

# 2009-10-18 Equanimity

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

equanimity, people, meditation, agitated, anxious, died, life, non reactivity, mind, sit, kinds, training, decay, economists, agitation, nonreactive, deep, reactivity, challenges, buddhism

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Please note, due to a health emergency, there was a one to two minute silent interlude during the final three minutes of this talk.

So an important part of Buddhist spiritual life is content contemplation or reflection, to actually think about particular themes. And in Zen tradition, they have cons, which are a little bit enigmatic kind of statements people grapple with for a long time. In our tradition, we don't we have more kind of more kind of simple, straightforward themes that are not so mysterious, but it can be equally challenging, maybe mysterious for us to learn how to work with in a deep way. And the theme that I'd like to bring up for contemplation today suggested maybe you take it on for this week, is that of equanimity equanimity is considered the crown jewel of the spiritual qualities spiritual virtues, inner capacities that come with Buddhist practice. And it's a once it's strongly developed, it's one of the most sublime and beautiful states emotions, mental qualities that a person can experience until it's well developed. Some people are turned off by the idea of equanimity because it can appear to be indifference and some kind of aloofness or indifference. But that's certainly not what we're talking about. When we talk about equanimity. equanimity is imperturbability of the mind. The mind is not shaken, or pushed around by the experience of life. It's where the mind peace subtleness is the acceptance intact. Regardless of what goes on around us, too. There's an evenness of mind The balance of mind centeredness of mind a non reactivity of mind that comes with equanimity. But to define it as the absence of reactivity is not doesn't quite do it justice because it comes with a very palpable tangible quality feeling in the mind of great pervasive peace of well being of kinda like calm. It's a wonderful thing. So equanimity is considered the crown jewel, the Buddhist practice, because it's the last one, when equanimity is quite strong. It's kind of the last door or the last kind of stage before the mind can get liberated. That liberation in Buddhism classically is built on a strong foundation of equanimity, this very strong balance of mind. As long as the mind is reacting to things, it's very hard for the mind to let go of its clinging. Because reactivity often comes with being concerned with our attachments and clinging and fears and everything. But we no longer are caught up in fears, reactions, clinging attachments, then the mind has a kind of stiff stableness and steadiness and ease with which it's a lot easier than to kind of let go of the last things that hold us in place. So it's, it's a crown jewel, because it feels so good. It's such a wonderful sublime experience. And also because it's the stepping stone to the last kind of stage of practice, which is liberation. It's also a very useful quality to develop in life, and much short of the duration. cultivating equanimity helps us go through life with much more ease and can avoid it. A lot of problems. It's been said that it can take 20 years or years to develop a really good friendship. And it can take an instant to ruin it. When we act in some reactive, impulsive way, because we're caught by the situation, and then we regret what we've done. equanimity, given the chronicity of what goes on around us, then we're less likely to react impulsively to what's happening, but rather be able to tap into a wiser understanding of what goes on.

The idea of going from young adults sitting tonight to aging workshop next Saturday, points to this trajectories arc that we people have, if they have a long life arc people have in their life, of going from often the energy and delight of being young to The fading away that happens as we get older the decay of age and not just flowers that decay, but it's also old people. People, we do a disservice I think to the world by always picking Buddha Buddha statues in that kind of as a young man, you probably reason usually picked him up in an item is enlightenment. When he was 36, and usually sits very straight upright, he has no wrinkles. And, and there should be I think in order to do justice to this life that we live in. There should also be statues of him as an old man, which I've never seen. There's a depiction there's a story he describes himself and we're in the suit toes as being having a bent back and a wrinkled face. And you don't think of your wonderful founder of your religion as being all bent over and wrinkled. But you know, he died when he was at 81 and probably looked quite old. back then. I imagine he was toothless. You know, who knows? You know, you had dentists back then. They didn't have a lot of sugar either.

Some years ago, I was visiting with Blanche Hartman, who was, she's taught here, she's in her 80s. She's a wonderful Zen teacher, a bit of Zen center. And she asked me how I was. And I told her that there was starting to be some health signs of old age, sickness and decay going on for me. And she written she lit up. And she said, Yes. If you're lucky enough, that's what happens. If you're lucky enough, that's what happens. lucky enough to live that long. That's what happens. What do you expect When you see this tree, this arc, you know, from, you know, with young young kids, you see them develop and grow, and you get kind of excited and happy to see the stages of growth sometimes. And then you get to a certain point in that arc, where it goes the other direction, if you're lucky enough and steadily to watch it. Your capacities and abilities and health kind of begin to decline. And some of us see it in our parents. And, you know, some people have nursed their parents into old age, some of the parents have died. But you can sometimes watch the decay of parents if you're lucky enough to have parents that turn old age perhaps. And it can be quite challenging for someone you care for so much about somebody for whom it has been so important for you and perhaps perhaps has been kind of a stable, stable source of security refuge because Begin to decay and not be able to have that ability anymore. So how do we have equanimity? In the face of some other great challenges that exist in this life? How do we have equanimity? The shorthand for these challenges in Buddhism is sickness, old age and death. But it includes a lot of different things. Is it desirable to have equanimity in the face of these huge challenges that we have? Some people feel that it's very important to be agitated. If they wouldn't say it that way. They would, you know, stand up and say is important. Everybody should be agitated. But there's a sometimes a deep belief in the value of worry, agitation fear. I know that in some families occasionally, that the way that people show love and care if they worry, and if you don't worry, then you don't have any other way of showing that you're really connected. Didn't care and involved and so you have to worry properly. And the better you worry, you know, the better you kind of show that you're connected and if you're equanimous then somehow you know, because it can be seen as being not caring. Oh, this is let me see apologize if I jump around a little bit. Some years ago, there was a man who came to IMC he was in. He was an elderly man. He came for a few years. And then he came to me one day and said, My kids are worried about me. You okay, dead. And because I spent my whole life being anxious. And after a few years at IMC and meditating, I stopped being anxious. And they thought something was really wrong with me. Because it wasn't the old dad, you know, let's be signs of dementia or something.

So, to be agitated, Also it says his various ways of being agitated is also people believe in it, because sometimes it's a way of getting attention. If we're kind of worked up and agitated, then people notice us have more and maybe more likely to take care of us. If we stay economist and peaceful in the midst of

our difficulties, then is anybody going to care? Only if we get excited about people care, or there can be fear that's sets in motion. Some people believe in fear a lot. And they believe that somehow going to mean most anxiety is fear that's believed about imaginary things. Some people make the distinction between anxiety and fear. And then it fears is for things that are real and anxiety are things that are imaginary, because they haven't happened yet. They're imagining into the future what might happen. So some of you probably believe in anxiety. Otherwise, why would Why would you be anxious. So equanimity challenge Some deep beliefs we have about how we think we're supposed to function in this life. A friend of mine who was a hospice nurse told me once

that

at some point in working with families, of a patient in the hospice, she will tell the family from now on, there's no more crisis. So and so now, whatever happens now is not a crisis. So you can imagine someone's come close to death. I mean, you know, they have a heart attack, there's all kinds of things can happen. But she said at this point, there's no more crisis. Is it possible to have the equanimity the non reactivity to allow nature to take its course after a certain point and you realize it's hopeless? This is where it's going. And okay. And what does it take you know, to stop getting anxious stop running around to the doctors and grabbing the my throat and say you have to do something for my loved one. being stressed anymore? Is it appropriate at some point to let nature take its course? And is it appropriate to not get worked up? Here's a worked up story that maybe I've told this before. But there was a woman who came, I knew her mostly on retreats. And she had come to many retreats that I taught. At some point, she had breast cancer. And she worked really hard to overcome the cancer. And so she lived much longer than people expected. But you kept but you still had the cancer and kept fighting it with all her might. Partly because he had a young daughter. And when she a daughter was about 10 years old, she came to me and said to him to retreat again and said, doesn't there's not this matchup anymore. I'm going to die. This this is pretty much where it's going and we don't know how long But that's where it's, you know, done everything I can can. And she was really angry, and really afraid. A lot of it because of her daughter. And so I told her I told this mother, I said, you know, this sad, I'm sorry for you, it's difficult for the daughter. But one of the most how you die is going to be one of the most significant influences on your daughter's life, the rest of her life. If you die, angry and afraid, it's going to set the course of her life in some big way. If you can die a piece, it's going to create a very different way for her to address her life and go forward here. So, some months later, six months or so, I heard from the Father, that in fact she had died. And, and she died at home peacefully. And when that both the daughter and the husband were there, she died peacefully, and when the mother died They went out in the garden and got a flower and came back and put the flower on the mother's chest. So, when is it best to be peaceful? When is it best to be economists? When is it when is the best thing we do to someone to support other people and support ourselves, not to get worked up, not to get agitated, but rather to stay more peaceful? I think one of the interesting things to reflect reflect on in contemplating equanimity in the value of it and how to know what it's about is to is to use kind of accrued economic terms to do a cost benefit analysis on anxiety and agitation. Is it really, to your benefit, to get agitated? So rather than say, Oh, you should be economists. Let's turn it upside down. Say, should you get agitated? Should you get anxious? Should you get angry? Is this really beneficial and useful to do that? And if you really are mindful of how agitation feels fear, anxiety, distress, how the what the how that impacts us how that affects us. Chances are that you'll begin getting disenchanted disillusioned, disillusioned with the value and importance of those kinds of activities. Many people have come to me and told us about anger not anything else. But anger becomes a you know, now that being mindful, I see how painful anger is for me. I don't think it's useful to be angry anymore. It's causing myself more harm than that enemy of mine and They kind of give up their anger, because they just see

it just hurts too much. Some of you probably are protesting now in your mind because say, well wait a minute, anger, fear, agitation, all these things.

I don't have any control over those. Those just kind of happened. I'm just doing my life and minding my own business. And then suddenly I get overwhelmed. This, this, this, I get visited, I get taken over. I'm not responsible. I'm not the one who's doing it. It just happens. And now you're telling me I've taken responsibility? Yep. That's what we're asked to do in Buddhist practice, is to use the capacity for mindfulness to look carefully and see what goes on in our minds in our hearts. And to see how things come into play how our mind picks up its ideas. Its reactions, its feelings and thoughts and gets involved and acts them out. So, when I started doing meditation practice, it was in the Zen tradition. And one of the values of Zen training. And this is the strictness and discipline of Zen is when you're in the zendo, meditating, you're expected not to move for the period of meditation. Here at IMC, you can move if you want. And I think it's better actually to err on the side of being lax than to err on the side of being strict like they are then. But it's also a great to have discipline. It's a great training, and I've benefited a lot from it. So what it meant was that for years, for endless hours, weeks, months on end, sometimes a practice I wouldn't be sitting upright and would not move physically. No matter what was going on, in my head with my emotions, no matter what was going on with my thoughts, and no matter what was going on physically. And so because of that, how disciplined Zen is, it's not uncommon for students to have a lot of physical pain when they sit. And, and I sat with a lot of pain. So what does it take to sit and not react physically to strong pain? What does it take to not react physically to strong emotional surges that come through us? And often, you know, if you feel suddenly really sad or really subdued, people can slump or depressed, they slump and lean over, or there's all kinds of things we do with our posture. But in his endo, you can't succumb to those postural influences him or being influenced by our emotions. You have to kind of stay sitting there. And so all these thoughts can occur. Thoughts like maybe I should go to the movies instead. I say that because I had a friend who said it's a Cien attend a seven day retreat, center retreat. And he told me later, oh, in the middle of the third day I left went to the movies. Once that spirit rock, I was teaching their retreat and, and, and this guy came in for an interview and he said, Oh, this is great being on retreats wonderful. And, and yesterday afternoon, I went down the street to the golf course. Maybe hadn't understood the program. So all kinds of ideas can come up desires can come up strong desires can come for something else. Stronger versions can come up. And in training, you're told to sit still and not move and it becomes a training and non reactivity. And it takes a lot of mindfulness, a lot of self awareness to watch oneself and watch the tendency to react and not get into it. So at least physically starts physically, but it translates to a more mental capacity ability not to react or pick up or be pushed around by all the different forces within us. And it for me that the gent the beginning of that training was very physical, wasn't mental. It was a physicality of not moving during meditation. Very powerful training. And a lot of beliefs, strong beliefs, strong ideas, strong attachments will come up that say you can't do this. It's not okay to sit still with this. an itch itches are great. No one. No one has died in meditation yet from an itch. So it's a great it's a wonderful place to train in equanimity and non reactivity.

Okay, you know, it can feel awful. It feels like you feel desperate, it can feel like I am going to die, I'm going to scream. But you know, you're not going to have to use it. Remember, remember your wisdom. And then you think, well, this is not worth it. I'm supposed to I came to get calm and settled and peaceful and happy. And this, you know, this is just, you know, awful, you know, in the middle never meditated again. But if you understand that, that meditation is much more than becoming calm, it's also developing inner strengths and strength and one of the strengths is one of non reactivity of equanimity. And so the edge because it gives you an opportunity, to struggle with yourself, to struggle against the forces inside of you that want to both they want to scratch they want to scream, they want to do whatever they want to argue with the Buddha. You know, it's meditation is ridiculous. Sit here in a ditch

is just you know that First thing and you know as all these all these forces inside of us start kicking into gear and to train and not buying into any of them to train to sit still and not move. At the end of the sitting, you might be more agitated than you were when you started. situation like that. But you might be a lot stronger as well. You don't admit we don't measure the progress of spirituality by, you know how commies get but also by the strength of your capacity to sit still with what's what's here. There are times when a successful meditation session is measured only by the fact that you didn't leave your question. It sometimes meditation is like being in a sitting out riding on a wild Bronco because the inner forces are strong, the fact that you didn't get up and leave that successful when the forces are that strong. It's very important not to measure success in meditation by calm, deep stillness. Successive meditation has a lot to do with meeting successfully, what is presented to you? Not your inner state, but rather how you meet. You're interesting. So, so, to train in meditation, what part of the training meditations to train and non reactivity. And something like an itch is a wonderful training for that. Within reason, physical pain is a good thing for that. emotional challenges. strong emotions is a great training for that. I've sat in the zendo meditation hall. And I don't want to tell you the full stories, maybe maybe you'll be a little bit generous to me when I tell you the story. Don't assume the worst of me. But I've sat in the zendo and all I could do was nuts. Love the person next to me. So, that was a training in equanimity or non reactivity. I had good cause.

But I sat still. And you know, and there was part of that training so meditation is a preeminent place to train and develop our capacity to be nonreactive. And we certainly avoid getting into trouble. I know that if I slugged the guy next to me, there were probably 10 people who would have jumped me. Literally, you know, it was would probably would be very dangerous for me to have done that. So I saved myself a lot of problems and probably a visit to the hospital. And so but you know, you can save yourself a lot of smaller problems to just simple, non reactivity. And then the challenge is how to be nonreactive and still be honest with who we are. Some people will practice non reactivity. Some people are really good at it, and they hide behind a wall of non reactivity. And you don't know what's going on with them. They're very private, they hide, they don't want people to know. And so that's not you know, that's not real equanimity in Buddhism, that's hiding, which is a kind of pulling back. So hard to be honest, while we're being economists as well. That's part of the contemplation and reflection for you to think about. How To be honest to yourself. part of the solution, of course, is to be mindful, to be really mindful and honest with what's going on. How to be nonreactive and honest about what's happening is very important part This training that we're doing here. So is it worthwhile to get agitated? Is it worthwhile to get distressed? Is it worthwhile to get afraid? Is it worthwhile to get angry? In many ways, the number of ways of answering that question for yourself to do the cost benefit analysis. But one of the as, as an inner life gets cultivated as meditation practice, for example, deepens then you start having a different reference point for doing that cost benefit analysis. If you're always agitated, being a little bit more agitated. It doesn't matter that much. But if you're really peaceful then that level of notation that you didn't mind before, stands in big contrast is a huge difference between it. So someone who doesn't whose baseline is already agitated, is not going to see much difference. But someone's baseline is in a deep inner sense of well being of peace, of stillness or quiet or, or love or, or some kind of well being, then there's a bigger difference. And that you might be more interested in safeguarding, that deep sense of inner well being. And you might see more clearly that's not worth losing that well being, no matter what's happening around you. And I've been in situations where I've grabbed a little bit with this question, because there have been people that I've known, who have been in dire circumstance, difficult situations. I've done whatever I could Whatever I could think of, to try to help them support them. I wasn't just sitting back and being economists, you don't let them kind of do what they're doing. I was involved. But I had to watch, you know, should I should I be stressed? Should I get anxious or not? And as I grappled with that issue, I could see very clearly that it just wasn't worth losing the inner sense of well being that I have. For the sake of the situation here, it didn't help it wouldn't help me take care of



it better. In fact, I think it would have helped me take care of it worse, because of him agitated, and distressed and anxious that I don't think very clearly offer a different kind of presence to other people. If I'm economists There's also a powerful lesson equanimity gives to others. And that is that they also have take responsibility for themselves.

You can still help and do all kinds of things. But with equanimity, you're less likely to be emotionally entangled with the other person. And we do other people a big favor. By not getting emotionally entangled with them. It can be challenged for them it can be emotionally it you know that they feel that love and connectedness requires you to be entangled with them. But if we don't get entangled with them, then allows them to see their own tendency to entanglement. And hopefully, they can take responsibility for it. Certainly we don't want to take me I don't think it's healthy for us to take responsibility for other people's entanglements. One of the ways that equanimity is cultivated in Buddhism is to reflect that every each person is the air to their own karma, each people what they experience, their happiness and suffering has a lot to do with the choices they've made. And even though I might wish the person Well, I want to support the person the best I can. I can't undo their karma. I can't undo the choices they have made and they are making and we do people I believe we do people a favor, to leave people alone. In the world of their karma choices. We can give advice, we can be supportive, we can offer them love. But there's a way of kind of our equanimity where we don't get to kind of excited and worked up. offer something to them that that is much more profound than is offered if we get emotionally anxiously tied up with them.

So my hope is that your mindfulness practice, both in meditation and in daily life. gives you some perspective and self understanding that encourages us to encourage you to question the kinds of reactions that you have within the emotional, mental, and physical reactivities that occur with events around you. And you begin questioning that movement, the agitation of the mind the excitement of the mind that happens, and don't take it for granted. It has to be that way. Perhaps it's something you can let go of, perhaps is something you don't have to buy into, perhaps you can hold your balance independent of these things. There can be strong emotions washing through and you can hold your ground with them, stay grounded, stay stabilized. And you know, let let these powerful waves come through, but don't give in to them. Don't succumb to them as we learn, and then in meditation as well to think of meditation part, as a training area, to cultivate this very significant form of non reactivity, to allow things to all kinds of things can happen, you should meditate, but learn how not to react to it. Just be with it, be with it, be with it. And then, yeah, we need some help out there. We need a doctor. So is there a doctor in the house and there's someone have a phone can you call 911 is a doctor there's a doctor there. Hey, Peters calling the phone. Everybody can be everybody. Sit quietly for a moment. And this is a time for.

So he is a doctor, and she's a maybe, maybe he has a little seizure, but he says he's fine hear the laughter. But we're going to have the ambulance come and come and check in. So I think what we should do is quietly kind of mostly vacate. And so they can come in and take care of him. If so, maybe not a lot of people should go out that way, but you can go out this way here. Just kind of go around and Do it quietly. And also if if some of you are going to stay for the meeting with jack that will happen also in the conference room. And as we certainly this is a time for powerful lesson what I was talking about today. But it isn't just the time for equanimity, but also for our loving kindness and our compassion. And there's here people taking care of him and we'll offer as much care as we can. And for you to hold them in your good thoughts, and volunteer and help. We're here for a long time is across the street, and we'll do our best to care for him. Thank you. Please note that the individual that experienced the health issues is fine. The individual went to the hospital was checked out and got a clean bill of health. So not to worry