of anger.

Try to separate the feeling of anger from the object of the anger. One of the ways of doing this is to look at the object—i.e., the person who's doing something bad—and try to think of the good they've done in the past or are capable of doing or saying or thinking, so that you get a more balanced view.

It's easy to justify our anger, our willingness to lash out at other people when we blind ourselves to their good side.

But if you look at the person and can't find any good at all, then you have to remind yourself: You have to feel sorry for a person like that. Those kinds of people are just creating all kinds of suffering for themselves, and they're going to suffer for a long time to come. So the appropriate reaction there is compassion.

When you've calmed the body and gotten the other person out of the picture, then you can look at the activity of anger as a phenomenon in and of itself in the mind: to see what it's based on, to see what feeds it, to see how narrow the perceptions are that keep it going.

As for the justification of the anger: When you see that something really has

been done that's unjust, unfair, harmful—then you're in a better position to think about what could be done, what could be said, and about when is the right time, where is the proper place to do and say those things.

Even though you may feel anxious to act right now, sometimes you realize that you have to wait for the proper opportunity to come.

Especially when you want to talk to the person who's done something wrong. If you come at that person with a lot of ill will, they'll sense it, immediately put up their hackles, put up their defenses, and it'll be hard to get any meaningful communication.

So you've got to calm your mind, bring it back to your more skillful emotions of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. When you can come from that spot, then you can talk. Even though it may take time, you find that the talk goes much more effectively.

Because that's what you want. If you see there's an injustice, you want to be effective in putting an end to it: not just lashing out in line with your emotions, but actually finding the right word, finding the right thing to do. And doing it with as much skill as you can.

So even though equanimity is encouraged in the practice, passivity is not. It's not a value in and of itself. Think of it more as a strategy. There are times when you do have to be very still and very quiet, and other times when you should act decisively.

Only when the mind is able to develop equanimity whenever it needs it will you be in a position to find out what the decisive action would be, the decisive word would be, because your ability to see the situation is a lot clearer.