

Brahmavihāras: (2 of 5) Equanimity

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

equanimity, *upekkhā*, choices, equanimity, goodwill, consequences, harm, agitated, compassion, mindfulness, aversion, ease, action

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Good day. I suddenly find myself feeling quite happy to sit here. I think this is because of the topic of equanimity *brahmavihāras* that I'll be speaking about. This is the second talk in the series on equanimity. Equanimity is a form of care for others, an attitude of caregiving, kindness, and goodwill for others.

Equanimity is when our goodwill is equanimous, and not reactive, or agitated. It is when our goodwill is not influenced by any kind of pursuit of desire or wanting something, and not caught up in repulsion or pushing away.

This comes into play particularly when it's hard to have goodwill for people. It comes into play when it's hard to have pure love or kindness for people, because of the circumstances they're in. One circumstance is when people make choices for themselves that in the end are not for their own benefit. We want to have equanimity for people who make choices that are harming themselves.

It's their choice, and it's their agency. It's their choice in a sense, even if the choices they're making are unconscious. The choices are their own. And so how our goodwill comes into play when people are making poor choices is part of the domain of this *brahmavihāra* of equanimity.

Certainly, we can feel compassion for people. But wanting and trying to help, when they're making choices that are going in the opposite direction, is kind of exhausting for the person who's being compassionate. And it may be pointless to have appreciative joy when we know they're making bad choices.

When we know that suffering is coming, it can be challenging for the person who's wise and sees what's going on. The wise person can see this person making choices. They're unfortunate choices. They're going in a poor direction, but I still keep my heart open to them. I still have this goodwill and care for them.

But I harm myself if I get all agitated and contracted by it, or if I keep pushing to be compassionate and try everything I can to help the person. Or if I go along and celebrate with them, when what they're doing is actually quite harmful, even though they have a kind of joy. And so how not to harm ourselves with our goodwill is in the domain of equanimity.

The word equanimity in Pali is *upekkhā*. It comes from the root verb 'to see,' 'to view,' and 'to observe.' The etymology of the word means to have an overview of the situation. It is like having a bird's eye view. To not be lost in the details of everything, but to have an overview of everything. So we can see it with wisdom. We see the bigger picture, and we're not caught in the details.

For example, there are times when people will do you a favor. You come to work and a colleague says, "I had a really difficult night last night. It was very hard. I have family who have COVID. People are dying." Or, "My child was up all night, throwing up and having a fever." They come to work and they say, "It's a hard time, and I'm really irritable." And you say, "Thank you for telling me."

And then, if you find that they're expressing some irritability, you're much more forgiving of them. You say, "They're having a hard time." You have an overview of why they are the way they are. So you have more space for them to be that way. They've been kind enough to warn you, and so you get out of their way. "Okay. That's just today that they're that way." And you feel for them. You have compassion for them.

You're equanimous about how they may say a mean thing, or cut you off going to the bathroom – whatever it might be. In that sense, there's an overview of the situation, a bigger picture. And so you're more equanimous and at ease with what to do.

Upekkhā is a wisdom factor. Our understanding of a situation is really useful for having equanimity. To simply hold ourselves in an equanimous way is probably not so helpful. Because holding and assuming something, which is not really true for ourselves, can be exhausting and harming to ourselves.

So, how do we have that bigger picture? How do we have the understanding of circumstances and other people, so that when we have goodwill for them, it's appropriate. We have equanimity, meaning we don't get agitated. We don't get restless, upset, or contracted.

One of the classic teachings in Buddhism is that everyone has their actions as their own. And no one else makes up for your actions. They are your own actions, no matter your circumstances, or where you find yourself in life.

There are a lot of unfortunate things that happen to people. We get sick in all kinds of ways. We end up living in a war zone. We have some accident. A car drives into us – we're doing nothing wrong – but someone else maybe is not paying attention. They run into us, and we're injured. These things that can happen are not our choices.

But, we do have a choice in how we respond – how we choose to live our lives. We're always at a moment of choice. And when we are practicing mindfulness, we start seeing more and more the places of choice. More and more, we notice that there are actually a lot of choices, moment by moment.

If we're not mindful, then we're just on automatic pilot. We don't see that we have choices about how we stand, and how we look at people. We have choices in how we speak, or when we don't speak. We have choices in how much food we eat, or don't eat. When we are on automatic pilot, habits comes into play. Craving or aversion comes into play. And *it's* driving the boat – we are not in charge.

When we see the place of choice – because it's clear in the quiet, open, mindful mind – the consequences are up to us when we exercise that choice. So if I see a thorn sticking up out of the ground, and I choose to step on it, and I cut my foot, that was my choice because I chose to step on it. That's kind of a dramatic example.

But if you don't see you have a choice about what you're going to say, and you feel angry and use a swear word with someone, and the person gets angry back, that's partly a consequence of your choice. Or that person doesn't want to talk to you and walks away, that's also partly a consequence of your choice.

If you do see that choice, then you can say, "Well, wait a minute, I have a choice here. What choice do I want to live by? What is my deepest choice? What are the deepest values I want to live by here? What's most important for me?" And to pause, and look, and choose what that is.

And so, when we want to make our own choices, we see that other people have choices as well. We can't be in charge of the choices other people make. We might help and advise them. There are all kinds of things we might do. But ultimately, people make their own choices. And when they make choices that are not wise for themselves, it's their consequences they're going to have to live with. If those consequences are unfortunate, it's heartbreaking sometimes.

But we don't let our goodwill or love for them get tied up and dependent on the choices they make. We don't exhaust ourselves with our compassion. We don't regret the ways in which we celebrated with them. We have goodwill with this overview of seeing clearly. People, who I love and care for, are making choices. And those choices are not wise. So I have to allow them a certain generosity – to give them the autonomy and dignity of making their own choices. And then they have to live with the consequences. I'll try to be supportive, but I'm not going to be responsible for all the consequences of their poor choices. They're going to have to live with that themselves.

Exactly to what degree we're involved or not involved has a lot to do with the consequences we think will come about by offering our support. If we think we can actually turn the boat – turn them in a new direction, or help support them to come to a new way of living – maybe it's great to offer a lot to them.

But we have to be very careful we don't harm ourselves in that process. This is why mindfulness is so important – to really track ourselves and see what's going on inside of ourselves. We have choices. We make choices as well. Can we choose the peaceful choices?

It doesn't mean the passive choices. It doesn't mean the uninvolved choices. It means, whatever choice we make, can we do so without the negative alternatives to equanimity? Can we do it without chasing or wanting something, or without getting caught up in the need for something to happen? Can we do it without contraction, aversion, closing down, or pulling away in horror? Can we do it without being restless or agitated?

Can we do it with a mind at ease? If the mind is at ease, then the goodwill as equanimity becomes the equanimity *brahmavihāra*.

I'll read you a very famous passage, used liturgically in Theravāda Buddhism. I see it as supporting our understanding and appreciation of people's place of choice:

Beings have actions.¹ They have actions as their refuge, actions as their heritage, and actions as their closest relative.

Actions and choice are closely related. Be careful with the choices you make – not to be hamstrung, not to be inhibited or passive in some kind of negative way. Use your choices, so that whatever you do in the world, you do without hurting yourself. You stay peaceful, at ease, and equanimous in a way that allows the best qualities of who you are to be shared with the world.

Thank you very much.

¹ GF: I take this as being choices of their own.