

# 2001-11-18: Equanimity

Thu, 6/18 12:21PM • 36:33

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

equanimity, mind, people, absorptions, experience, economists, balanced, state, happiness, buddhism, joy, rapture, develop, called, meditation practice, brahma, emotions, familiar, monk, sublime

## SPEAKERS

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So

yesterday we had a one day sitting. And I talked about equanimity, which has been in my mind for some time. Probably because my lack of it and my in certain areas, and it seems to be a topic that I've been exploring and trying to develop for myself. So I thought talking about it yesterday, still on my mind. So, I'd like to just kind of continue or for those of you who were there yesterday, because a lot of it via repeat. One of the principles that I often talked about, I think about Buddhism, Buddhist practice, is that mindfulness as the function of if in In the light of mindfulness, the wholesome mental qualities grow. In the darkness, they shrink. And in the light of awareness of mindfulness, unwholesome mental qualities shrink, and in the darkness they grow. So if we're if we're aware, we're aware of, if it's wholesome tends to grow and be nourished by that awareness, and that those things are unwholesome. They are nourished by unawareness, by not paying attention by letting them be unconscious motivations. So, one of the things to do in Buddhist practice is to become familiar with some of the mental states and qualities, which maybe you're not so familiar with some of the wholesome ones, and also some of the unwholesome ones, so you can recognize them become familiar with them and thereby nourish them or starve them depending on what is wholesome or unwholesome. Through your awareness. And in my contact with Buddhism, I was surprised to discover A range of kind of emotions or mental states that I was not familiar with, kind of just growing up or I kind of knew the words of them may perhaps some of them I didn't even know the words of, you know, for example there I don't have a memorized list, but there's like five different kinds of joy that can happen in meditation and their words, you know, we don't we don't have words for them in English, but sometimes it's translated into English as things like rippling joy and cascading joy and exploding joy. And there's all these wonderful kind of words for joy, different different ways experienced in the body. So equanimity was one of these things that was a little bit of a surprise for me. And I, you know, I kind of, I guess, knew what the word meant somewhat. And, but my discovery of equanimity through the meditation practice was a real surprise and to discover what a tremendous power

equanimity is. I meet a lot of people Who, when they hear that word equanimity, feel a little bit turned off by it. Because for a number of reasons I think perhaps because equanimity is a kind of normal definition of equanimity is a balance of mind and evenness of mind ability for the mind to be balanced in the midst of success and failure praise and blame pleasure and pain so you're not influenced by the winds occurrence of what other people think. And the mind stays balanced doesn't go for or against what is going on and the awareness doesn't contract or for against what's going on. And it can seem like kind of like a little bit dull it can seem like kind of a kind of like there's no passion there no life it just kind of kind of adult kind of neutral state that who wants to be in a kind of neutral state you know, you want to be more excited in life and the surprise for me in discovering equity through meditation practice was that it's a very strong power, it's almost, I'd venture to say kind of like when when it's well developed, it can feel almost like a passion. It's such a strongly embodied and mental state that everybody kind of state that kind of feels the body in mind with kind of energy and radiance. That the last thing you want to think of it as kind of a dull, empty kind of neutral state, even on the mind is not reacting to anything. So

I think a lot of people, the number of people think of spirituality, in terms of such emotions as joy or compassion or love, or attainment of oneness or communion with something wonderful or but very few people, I think, focus on equanimity as being a very important part of a spiritual life. In Buddhism, however, equanimity is one of the premier primary primary prime emotions or mental states and number of lists, it's kind of top of the list. Some people you might, might almost come to the conclusion that equanimity is the most sublime are the highest or the most elevated or most important emotion, both social emotion between people and personal kind of state of mind to have. So I think it's well well warranted, visit kind of to explore a little bit talk about a little bit and, and make us a little bit more familiar, both with equanimity, and perhaps with some of the forces that make it difficult for us to have equanimity. Because, well, while being familiar with it, learn to recognize and appreciate it when it appears, strengthens it. A lot of what Buddha spirituality is about is noticing the kind of things that keep us from what the ideal is the little saying that I borrow from William James, if there's a gap between the actual and the actual and the ideal, choose the actual. So I think it works very well for mindfulness practice, if there's difference between what you hoped would happen, the ideal, and what's actually going on for you put your attention on what actually is going on. And then through the actual, you can even hopefully discover the ideal. So we talked about equanimity so you can become familiar with it. But perhaps ultimately, one of the more important pieces of the work is to become familiar with what keeps equanimity from happening, appreciating the possibility of it, and really kind of studying investigating our reactivity.

There's a little bit of I don't know if it's a really good story to illustrate equanimity. But I tell it to you because it's a story that's most commonly taught in our tradition, when people talk about equanimity to different teachers to the passionate teachers. And it's used To to anyway to highlight is possibility. So I tell you just not so much that the story is a good one perhaps but but that is just bring you up to date is this their story but you probably heard a lot of it it's a story of them. Yes, barbaric general who stormed into a monastery and there's a monk sitting there, elder monk. And the general lifts up his sword, and

he announces it, you know, with the intention of maybe killing the monk. I am the kind of person who can kill without blinking an eye. And the monk looks at him with a lot of equanimity or serenity looks at him and says, and I am the kind of person who can die without blinking an eye. And so then the general lowers is stored becomes the disciple of the monk, supposedly. So, you know great equanimity in the face of danger of even the possibility of death and dying. And even though that's probably a mythic story kind of made up story, I think there's lots of examples that people that have that kind of equanimity, sometimes for the better than the worst. People who are not afraid of dying or sometimes the people who should be most afraid of

like an image is very useful. It's very useful for parenting. I learned after the fact it's one of the areas we know where I'm struggling to find my equanimity. The but I remembered, I've been around a number of four year olds. My son is three and a half or so. And surprise I had with these four year olds is for especially with the first What happened I saw I was really surprised and didn't know these things happen. But I was on this four year old who she told her mother, I hate you. And I was kind of horrified, you know? And how could that be and went through my mind, you know, what kind of parenting are these people doing? And, but it seems to be that I don't, I don't really know these things so well yet. But it seems to me that it's a kind of stage that a lot of kids will go through, just as my son went through a particular kind of archetypical stage. We could go or so at home where he announced that when he grew up, he wants to have a baby. And somehow my mother, my wife explained to him that you know, that he couldn't do that really on his own very well. And you needed a woman or a wife or something woman. And, and he said, Well, I won't have any baby with you then. And then he said, I always want to be with you. And I've heard you know that young boys will sometimes say, you know, I want to marry you, Mommy, they know at this age, and then you know, six months later they're saying I hate you. And so if you need to know these things that are coming, you know, maybe they're kind of universal patterns of some sort, right? common patterns that are not universal, but patterns prominent enough in our culture, there can be much more equanimity about they're appearing. And I've known that, you know, that seeing the patterns in, in my son has helped a lot for me to be economist the times where, when I didn't see the pattern, I'd be you know, my attitude was, this is forever. They don't intellectually believe that, you know, thinking that but kind of my emotional response kind of this is forever to live with this forever now. And actually, you know, it's just a phase you know, it goes through a couple of days. Or a week or however long and, or, you know, so one of the things a couple years ago, my wife and I would say we we look at each other and we'd say, we're having one of those days. And that was really helpful for me. Because it's just you know, it's one of those days that happens with raising kids and, and, and reminded me not to be lighter but a tad more equanimity about it's just these are kind of things that go through, I don't have to get to some big conclusion about it. So, equanimity is seen as as kind of one of the highest Buddhist emotions. And one of the ways to see that is in the lists that it appears in the list of practices or practice experiences. Most commonly, it appears in the list of the four brahma vihara, which are the four divine abodes before that kind of divine or wonderful or very wholesome social emotions to be cultivated the way we can relate to ourselves or relate to others. And these are loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and quantity, and the way that and that. Classically, these four social emotions are cultivated as meditation

practices. They're cultivating that order first loving kindness, then compassion and sympathetic joy, and then equanimity. And with equanimity being last recommend is building on the first three. Were the first three are kind of present first, I kind of cultivated I'm strong part of who you are. And then there's equanimity that integrates them and holding them all together in a balanced way. So rather than equanimity being kind of returning to a neutral state. It comes along with these feelings of love and compassion, but so it's fueled by them or informed by them, and an intimate part of them. I think of equanimity as a brahma vihara has been the grandmother grandmotherly mind where a grandmother has Supposedly tremendous love for the grandchild, but has a lot more equanimity than the parents. And, you know, they've seen it all and they know it all and you know, parents are fretting around you know, so concerned and we should have seen us at our house scene. You know, you know it, you know, I think is probably, my guess is that in the normal course of things, parents when they have two children, I have a lot more equanimity second time around. Because you know, you've seen it before you know, you can see it coming in.

Anyway, grandmotherly mind. The other place you see it is in the list of the four absorptions. When people get very deeply concentrated in meditation, they enter what's called jhanas or the absorptions. And they also follow a progression, that kind of a natural progression that were. The second absorption is characterized by A tremendous rapture, rapture, sometimes tremendous can be range of how strong it is. At some point the person becomes stabilized in that absorption. They're trained or they Intuit that that rapture is actually agitating. It's like, if you get too much rapture, it's like enough of this, you know, I'm tired of it, it's kind of tiring to have all this, you know, intensity of the Rapture. And people just want to get, you know, let go of it. And they're trained to let go of it in favor of the underlying and a sense of happiness, or kind of bliss that is much more satisfying than the Rapture. It's not, there's not mentally so agitating as you're actually can be. And then after that stabilized in the third absorption, they're trained to see how notice how even that wonderful sublime happiness is little bit agitating and a little bit stressful. And, you know, after a while, you get kind of tired of that. And then you meditators learn to let go of that happiness in favor of acronyms at the state have very deep equanimity. And equanimity is experienced as much more deeply satisfying than either rapture or joy or happiness. And so, rather than being kind of a neutral doll state, in contrast to rapture, enjoy, it's actually much, you know, it's as much as a greater, satisfactory values much more satisfying much more. I don't know what to say. But maybe you said it's very much more satisfying. It's much more sublime, precious feeling. The other place and there's another place of creativity appears and that's in the Vedic minimality of the absorptions is equanimity of great concentration. When the mind is very, very, has a strength of concentration, then things are not going to influence it much. You're not going to be blown over partly because you're not noticing much. And when you're deeply absorbing the absorptions. You don't really hear things or feel a lot of things and the mind is kind of independent. sensory input experiences of life and for through that independence, they can experience this great equanimity. Because not troubled by anything. It's kind of easy then right? The so then you have this list of the seven factors of awakening. And the seven factors of awakening are the seven. mental states are qualities that get developed as a person approaches the experience of enlightenment. And these things, seven need to be in balance with each other. And these are mindfulness, investigation,

effort, joy, concentration, tranquility, and equanimity. And this time, even though equanimity is last, it's not because it's the highest. It's just I don't know why they ordered it that way. But the seven are supposed to be balanced together. And in this case, rather than letting go of joy, joy and equanimity or balanced, joint tranquility, balance, joy and ability to investigate what's going on in the moment are balanced. So these things are what arises out of mindfulness practice rather than concentration practice. And they become very, very strong states that they don't get balanced at a low level they get balanced in a fairly high pitch. The and then the fourth the fourth place, you see equanimity is in classic practice of Vipassana, there are stages called the vipassana knowledges. Some vipassana students will go through and the last stage of these Vipassana knowledges last stage of Vipassana there's either 12 or 16, nine or 1216 states stages depending on how you count is called the equanimity towards all formations. Which basically means like when emanate towards anything you can experience and this is equanimity that doesn't arise as not because you're so concentrated. Not because you've developed why social understanding of how to have equanimity in relationships with Other people, but rather, you have equanimity because the mind is not inclined in any kind of way to before against what it's experiencing. So it's open to all kinds of experience, whatever it's going on. But it allows it to rise there. And there's no holding on or pushing away or resisting what that experience is. And this is an extremely sublime experience to have that it's like the mind, it's kind of like the mind is so radiant, that radiance is the right analogy here, but just so radiant, that they're just so

content and so happy or fulfilled or so settled or to a piece of itself, that it doesn't really not influenced by anything pain or pleasure or whatever is going on your experience. Sometimes I call this the Teflon Teflon mind. Because things just slide right off. One of the analogies using the suttas they didn't have Teflon back then. But they had lotus leaves, which drop a water, they would just roll right off a lotus leaf was the exact example this kind of equanimity. And as being the last stage of personhood, it's the stage who sets the sets like this sets the it's it's the stage set the stage for her for the experience that I'm Nibbana of the final awakening, kind of like when the mind is so economists that is not for against anything doesn't contract doesn't exist. Anything just allows everything to be there, the mind rests kind of in its natural radiance, then it sets a stage for the mind to release itself. As if it's as if the last vestiges of clinging or holding is consciousness holding on to itself. And then let's go over itself and then there's experience of Nirvana.

Now, most of us in the course of normal daily life are not going to have these kinds of intense experiences equanimity, but we can have tastes of it in smaller ways. For many people, it's the first list of brahma vihara 's which is most important to have equanimity in a relationship to other people, and the cultivation of such equanimity in Buddhism, as a meditation practice, the Brahma vihara 's are done through saying phrases, that the phrase that's connected to the Brahma vihara equanimity is something like everyone is the heir of their own karma. Everyone's happiness and unhappiness suffering as a result of their own decisions that they make. I might care a lot about you and want the best for you. However, I'm not responsible for the decisions you make and the decisions you make that affect your well being or lack of it. So that's a whole topic in itself those phrases, but that that

understanding someone else's responsible for their own happiness is one of the ways to develop a social equanimity in Buddhism. And I find that very helpful for me when I'm dealing with people like right now I'm dealing with a relative who's quite sick. And it's quite distressing for me to actually area where have I seemingly have the least equanimity is around my, my close relative, so sick and but what I have what I'm seeing over and over again, is the degree to which you know, I'm doing the most I can to try to be helpful, but that she makes decisions, which sometimes are her decisions, I can't stop her decision making, but she making decisions which seemed detrimental to her health, or well being, and very, very compassionate and sympathetic to her because it's very hard for her to kind of make through her life and she's struggling and just a decision she makes or just are You know, probably the best she can do. But still, she's making her own decisions, and I can't get in there and make those decisions for her. And that helps me a little bit. It doesn't make me feel less doesn't make me feel happy. It sounds like I could go home, you know, I feel because there's no suffering around there. But I feel like when empty, some equanimity, because I don't feel responsible. And for me, the Achilles heel of the effects, you know, my equanimity or lack of it, is my sense of personal responsibility for other people's happiness and well being. So when I realize that I'm not so personally responsible, that doesn't mean that I stopped doing everything I can to be helpful. But if I don't feel personally responsible, then there's no I don't have this hook in my mind where I contract or get frozen or get fulfilled with despair or something that I might have. And I'm beginning to see that equanimity with my son. Because I didn't. I had no idea that by time so much, three years old, they're already becoming One person you know, I thought that was happening later, you know, I don't know, I didn't know what else but I thought this is all new to me. And, but this guy's his own guy, you know, he makes his own decisions and he's you know, I just sort of there's a there's a part of me that I'm not you know he's deciding for himself you know his own character is born with a certain personality and and so we're starting to see you know that there's a degree which I'm not responsible for the his personality and kind of his choices unit h3 in certain areas, gives me some equanimity so they don't kind of writing up so close and kind of feel like you know, I'm personally responsible and it's up to me all these things. It's kind of, I don't know if mystery is the right word, but there's a kind of mystery to me, perhaps to to raising children in that. You know, I seems like you're not exactly in charge.

And, you know, for better and worse

and in social relationships, equanimity is really important because you know, you know, as the saying goes, it takes it can take years and years to develop a good friend, and it can take moments to destroy it. If you don't have enough balance of mind, then reactivity can get the upper hand and we can, you know, say something or do something which is really hurtful for the person. And then, you know, years of friendship has been erased of trust. Um, some people are afraid of equanimity, especially meditative equanimity. Because to be really deeply economists requires letting go of concerns with me in mind. With definitions of self, and some people are very afraid to exist in any kind of way, even in deep meditative states without the security of knowing who they are and defining themselves protecting them themselves by having a certain definition of who they are. And as long as there's some kind of definition of self are concerned with me, your mind, the mind is a bit fragile. Mine actually



lacks the conditions for acronyms. Because you're going to be swept up by all kinds of things that threaten or support or enhance that sense of self. So one of the functions classic definitions of equanimity is to prevent us from falling into extremes. And some of the extremes that they talked about otherwise called the eight worldly conditions. So the eight worldly winds that if you have a strong sense of self definition, that self image you're holding on to, you just get blown over left and right. And these Usually listed this way. success and failure, praise and blame, gain and loss, and pain and pleasure. And you know, these things can get really caught up in these kinds of things. Or the mind can be equanimous about them not think so much about it. If someone comes and praises you, you know, do you get elated? If someone comes in criticizes you do you get depressed? Well, if someone comes, critics criticizes you for the zit on your nose. If you're a teenager, you get quite upset. But if you're 80 years old, you know, you could care about what people think about my zits, you know, and you're quite equanimous about it. There's no it doesn't affect, you know, our ups and downs. And this is this is why I call Buddhism premature aging. because it involves developing that kind of commonality but we're not caught up at all. Things that are so essentially important for us earlier in life that we use to define who we are and measure self positive negatively. We're economists about praise and blame, success and failure. There's lots of says failure is part of life. And we don't have to use it to define ourselves or to measure ourselves and you know, just continue with what needs to be done. So to have that chronicity about these four, eight worldly conditions is one of the places of equanimity. People sometimes afraid of equanimity because of requires letting go of what we're attached to. And that's where the study of our reactivity becomes an important part of developing equanimity. What is it? What are the triggers inside of us, that make it difficult for us to be economists? What are the what are what is our reactivity in different situations? Who's crying? For example, for me, the sense of responsibility is one that kind of I get caught by other people get caught, maybe perhaps by praise and blame Other people get caught by success and failure, other people get caught by pleasure and pain. Some people are really afraid of any kind of pain at all or the possibility of it. And there's no equanimity about it. And some people have a lot of equanimity about it. Some people are losing equanimity about what's gonna happen in the future. They might projections The future is what's going to happen. And that makes them anxious. So I noticed that in myself, that the times where I wake up in the middle of the night or, or I have trouble falling asleep at night, last night, my wife woke me up at 230 and said, I'll come and look. And so I stumbled out of bed to look out the window and see the shooting stars and we saw something quite beautiful. I never seen such kind of big stars, shooting stars or whatever the comets going across the sky. So it's kind of nice to see, but then I had trouble falling back asleep afterwards. Was it worth it? And, and but what I noticed is for me is that

when I have trouble sleeping them, usually in the moment in the experience itself, I'm quite happy. It's usually comfortable and they're in a nice, comfortable bed. Nothing's you know, welfare, basically comfortable, that would make my mind anxious where I lose my equanimity about it all serenity or peace about it is my concerns about what it means the next day. Oh, if I if I'm really sleepy in the next day, then I won't be able to perform the way I need to or I'll stumble over my words or I'll give an unintelligible Dharma talk. And every everyone will reject will reject me, you know. So it's like the concern about what's going to happen in the future that where the hook is for me, and some of it has

to do with, you know, self definition how people will see me and how I successful in my endeavors and all these little things. have grabbed me. But in the moment there's actually nothing nothing. You know, it's actually quite wonderful for me. Usually when I'm laying there, sometimes I get kind of uncomfortable. But because we have a hard futon

so what are the forces that make you an economist? What are the things that get you caught? What are they the kind of reactivity that you need to study and become more familiar with so that you don't make yourself economists because you can make yourself that way artificially, and be just, you know, just it's, it's if you do it artificially, then it becomes any kind of violence to ourselves. But by understanding wisely, how we get caught and end to end, be willing to be inspired to look at that because As you feel inspired by the possibility of having equanimity, you feel as a possibility, the potential for who you are. It's not a dull neutral state, but it's actually it's something very vital. And so you're interested in it. But you know, the Wise way to approach it is to use that inspiration to and confidence to go and look, you know, what, how is it I'm getting caught here? Do I need to be caught this way? Do we need to be for and against this kind of experience? What is it for you? The last thing I'll say is that the warning in Buddhism is that or the teaching is that equanimity is not indifference. It's not a kind of a neutral state. We're kind of indifferent to what's going on just as much as the grandmother who loves the child is filled with love and concern for the grandchild. But it is equanimous about what the, you know, the ups and downs of the grandchild. But that you know, so the quiet equanimity is there and the grandmotherly mind, but the indifference is not there. So equanimity is not indifference. And it's also not to be confused the warning and the text. This is not to be confused with ignorance, the equanimity that comes out of not knowing. Because if you don't know anything, you can be quite economists sitting here, maybe all of you really hate this Dharma talk. It's just like the worst one you've ever heard. And, but, you know, you're, I'm an optimizing the conversation right now. So, you know, you don't have a chance to tell me that. So I don't know. So I can have this blissful equanimity about that, because I don't know, you know. So that's not considered equanimity, just kind of the bliss, bliss of ignorance. I don't know if that's the right example, but maybe you get the principle. So those are my thoughts and around the topic, and what I was hoping to do this evening this morning, is we have about five minutes before the usual scheduled end. What I'd like to ask you if you'd be willing to go along is if you would, suggestion would be you can do one of two things, we just have an open discussion on this topic or to have more voices, be able to talk and explore the topic. My interest was that you all form little groups of three or four, and just for five minutes, maybe three is a good number. Just talk about this topic, equanimity, your reactions to the talk or your reactions to, to, you know, you know, how it is for you and, and what you what you care to talk about, and what meaning this might have for you, or what are the things that make it difficult for you to have equanimity. And it doesn't have to be great deep confessions, but just in five minutes, just kind of explore a little bit and see what different people around you might think about this topic. Would that be okay? Yeah, so why don't you just form little groups of three triplets.

Ken, again, there's two over there. Do you want to sit on the chairs Do you want to join them or Jerry and



Knowing how to let go is an important part of equanimity.

So you're more than welcome to continue the discussion after we formally end. But I just want to just say that we should probably end and formally and I'll read to and I'll read a short quote from the Buddha. That's used sometimes as a description of economists mind. The Buddha was talking to his son, his son became a Buddhist monk. And he said his son's name is rahula rahula. Develop an awareness that is like the earth. For on the earth, people throw clean and unclean things, and the earth is not troubled or repelled. And as you grow like the earth, no pleasant or unpleasant experiences will grab your attention. Attention or stick to it. Similarly, you should develop an awareness like water for people throw all manner of clean and unclean things into water, and it is not troubled or repelled. And as you flow like water, no pleasant or unpleasant experience will grab your attention or stick to it. So May you be like the earth and the oceans. So, thank you very much and I'll see you in a couple of weeks.