

# Brahmavihāras: (1 of 5) Equanimity

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

equanimity, *upekkhā*, love, pursuing, compassion, purified, feeling, freedom, opening, practice, meditation, joy, delight, parents, parental, loving-kindness, centeredness, sympathetic joy, *brahmavihāra*

## Gil Fronsdal

I want to welcome you to the land of equanimity, the time for equanimity. This is the topic for this week's five talks. In particular, it's the equanimity *brahmavihāra*. It's a form of love, which is characterized by *upekkhā*, the Pali word for equanimity.

It may seem counterintuitive to think of love as being synonymous with or connected to equanimity. Because love seems to be something that's more proactive, engaged, going towards people. It's being expressed – many things.

But in fact, I think it's not too difficult to analyze love. The way it's often practiced in the world around us is that it's mixed up with other attitudes, needs, and desires. Sometimes love is mixed up with what we need, like company or security. Sometimes people feel like they need admiration. Love sometimes is mixed up with fear. It's sometimes mixed up with lust, power, or status. There are all kinds of things that come along with love. And sometimes it's very hard to see the difference between some of these other elements that come along with love, and love itself.

I like to think of the practice of mindfulness – as well as the practices of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – as being practices that purify love. They simplify it, like you would simplify gold down to its beautiful essence. You take out the dross, the impurities, that are there. We simplify and clarify our love so that it's not mixed up with these other needs and things going on. It becomes more and more a wonderful treasure, a wonderful jewel inside of us – a source of nourishment and support.

How do we purify or clarify our love? For example, with loving kindness, what gets purified is any form of ill-will and love that has to do with our self-centeredness, self-preoccupation – any feeling of, “What's in it for me?”

As we practice or connect to compassion, compassion is freed certainly from any tendency for cruelty, or to harm people. It's also purified from any sense of distress, dismay, or horror – emotions that compassion is sometimes confused with – or that might be there.

Appreciative joy gets purified of envy and jealousy. When there's jealousy and envy going on, it's a very strong motivator for insisting on love, holding on to love, or protecting our love with someone else. Appreciative joy is also purified from any kind of self-centered focus on oneself, around feeling discontented, giddy, or like, “I'm the one who's now enjoying the delight of someone else.” This is a vicarious way of living where the focus is really on one's own purity of heart, rather than being open only to the joy of others.

Equanimity is also a purification. It's a purification from two things: repulsion and pursuing. Sometimes it's translated as ‘attraction’ or ‘greed.’ But the Pali word has a connotation of ‘pursuing’ – following after something. And so equanimity is a love that is neither pursuing, nor has any kind of repulsion towards anything as a result of it, or as part of it.

One way to appreciate this quality of equanimity is not to try to understand it directly, but to understand its alternatives – that the mind that isn't centered in this restful, easeful place of equanimity is a mind that is either for or against things. It's a mind that has qualities of pursuing, repulsing, or pushing away in a way that's not so healthy. That's not really a place of freedom.

So we begin discerning and noticing the small ways, or the big ways, in which we're pursuing with love, wanting, and getting. Some of us, especially when we were maybe teenagers, had a very strong drive to pursue. So, to find equanimity, to find a place where love is not pursuing, repulsing, or pushing anything away, but is able to

stay open and clear. And then, in that openness and clarity – that purity of equanimity – love can radiate and shine quite broadly. The purification of love is the task here.

These different forms of love are closely connected to freedom. They are freeing. Freedom is a means for loving; it's opening to love. There's a wonderful reciprocal mutuality between the greater and greater degrees of freedom that the practice brings, and our greater love. And the greater love we have supports our freedom.

The Buddhist *Theravādan* tradition provides an analogy for these four kinds of love. It has to do with parenting – a certain ideal parent situation. The parents have maybe four children. One is recently born and healthy. There's lots of enthusiasm, happiness, loving-kindness, and goodwill for their future and delight. It's very simple and clear – lots of delightful goodwill and loving-kindness all around.

And then there is compassion. Maybe the second child has an illness or some disadvantage. The parents feel a lot of care and compassion. They support that child in a different way than the others, because of the sickness the child has.

Someone else is in the flush of youth. Life is opening up for them brilliantly and wonderfully. There's a lot of joy and appreciation that things are working out so well. The world is opening up for them, and the opportunities are there.

And then the fourth child is well established in their life. They may be in their 40s. They are well established in their career, family, and activities. It's going along just fine. The parents don't have to think about them so much. They do not have to be concerned about their welfare. And so there's an equanimity towards that child.

Whether this is a good analogy or not is not exactly the point here. We have to shape these analogies for ourselves. But the idea is this association with ideal parental love. Parental love generally doesn't have the complexities that romantic love has. It can have its own complexities, but it's easier with parental love to feel a simplicity and purity there.

Sometimes parental love is not about the parent. This is especially true when a baby is just born. The love is so directed towards the baby, that there's sometimes self-forgetting that goes on for the parents. Because it's just caring for the baby and everything they need. So this ability to love without it being self-preoccupied love – without it being about me, myself, and mine – what's in it for me, what I need, and what I have to get.

There's nothing wrong with having needs. There's nothing wrong with pursuing our need to be safe, happy, and content. But it's useful to separate needs from our capacity for love. This allows our capacity to love to be simple and pure, just a wonderful opening and clarity.

One of the ways I've experienced this in my life – a kind of door to really appreciate love in a deep way – was and is through meditation. Through my first ten years of meditation practice, I sat with a lot of suffering. Unexpectedly, it opened into a lot of compassion. I learned to appreciate this beautiful capacity for compassion, without any need, and without being for or against – even though there's a movement towards wanting to help others. But the movement towards supporting others or helping or caring for others can be done without self-centeredness, or being for or against anything.

In my next years of practice – and especially when I practiced *vipassanā* – I discovered this wonderful capacity for goodwill, friendliness, kindness, and the simplicity and purity of it, without needing to receive anything in return.

And sympathetic joy. I've really come to appreciate this a lot in my time as a teacher, feeling so much appreciation and delight in practitioners and other people. And learning there is a way of coming out of meditation in which delight and joy can be so simple. Without any needs, or needing to do anything – really just delight and joy.

And then equanimity. The love of equanimity has a lot to do with meditation. The way in which I've discovered freedom in meditation – freedom from attachments and clinging. Sometimes just feeling this real, tender warmth and care – and kindness that extends to people whom I don't really like, or I have trouble with, or I'm disturbed by what they do. And to have this ability to have love and equanimity spread out in such a clean way is also one of the great treasures.

So the topic for this week is equanimity. It's one of the most important topics. Equanimity has a lot to do with wisdom – maybe more so than the other *brahmavihāras*. And we'll see that wisdom comes into play – and how the practice really comes into play – to really cultivate and develop this equanimity factor. We'll also see how it leads to freedom.

That's the topic for the week, and we'll end it this Friday with the New Year on the first. For those of you who are up early enough, we'll begin the year with an evocation of this quality of equanimity. And who knows, maybe it'll be a great resource for 2021.

Thank you so much, and I look forward to tomorrow.