

Deep Dive Into Seven Factors | 7. Equanimity

EQUANIMITY

- Sayadaw U Tejaniya

MEDITATION

Taking up a comfortable sitting position, we first bring attention to the body sitting here, being aware of whatever sensations there may be.

Now settle the attention on the sensation of natural breathing. Notice the relationship to that sensation, whether it is easy and comfortable or whether we have to put forth some effort to notice it.

Now for a moment bring attention back to the bodily sensations. As you observe them is there a sense of settledness about them? Do you refer to like and dislike, or can you be more even-tempered with the various sensations?

Then turn attention back to the sensation of breathing again.

This time, as we bring attention to the sensations in the body, see if you can notice the feeling tone related to them. Do these sensations feel pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant? Which of these feeling tones is most noticeable? Which is most common? If you notice a sensation that appears neutral, see if you can give it some extra attention.

What is the nature of this neutrality? Is it a lack of real feeling? Or is it a real neutral feeling, a kind of being OK? Or is it an evenness, an equanimity?

Then turn attention back to the sensation of breathing again.

Now turn attention to the condition of the mind. Is the mind calm or active? Is that calm reasonably even or steady? If the mind is active can you notice the condition behind it? Is that knowing of it even or steady? Can you be aware of a steady quietness behind the mental activity? What is the emotional state of observing the mind?

We will reflect here on equanimity, the seventh Factor of Awakening. As you may remember from the last chapter, it is one of the factors in the fourth of the concentrated absorptions or *jhānas*; it is also the fourth of the Brahma Vihāras or Four Divine Abidings. So perhaps you can appreciate just how advanced this quality is, since it occurs as the last or most developed in each of these lists of categories. In the fourth absorption equanimity is even more evolved than happiness. The factors of the third absorption are one-pointedness and an unmitigated well-being. Imagine if you can a kind of unalloyed, timeless, unbounded well-being, where all your cells are humming with warmth and goodness. That's the third of the absorptions, a pretty high one – but even that is a little coarse! From there we go on to equanimity, where even this humming of the cells is disturbing. Hard to imagine, isn't it? But that's how refined it is.

Equanimity plainly translated means 'equal-minded' or 'even-minded', a mental and emotional equilibrium. All of us must be fairly familiar with the multitudinous ups and downs of our moods. At some point we realize that this emotional roller coaster is not satisfying, and then we may begin to appreciate the value of equanimity. In an everyday context, however, equanimity is not much talked about. We hear more often about people's 'passions' rather than their 'equanimities', although some people may think, 'That's how a Buddhist is, wise and equanimous.' They recognize equanimity as something noble and worthy of aspiration.

My experience is that equanimity isn't quite as easy to develop as it appears. I tried to develop it some years ago, but ended up with something very different. During my second year meditating in a forest monastery in North Thailand, I had a lot of thoughts coming up which I defined as 'worrying thoughts'. I had originally planned to go to Thailand for one month, get enlightened and go home. But there I was, still working on it two years later, with recurring thoughts of whether I should stay

(enlightenment could be right around the corner!) or just pack it in and go back to university. Should I be realistic rather than so idealistic? I didn't have a proper visa either, because my entry card was lost when I came to Thailand, and I had to go to the immigration office every two weeks, where they'd say, 'Sorry sir, come back in two weeks.' So I was really uncertain as to what I was doing there, 'Am I staying? Am I being kicked out? What is happening?' I looked in a meditation manual which said that the antidote for worry was equanimity, so I thought, 'I'll just develop equanimity, then' – and after a while I fell asleep. Actually, it wasn't even sleep; it was just blanking out, it was unconsciousness, which became a real problem. I tried everything to combat it. I tried to sit at the best part of the day, five o'clock, after a cold shower and a cup of coffee. I'd sit there, and after an hour I'd open my eyes and I wouldn't know where I had gone! It's OK to sit through a drowsy meditation, but if you are not aware of where you are, it's very worrying.

Around that time I had to go to Bangkok to sort out my visa, and I took the opportunity to go to a meditation monastery in a town on the east coast. I told the teacher there about this problem and he replied, 'Oh, just look at sleepiness, look at the whole process of sleepiness.' I thought, 'What? Isn't that the problem? I just blank out, how could I see it?' However, at this meditation monastery there's nothing to do except look at your experience. So after about a month of watching sleepiness I began to notice that it wasn't actually sleepiness, it was more accurately unconsciousness. In the second month I noticed that before unconsciousness there was neutral feeling, or an emotional numbness. Then in the third month I noticed that before neutral feeling there was seemingly equanimity, but actually, looked at closer, it wasn't equanimity at all; it was indifference, it was actually a turning off from experience. The indifference in this case was turning off from the worry, turning off from a disturbing experience and being indifferent to it; and then there was a numb feeling before there was unconsciousness. So in order to unravel the problem I had to go back to the source and stop creating indifference. Once I stopped developing

indifference, the sleepiness stopped, but then all the worry came back! However, at least I was conscious. Sometimes it's more reassuring to be conscious with your worry than to be asleep and so not knowing of it. One of the dangers of trying to develop equanimity directly is that it's very likely to become indifference. True equanimity, though, is even-mindedness with regard to all the difficulties: the worry, the busy mind, all the problems. Thus equanimity results more often from developing many of the other spiritual qualities first. Developing concentration provides the possibility of calming down some of our usual emotional reactions, habitual interpretations and self-supporting stories. Through the development of mindfulness we learn to tune into the conditions of mind, including our way of reacting to what we experience and its inherent impermanent nature. Investigation of dhamma helps us to realize some of the background causes of this reacting, which results in some degree of letting go. In this way we are preparing the ground for a more balanced, equanimous engagement with reality. Otherwise we may idealize or hypothesize some kind of equanimity-like mood, when in fact we are repressing resigning from or damping down our energized moods, or resorting to an aloof, spiritless, emotional frigidity. So perhaps you can recognize how refined equanimity is. Now, you may ask, 'Well then, how do you develop equanimity?' Perhaps it is best to start with the indirect way. The chant on reflections on well-being mentions the four Brahma Vihāra meditations. Wishing to be free from affliction, etc. is developing friendliness for yourself and for others. Compassion is wishing 'may all beings be released from all suffering', and empathetic joy is wishing that all beings may 'not be parted from the good fortune they have attained,' that is, rejoicing in other people's well-being or good fortune. The last part of the chant has to do with the development of equanimity; that is, we reflect on the principle of moral cause and effect, of kamma-vipāka, that 'all beings are the owners of their actions, and inherit their results.' So we can develop equanimity in stressful, troubling situations by contemplating the principle of cause and effect, action and result. Instead of being angry at something or someone, you could contemplate how their actions will have appropriate results. If you want to be righteous about it, you could say to yourself, 'Well

they insulted me, they're going to get insulted too.' Not quite equanimity yet, is it? However, we are at least contemplating that we are all answerable for our actions. The complication is that there is no set time for these results; they ripen in their own time. We could consider many hypothetical situations. Let's say for instance that people insult you. It may result from one of their habits – they may insult everybody, and one day they may insult the wrong person and get a 'knuckle sandwich'. Or those people may not have many friends because they are very insulting. You can say, "Ah, that's *kamma-vipāka*, that's the result of their actions.'

We have to open our minds somewhat to this idea, this universal principle. If we become angry with someone, we usually react in a narrow, personalized way – 'I'm angry with her because she did this to me.' But to develop equanimity it is more beneficial to consider the bigger picture. We understand that the universal principle of action-result is more all-encompassing than our own personal reactions (and more ethically neutral). We're all subject to this principle, not just that person; we're answerable to it too, and if we succumb to anger we too will experience its results; we may become sick with anger, for instance.

If we can contemplate the principle of cause and effect, that all intentional actions will have their result in some way or another, we can step back from the personal to embrace the universal. When you recognize anger arising, you also understand that what you do with that anger is your responsibility. You can maintain the anger if you want, or you can acknowledge, 'There is the principle of cause and effect, and if I can take a step back from the personal, the universal will deal with it in a wiser way.' We don't have to be so personally involved; we can abide with even-mindedness, contemplating this timeless, universal principle. Maybe we won't see the results of someone's actions immediately, but in a wider sense, over time, those results will eventually come about. You need to have a certain amount of trust in this. You can work on equanimity by abiding more in this even-mindedness – 'Hey, I don't have to react to the ups and downs of life; these things will sort themselves

out.' How many times have you been upset about something and then, even while you are stewing over it, it just resolved itself?

We learn as we grow older or spiritually wiser that we are all part of a much grander, impersonal process, and we become more experienced in how situations often resolve themselves in their own time. Sometimes we don't really need to do anything to sort them out. Then we can realize the value and purpose of equanimity, and accept the idea that these things, these situations, will even out through the principle of cause and effect. Doesn't that thought make you feel more even-minded, more relaxed and relieved, perhaps a little equanimous? Equanimity is sometimes understood as resignation to or acceptance of fate. However, this is not a very spiritually developed understanding of it. Rather than just accepting our fate, we recognize that we function within a universal causal principle and can change our fate through right action. In the Buddha's teaching '*kamma*' literally means 'intentional action'; we have the power to act within the bounds of an ethical causal process. For example, if we do something wrong it could give a certain potential result, but we can correct that – we can apologize, we can make amends – and change the potential result. So action gives potential results; it's not as deterministic as fate. We can change possible results, we could even cancel some of them out. In fact we're continually changing results, because we are acting continually.

Buddhist equanimity is that even-mindedness, that emotional equilibrium which arises from a wise tuning to the true nature of reality. When we understand that all things are constantly changing, in harmony with the principle of cause and effect, there is often no need to react personally, no need for elation or dejection, for taking or rejecting. We have seen how reacting merely spins us into new actions and results, and thus prolongs the cycle of further reacting.

Maybe you noticed in the meditation exercise I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, just as I have noticed, that some form of even-mindedness is present much of the time. However, most people don't notice it; they don't recognize it or they don't see it in the right context; they may think it's just boredom. When there are no strong emotions pulling you up or

down, there's a certain even-temperedness and you think, 'Well this isn't very exciting, is it?' Usually we are looking for the more exciting emotions which stand out, and because of this the background steadiness, the evenmindedness, doesn't attract our attention. Sometimes it can be mistaken for dullness of mind or maybe indifference, but there is often a quality of mental evenness, composure, steadiness there as well. If we give attention to these qualities, perhaps they will begin to stand out a little more in our consciousness.

Sometimes when we begin our meditation we're actually looking for problems, for disturbances, rather than looking at those moments of peace, of quiet, of equanimity. But if we had those moments pointed out to us in the context of the Seven Factors of Awakening, we'd see the value in that even-mindedness; perhaps we would give it more emphasis, because that is what gives us stability. You may sometimes have noticed that if a problem arises in the course of a day which is quite evenly paced, when you have some steadiness, some stability of mind, that problem becomes easier to deal with. This even-mindedness becomes a supportive element for concentration. In the fourth absorption you have a very stable mind with equanimity. With happiness and joy there are fluctuations, because they are more active states. With equanimity, however, the stable mind just carries on; with or without happiness, it stays even-minded.

When living in England I was invited to teach a class at a local school. While waiting in the vicar's office, I noticed on the wall a big poster of an angel with the caption, 'It's easy to be an angel when nobody ruffles your feathers.' Buddhists would say, 'It's easy to be enlightened when nobody stirs up your defilements.' That is, it's easy to be equanimous when you aren't being disturbed by any difficulties – but there's no challenge in that. Ajahn Chah would call that the equanimity of a water buffalo. When problems begin to occur, thoughts and emotions start arising; that's a test of your equanimity. When this happens, you remain present – you don't dissociate, you don't run away, you don't become indifferent or numb. You still respond, but with even-mindedness.

In the context of the Factors of Awakening, equanimity follows and is thus supported by concentration, and

before that tranquillity. Ultimately, however, perfect equanimity comes from wisdom, from clearly seeing the true nature of things. When one understands that all things are impermanent, always changing, ephemeral, what is there to get excited about? Everything is just changing phenomena, just flowing processes. Ultimately equanimity is that profound, dispassionate stillness where everything manifests but is not reacted to, just silently received.

All these Seven Factors of Awakening work together, although for different people some of them may predominate more than others. Someone who worries a lot may need to work on even-mindedness, on not being so caught up with the different states of mind that arise and with trying to sort them all out. Even-mindedness is a valuable principle, which becomes a powerful quality supporting increasingly deeper insight.