

Brahmavihāras: Equanimity (4 of 5)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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The topic of this fourth talk on the equanimity *brahmavihāra* is the relationship between equanimity and this kind of love, care, or goodwill that is nonreactive, non-contracted, or non-agitated. In the classic language, it isn't automatically involved in pursuing, being attracted to things, or chasing things. It isn't automatically involved in repulsion, pushing away, or pulling away. But it is a mind that's able to be present and open to what's happening in the world. And that's able to maintain its goodwill, friendliness, love, and care in spite of the dangers in the world.

Now we're coming into where wisdom and practice really come to maturity. It's easy enough to have some idea that we're supposed to be loving, and everything is wonderful when practicing, just accepting things as they are – for that to be a pastoral image of life, the idea that everything is wonderful and good.

Sometimes when there are a lot of Buddhist teachings about just sitting in awareness, accepting things as they are, being open, and nonreactive, I sometimes feel that it's the teachings of people who are relatively privileged, well-off, and don't have a lot of the challenges in their lives that many in this world have.

Many people live in danger zones in their families, communities, and countries. There are dangers in this world. So how do we maintain a loving, caring heart in the face of dangers? That's one of the important topics. Perhaps it's a nice way of coming to the end of 2020. A year ago, many of us did not see the dangers that we were going to face this year. A surprising amount of danger, even fear, now exists in our society that didn't exist a year ago.

It's remarkable that walking down the street, people will avoid each other. I'll step out into the street, and let somebody else have the sidewalk. Somebody else steps out in the street, and lets me have the sidewalk, even though everyone's wearing masks. Who would have thought? It's kind of like living in a science fiction movie or something. It's such a radical change in our society.

So how can we be wiser with this? How can we be equanimous with this in a wise and appropriate way? How can we learn from 2020 so that we enter into 2021 with more wisdom and street smarts – with more equanimity, love, and compassion? Given what happened during the course of this year, how have we matured with all the challenges that we've had?

I say all this because in the ancient texts, in the book *The Path of Purification*, they talked about the near enemy of the equanimity *brahmavihāra*. The near enemy looks like equanimity, but it isn't. That equanimity is called "ignorant equanimity." It's equanimity that's ignorant of the dangers in the world.

It's easy to be equanimous if one doesn't see the dangers, or understand what's going on in this life. In the text here it says, "The near enemy is the ignorant equanimity that is not aware of danger. The far enemy is greed and repulsion." It is not possible to have either greed or repulsion, and equanimity.

But this near enemy also doesn't really allow true equanimity to be there, when it is not aware of danger. I don't think we hear very often in Buddhist teachings things like, "Sit down and close your eyes. Be aware in the present moment. And now become aware of danger."

But there is danger in this life. Life is fragile. Life is short. They say even with 100 years, it's a short life. In life it is easy to get sick. There are people who are not good people. We can go to the wrong places at the wrong times, and it is dangerous. We live in a world of danger where our lives can change forever on a dime. I've known plenty of people (and myself) where some accident happens. And then we're never quite the same again. We didn't anticipate the danger that would come.

This is not meant to be a depressing way to end 2020. But it is the classic way of appreciating that true equanimity also understands that the world has dangers, and learns to develop the strength, capacity, openness, and wisdom of how to be equanimous and loving in the face of danger. Without that message, it's easy to think that we're supposed to just live in a protected environment. That we should live in a monastery or someplace where we're completely safe.

We can do this work of being completely non-attached and unfazed by what goes on in the world. But I hope that's not what we're doing. I hope we are learning how to live in the world as it is – with its dangers. And learning to be loving in a way that it doesn't succumb to repulsion or pursuit. That doesn't involve actively going after things, pulling away, or automatically going to help or fix, when that is not really needed. Or trying to push away or deny what's there.

It is said that equanimity is one of the most mature and developed forms of Buddhist practice. To really have this strong sense of equanimity, it comes after many years of practice. It's like the North Star. But it definitely doesn't make us indifferent. Sometimes here in the West, people often say that the near enemy of equanimity is indifference. Equanimity is certainly not indifference. It involves deep caring and love. Having it is to have an open window – not having to hold on to something that can be hit, that can be hurt.

A different analogy is that if we hold our hands in a fist, then something can hit it and it can hurt, because it doesn't move very well. But if we open our hands and fingers out wide, then things can hit and they are just like bamboo, flowing with the wind, back and forth. Or maybe it just goes right through the open fingers, and doesn't really touch us. So we go into the world very differently if we're fist-ed or knotted up in something than if we go with an open hand, an open heart.

And so this ability to not have attachments, clinging, or self-definitions that we hold onto for dear life, but to just relax the heart and mind, open the clinging, and in that to be able to be present for danger. Because then actually, we're in less danger in our hearts. We might be in physical danger. But the heart is never in danger if the heart doesn't cling.

One implication of Buddhist teachings is that the greatest danger we live with is the danger in ourselves – the danger of clinging, the danger of giving up our ethical life. The danger of giving up our ease or peace. The danger of giving up our love, our freedom – which we do if we cling and get attached.

There is no intentional, unethical life without clinging. The deepest well-being of the heart is not lost because of what people do, and what the world does around us. It's lost because of how we react and respond to that. And so to realize that there's danger here too.

As we practice, learn how to stay open, like an open window. This is partly so we are protected from ourselves. And we are much more protected in the heart from the dangers of the world. Things might still happen to us. But they don't run into this tight fist of the heart or the mind – that things are hard and difficult.

To cultivate, to discover the form of love called equanimity – the flavor of this love that is able to be equanimous and loving in the face of danger. This is a tall order. It's not an easy thing to discover how to do. But today, you might spend time reflecting on this. Maybe you won't be served very well by arguing against what I'm saying. Maybe there are arguments to make against it. But maybe you're better served by exploring and experimenting with this idea of: "How can you stay loving, caring, and friendly, in the face of what you might think is dangerous?"

Don't put yourself in danger please. Please take care of yourself. But maybe you can explore this and ride the edges of it. Maybe there are dangers you're worried about, but aren't as dangerous as you think, as you open up and no longer have anything knotted up inside. Maybe talk to friends about this, and explore this topic of having equanimous goodwill in the face of danger.

This seems like a wonderful way of learning from and reflecting on this last year. Becoming better people because of this last year. And not being the victim of last year. But really building and preparing for how to go into 2021, wiser, more caring, more loving, more mindful, and more for the benefit of the world.

I look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning if you're up early enough. And we'll welcome in the New Year with the last reflections on equanimity. Thank you.