

Brahmavihāras: Equanimity (3 of 5)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

equanimity, obligation, responsibility, duty, love, butterfly, cocoon, obligated, appreciation, fix, involved, responsible, accountable, Norwegian, *ansvar, plikt*

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The general topic for today is equanimity. This is a continuation of the discussion from yesterday. Equanimity is a form of care or love for the world and others – to not be bothered by what's going on with others and ourselves. To be able to keep steadiness, calmness, or ease of mind, so that our love is not agitated by the challenges of this world – the challenges of people, others, and what goes on.

As I've been saying, in particular the challenge of the mind is to not get caught up in pursuing, engaging in, and trying to fix all kinds of things that disturb our love and equanimity. The other challenge is to not get caught up in repulsion, pushing away, and not being able to stay present – or going away from what's going on, and closing down. But to be able to stay open and wise without anxiously getting involved unnecessarily or inappropriately – when we can't do anything, when it's not appropriate for us to try to be involved, to fix, or do something.

There are many reasons why it may not be appropriate to get actively involved. One is that sometimes it's better to let people find their own way. We can offer support in terms of our presence, appreciation, and encouragement. But if we do everything for other people, then we don't let them grow strong.

There's this beautiful story that went around some years ago. I don't know if it's made-up or true. It's about a person who comes across a cocoon with a butterfly inside, about to be born. The butterfly is struggling to come out of the cocoon. A caring person, who wants to help, pulls some of the cocoon's threads to loosen up the space, so the butterfly can come out. When the butterfly finally comes out, it falls to the ground, never flies, and dies. What the caring person doesn't know is only in the struggle to get free of the cocoon can the butterfly lubricate its wings enough to be able to fly properly. The butterfly needs the struggle.

So one of the reasons to not get too involved in other people's struggles is when they need to be left alone to find their own way – to learn, develop and strengthen. If we do it for them, they never grow. They never face themselves.

This is especially true spiritually. If someone fixes all of our problems for us, we'll never develop the insight, capacity, and inner strength to address the problems for ourselves. There are many reasons to develop this. But, for many people, one of the things that gets in the way of staying equanimous, loving, and unagitated is a sense of responsibility.

I certainly identify with this. One of my Achilles' heels – maybe it still is a little bit – has been a sense of being responsible for too many things, for other people, and how they feel. A need to somehow get involved. So to allow people the autonomy to make their own actions and choices, and to realize that the choices they make are not up to us. We can support them. We can offer guidance and advice. But people make choices for themselves ultimately.

To take too much responsibility for how people feel, and the outcomes of people's lives is to get agitated, and lose the equanimity. And in some ways to also lose the clarity of love and goodwill that can be there, before responsibility kicks in, in an unhealthy way.

So in order to maintain that equanimous care, love, and goodwill – for some of us, it's useful to look at this topic of responsibility. In this regard, I find it interesting that this English word 'responsibility' has a wide range of meanings, which – as far as I can tell – is different in some other countries. I read once that one of the first people to study the Iroquois nation claimed that there was no word in that language for 'responsibility.' But they seem to have a very successful and noble civilization without the word 'responsibility.'

If you look in the Pali-English dictionary, there are a few words – two, three, or four – where the Englishmen, who made the dictionary over 100 years ago, chose to add the word ‘responsibility’ as one of its meanings. But the main meanings are things like ‘burden.’ ‘Burden’ isn’t quite a satisfying definition for the English word ‘responsibility.’ So it’s almost as if that word ‘responsibility’ doesn’t quite work in the languages of the Buddha.

I speak Norwegian. In Norwegian, the word for ‘responsibility’ is *ansvar*, which means ‘to answer.’ It’s like a cognate of the English word ‘answer.’ It’s probably closer in meaning to the French and Italian words *réponse* and *riposta* than the English word ‘responsibility.’ In Norwegian, the connotations of *ansvar* mean “what you have to answer for,” “what you’re accountable for.”

There’s a different word for ‘obligation’ or ‘duty.’ In Norwegian, it’s *plikt*. So these are two different words. Whereas in English, it seems to me the idea of obligation, duty, and accountability are all in the range of meanings of responsibility. So much so, that responsibility often comes across as something we’re obligated to do. We have a responsibility to do something. However, with the Norwegian word *ansvar*, we’re accountable for what we do. We have to answer for what we do.

So if we take the English word ‘responsibility’ to mean that we’re responsible for our actions, that goes clearly along with Buddhist ways of thinking – that we’re responsible for how we act, what we do, and the choices we make. And we’re responsible for the outcome. We’re certainly responsible for making choices and doing the act. But we’re responsible for and accountable to the outcome.

What it’s not in Buddhism is this idea that we carry with us of an innate obligation and duty to become free, loving, kind, and responsible for other people. Responsibility is not a weight that we carry with us. In some ways, Buddhist practice frees us from a certain understanding of responsibility: the sense of obligation and duty.

As far as I can tell, in the teachings of the Buddha, doing spiritual practice in life doesn’t come with any sense of obligation. There’s no obligation to be loving or generous. There’s no obligation to be caring for other people. It’s not a duty. It is an opportunity and a choice. It is something we might want to do – but not because we’re obligated to do it.

The only reason we have obligation in Buddhism is if we made a promise – a vow, a commitment – or if we have a purpose we want to fulfill. I don’t know if obligation is the right word, but certain purposes require certain things. If you want to discover the benefits of meditation and really dedicate your life to live out the benefits – that requires that we meditate.

However, the idea that Buddhism frees us very much from this sense of obligation and duty, in favor of being accountable for the choices we make and the actions we do. We have to answer for the consequences of them, as do other people.

The sense of freedom from this obligatory responsibility means we can enter into different situations with a fresh, clear mind, ready to respond. We have an ability to respond, to be ready to meet the situation as it is – but, without carrying with us. The ideas of what we have to do are often a trigger for reactivity. Like being upset that things don’t just go along. Or, “I’m not doing what I’m supposed to do.” Or, “I’m obligated to be a certain way in this situation.”

Rather, to enter any situation without obligation, and then to respond as appropriate. To meet it, and see what the choices are, can help with equanimity. It’s easier, perhaps, than to love. Because love is not burdened by duty – that we have to be a certain way, respond a certain way, fix the situation. We can just be there and figure out what’s needed.

The love of the equanimity *brahmavihāra* is often very valuable for the first way in which we meet a person or a situation. It’s the first way of discovering and finding out what’s there.

If we enter into a new situation or meet a new person, and we’re just automatically being compassionate for them before we even know them – it may be a little bit burdensome for them. Certainly, we’re kind of activated. Or if we’re already feeling joy before we know anything about them, we might actually do them a disservice if someone they love just died. Or if we have too much goodwill for them before there’s a chance for there to be some real connection and knowledge to see something in them we can appreciate. That can also be kind of off.

So this ability to know equanimous or nonreactive love that doesn't carry any responsibility and obligation with it. It's just there, like an open door, ready to meet whoever comes through that door – and then respond accordingly.

If some of you are a little like me, with an Achilles' heel of responsibility, obligation, or duty – to really develop this equanimity *brahmavihāra*, it helps to see that we do this and are not caught by it. Let it just be water that washes by as you hold yourself steady in your love and care for the world.

Don't be tripped up by obligation and duty, even if other people expect that of you. Why should they? Why should we believe them, that that's how it has to be? It's possible to love, to be generous and kind, and to have very rich and warm relationships without any sense of duty and obligation – unless you've made promises.

I hope this is helpful as I explore the topic of equanimity. We'll continue tomorrow. Thank you.