

Equanimity Week 2: Equanimity and the Brahma Viharas From Chris

Equanimity (*upekkha* in Pali) is the fourth of the Brahma Viharas (The Divine Abodes, the best states of heart/mind to live in). The other three again are *metta* (kindness, goodwill, friendliness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (joy in the happiness of others). We looked at these a bit last month when studying the Parami of *metta*.

This week we'll look at some traditional ways of understanding and practicing Equanimity as a Brahma Vihara and how this quality brings balance and wisdom to the other three.

The word *upekkha* literally means "looking on", but the implication is not at all a detached indifference to other people or to the world, but rather the dis-entangled wisdom perspective that we can gain with practice. As with all the Brahma Viharas, it is fundamentally a state of our own heart and mind independent of relationship. It is well-being, ease, steadiness, composure that is not thrown off when it encounters the vicissitudes of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, success and failure, praise and blame. Having this inner stability allows us to fully engage without the elements that cause suffering, add pressure to the situation and lead to burn-out. We don't need to be driven to achieve some unrealistic result, and we don't lose touch with our own well-being in the face of others' suffering.

In the practice of using phrases to orient the attention and evoke the quality in the heart, the phrase for Equanimity is something like "My/your happiness depends on my/your actions, not on my wishes." We can understand that actions refer to intentional acts of mind, speech or body. So, it does matter what we think and what we sincerely intend, but inner well-being is not a matter of wishful thinking, and certainly not something we can directly bring about for another person simply by wishing or even by wholesome actions. This might sound cold, but the intention is to keep the steady warmth of our own good heart going and radiating out to the world without becoming attached to that over which we have no control. Of course, goodwill and helpful actions will *tend* to help another person, as the opposites will *tend* to cause more suffering. But ultimately, it is a person's own history and practice of wise intentions, speech, actions and cultivation of wisdom that will determine their inner state of being. Others have both the responsibility and the freedom to live their lives as they choose, and to live with the consequences of those choices. This lesson is often learned the hard way in relationships, whether of parents with grown children, therapists with patients, activists and the populace, spouses, friends or simply fellow-beings.

Each of the Brahma Viharas may be said to have "far" and "near" opposites (sometimes called "enemies"). The "far" ones are the true opposites, such as ill-will for goodwill, cruelty for compassion, or envy/jealousy instead of joy in the happiness of others. The "near" ones are those qualities that can easily be mistaken for the desired quality. These often involve a lack of the flavor of Equanimity. Let's look at these to get more of a feeling for what Equanimity brings to the heart/mind.

The “near enemy” of metta is attachment, either to the person in the relationship or to the outcome of our good wishes for them. *Metta* can be mistaken for other aspects of romantic love, lust, or complex needs to have another live or be happy in a way that serves the wisher more than the person themselves. Attachment has an expectation of outcome that is beyond our control. *Metta* is fundamentally an inner state of one’s own heart that simply radiates goodwill, kindness, benevolence, harmlessness to all. There is the confidence that that is the best basis for our engagement in any situation, and that all the other conditions of existence will play their part in determining how things actually unfold. Equanimity brings that ability to keep our own hearts attuned to this state of goodwill while the winds of change roll on and other people do what they do. I read this poem by Hafiz in the session last month:

*Even after all this time
The Sun never says to the Earth,
"You owe me."
Look what happens with a love like that,
It lights the whole sky.*

One “near enemy” of compassion is pity, which has a cold, distancing, blaming or condescending flavor. This attitude is usually based in unacknowledged fear that we ourselves might “catch” the disease of suffering. Equanimity implies both the wisdom to know that we are indeed already *not* immune from the impersonal arising of difficult circumstances, and an inner confidence that we won’t be thrown off balance by them. This wisdom lets us tune into the fellow-feeling of compassion with suffering that is not so tinged by fear of becoming unbalanced by our own reactivity.

Another very common “near enemy” of compassion is when we take on the inner state of suffering of another in the mistaken idea that this will help. Some of us may have very strong habits from childhood of mirroring or merging with the inner states of those around us. Mindfulness practice over time can teach us to discern how our own state of well-being can co-exist with feelings of caring and concern for others. It’s possible to know or even sense what others feel, and to respond with care, without losing sight of our own well-being. It is not the right understanding of any Buddhist virtue that it should lead to a net increase in *suffering*. Would it help for a nurse or a parent to feel exactly as bad as the patient or child and climb into the next bed and moan? The common example is that in order to help someone sinking in quicksand, you need to be firmly anchored on solid ground.

A certain kind of “misery may love company”, but misery really needs being seen, met and held with strength and wise understanding that can lead to something beyond wallowing in suffering together. Bhikkhu Analayo points out that the inner state of Compassion in Early Buddhism was understood to include an element of joy, joy in knowing that we have learned how not to suffer (or not to add more arrows, if you know that parable). It always has one eye so to speak on the ultimate freedom and joy of liberation. This is the joy that someone like Mother Theresa or the Dalai Lama always seems to bring into any room, it’s this buoyancy of the confidence in something beyond suffering that doesn’t lead to burnout.

The “near enemy” of sympathetic joy is said to be exuberance. You might think of common responses to watching your team winning, or of getting very swept up in the crowd at a rock concert or a political rally. These are again rooted in a kind of attachment to circumstances, identification with winning or talent or luck, and leads to emotional excess which can overwhelm wisdom. Happiness is contagious, but we also need wisdom. The happiness of someone who is drunk or just pulled off a bank robbery should be seen as delusion and give rise to Compassion, in the form of wishes for them to find wiser sources of true happiness, and Equanimity, in the form of our own inner sobriety and steadiness. This quality of sympathetic joy points to a joy imbued with wisdom that is boundless and not diminished by self-centeredness, by envy or jealousy of others’ good fortunes.