

## 7 Factors: Equanimity

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So I'll begin with, oh, this is the topic today. I'm sure you can all guess. Equanimity. And it's seen as the crown jewel of all the factors of awakening. Because all the other factors have to be really full for equanimity to arise. And that's, you know, the topping on the ice cream. Yeah.

So, I begin with the story. It's a story that I heard was from Suzuki Roshi. And I know many of you have heard this, the story of the broken cup. And, you know, he was known... A student was watching, you know, Suzuki Roshi. He had this beautiful glass teacup. It was very fragile.

And Suzuki would really take excruciating, extraordinary care of this cup, give it a lot of attention, and give something else a little attention to. Okay, first things first. So giving the cup extraordinary attention, one day the student noticed, you know, was there when somebody came by and broke the cup. It shattered many pieces, you know, and he saw... You know, the Roshi, just calm as if nothing had happened, you know, just very, very at ease. And so he asked him, he was like really confused, you know, you love this cup, you know, why aren't you grieving, why, you know. And he said, you know, to me this cup is already broken, it's already broken.

And when I drink of it, I enjoy it, I appreciate it. You know, it holds my tea admirably, you know, and but when it breaks, it's, you know, everything breaks, you know, so I just say, of course. And that kind of exemplifies equanimity, but it's not so easily earned in some ways, you know, and so what comes to mind, you know, the day before 9-1-1, I was at IMC and this teacher gave a talk. It was Eric Kohlvig. And he told the story of a couple of friends of his were getting married. And I think they were practitioners. And they asked him to, you know, come to the wedding, to officiate. But he couldn't be there. So he sent a letter to be read instead.

And so he read us a letter. And so it was called the wedding blessing. I'm not going to read you a letter, but I'll tell you about it. So he suggested to the couple that their lives organizing principle should be helping each other to become free, which naturally results in a deep, authentic love. The love of attachment doesn't come close. The love of freedom is much more nourishing, and that this is how the organizing principle of the relationship was to be. And he said, losing each other is the final exam of your relationship.

And it's really poignant, you know, to bring up at a wedding, you know, the death of each other, the end of each other. And, you know, having, knowing that we are already broken, we are already dead, you know, it's a heavy reality to take in fully. Right. And anyone who's lost someone dear to them knows that, knows the excruciating pain that can happen from loss. And which brings me to, so I'm going to just shift a little bit about how we are with that idea of losing everything, you know, the five contemplations of losing everything we cherish in our lives. Everything is already broken. Everything's already gone.

I won't mention the name, but some of you know this story. One Dharma teacher, in her early days of practicing very deeply, she had children. And she had three children. And they were pretty young. I think they were all under 10. And she was so called to the Dharma that she went to Asia to practice with a teacher for three months.

And to be away from her young children for three months was like really an intense experience for her. And so she went up to the teacher and told him how she felt and how hard this was for her. And he just looked at her very nonchalantly and said, you know, consider your children already dead. Yeah. And she said it took her three years to forgive him. But she kept him as a teacher, which was really interesting. Yeah.

You know, and as you might expect, he never had children. You know, so the thing about this whole letting go, letting go of those really deeply interpersonal relationships and allowing them to be free is something we grow into. It's not something we tear out of ourselves. It's something that softens and grows into us. And we can't expect ourselves to suddenly, like, oh, suddenly not suffer. And my take would be, I wouldn't say that to a student, but...

So as a definition, you know, there's many different, you know, ways to define it, but it's like not being pushed or pulled by experience. You know, not being pushed to what we want or push away what we don't want. And to be in a state where we're not doing that is such a state of ease to not be, you know, to have dinner and then not want dessert, you know, not want what's next, what's next, what's next. You know, but the thing about equanimity that really struck me, you know, when I first heard this teaching, what I didn't hear was that equanimity is warm, it's rich, it's affectionate. It's a deep engagement and connection with life, with

ourselves, with life.

And so appreciating that, you know, as we learn all these qualities of the factors of awakening, we've got this wonderful unification of *samādhī*. And then I heard at the time, and then there's equanimity. And, you know, what makes it a jewel? You know, what makes it a jewel? And... You know, there's nothing to defend. And there is so much freedom when we don't have to defend anything. We don't have to protect ourselves. We just show up for the changing experiences of our lives.

There's a well-known verse from the Third Zen Patriarch and Sincan from the, I don't know, I think sixth century or so. And... And it's called the Great Way, and many of you have heard that. And I love to hear it again and again.

The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.

There's... different aspects to equanimity. The equanimity in our daily lives can look very different than equanimity as this refined factor of awakening and full maturity. When the factors are mature, we don't do anything. These things just happen. You know, the conditions are set when... Mindfulness is steady, investigation is clear, we're seeing very clearly. All this energy arises in us and a feeling of joy or deep interest is in us.

And then the peacefulness, the tranquility and the wonderful feeling when the mind is completely unified and not jumping here, not jumping there, just really settled, unified. And then equanimity just arises out of that. And it's a state where things might arise, a defilement, a greed might arise, a little flicker of it, but we're unmoved by it. We don't move towards it. We're just like, oh yeah, there it went, there it went. Aversion arose, there it went. You know, it's a state of very, very deep. It might be completely quiet at times. You can have these little parts of us that, you know, that show up here and there. But there's no pulling or grabbing or pushing.

But in the, when we're not so refined. We can encourage it. We can encourage, even though it's not an, you know, equanimity is not an attitude, but we can have an attitude that shifts us towards that potential of equanimity that makes our life less contentious. You know, we let go when we're contracted, we let go. And that automatically is like a nice shift towards equanimity. And if we really see how we're, you know, hatred showing up, we don't support it with our stories. And that shifts us towards equanimity. Just being mindful of pleasant and unpleasant experience requires equanimity.

So we have some level of equanimity at all the various stages of being awake, of being ordinarily awake. So just to be willing to see our hatred when we're in the middle of it requires just enough equanimity to be willing to consider the idea that we don't need to nourish it. Especially if we're really caught up in it, any form of a strong aversion, any strong hindrance. So it's equanimity, that factor that's there in the mind and that allows that to be seen with just a little bit of care, a little bit of objectivity. You know, one of the... tendency, you know, if we don't have that equanimity towards pleasure and pain, we tend to want to pay attention only to the pleasurable stuff and just kind of ignore the unpleasurable stuff. But it also works the other way around where we favor the pleasurable stuff.

And I think a classic example that I have a feeling some of you have experienced. So we call it creative attack. Anyone experience that where, you know, it really feels good, this creativity. It's just so wonderfully juicy. And, you know, we can be seduced by it. And again, it's like, you know, we're favored the pleasant. We're just hooked by the pleasant. And, you know, there's majorly strong wanting to be there. And... you know, we forget why we're meditating, why are we here.

You know, when we're in the middle of that, it's like, well, this is fantastic, you know, this is so great. And we forget, you know, we took all this time to develop a concentration, to be on retreat, and, you know, and we're forgetting we're here for freedom, for letting go of the burden of suffering. And... You know, I once spent hours on retreat writing a book, you know, and I was just sitting on the cushion looking very peaceful, you know, and just writing, you know, it was really, really good. It was a Dharma book, you know. I was actually a teacher manual, you know, how I thought teachers should be teaching. Yeah. It was before I was a teacher.

And, you know, and finally at some point, you know, I don't know what brought me back, but I came to my senses literally, right? You know, back to the body, to my senses. I remembered. But it's having equanimity about the pleasure. You know, it's attachment to our pleasure that we didn't see. Some of you have read Tenzin Palmo's story. She spent 12 years in a cave in the Himalayas. And she's been a big inspiration to me. And not that I would ever try to do that. But, you know, so, you know, she's a contemporary Tibetan nun. I think she's still alive. I haven't seen anything otherwise.

But the cave was six by ten. It was way high up in the Himalayas. So in the winter, there was no access. There was six months of no access. And she practiced in a wooden box sitting up. She slept in a wooden box sitting up, the entire time sitting up. And she had bad problems, which was interesting. You know, she was willing to meet with that, you know, to do this

particular practice. And I think she slept three hours a night, you know, and then the rest was practice.

Her last three years were in complete isolation. Right. Before that, there was a little bit of in and out, but those last three years were complete isolation. Yeah, it was like 30 degrees at night, you know, 30 below, I'm sorry, 30 below at night. I've never lived in the cold, so I don't have a good concept. It's colder than I would want. But what really inspired me about her story is that, you know, she grew a little bit of food, not much grows up there. You know, she grew primarily turnips. And every year, somebody would come in from the village below and bring in a delivery. And, you know, after some years, you know, they were pretty regular about it.

One year, he didn't show up. And then it was all snowed in and it didn't come, you know, and she just thought she might die, but she wasn't particularly stressed about it. And she survived on turnips, you know, and I don't know if she had anything else at all, but primarily turnips. And... But she obviously survived. But all of that was really impressive, right? You know, but what really impressed me was that when she went back into town to check in and they came, no, she didn't go back, I'm sorry, she didn't go back to town. She was, the delivery person came and she never said anything. She never complained. She just accepted it as it came.

And that level of equanimity is quite a powerful level of equanimity. She was fine whether he came or not. So every time I go to a meal and it's completely burnt or ruined, or you know, I'll have to just think about her. You know, so developing equanimity, you know, is not just something we do on the cushion. It's something we do in all aspects of our lives. And most of you are familiar with the eight worldly winds. The eight... What's the word? Um... There are the eight aspects of experience that's common to all of us. We all experience all of them, the winds of life.

And there are pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, and fame and disrepute. And at some point, we experience them, you know, and as it's natural for humans, we want the pleasant ones and we don't want the unpleasant ones. But despite that life shows us otherwise, we keep thinking if we just do everything right, we just do everything right, we'll just get the pleasant ones, the ones we want. And it's amazing how we can cling to that when it's just so illogical. You know, we're going to get pain. We're going to get, you know, loss. We're going to get blamed, you know, and somebody isn't going to think well of us at some point in our lives.

You know, pleasure and pain, you know, are at the center of our addictions, of our most of our

bad habits. And, you know, we're... Yeah, I won't go too deep into that. I think you're familiar with it. You know, gain and loss, you know, sometimes we get what we want, sometimes we lose things, we're deprived of what we want. You know, I really appreciate like what the Buddha said about praise and blame, especially as a teacher. You know, it's a great thing to keep in mind.

You know, in the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha noticed, they find fault in one sitting silently. They find fault in one speaking much. They find fault in one speaking moderately. No one in this world is not found at fault. No person can be found who has been, is, or will be criticized, will be only criticized or only blamed, only, or only praised.

I was thinking of, you know, I went to hear Dharma talk once, you know, and I was a guest teacher and... And, you know, at IMC, you know, when I'd been going there for years, you know, my mind was really attuned to the beginners in the group. And I really wanted to, I always listened through the eyes of a beginner. How would a beginner respond to this talk? And so I thought to myself, this is the worst Dharma talk I've ever heard. You know, of course I didn't say anything, but it was just very much deeply in there, you know, and everything was wrong with it, you know.

And at the end of the talk, someone I knew came up to me and they said, you know, that's the best Dharma talk I ever heard. So I hope those of you who are, you know, a large amount of the people here are training to be Dharma leaders and some of them are beginning to give Dharma talks. So it's good to remember that. But when I first learned about the apisicitudes, you know, I only thought of them in relation to our daily lives. But then I start really noticing how much they played inside me on retreat. And in fact, all of them would show up on retreat sometimes, you know.

And, you know, for instance, your pleasure and pain, you know, my body feels great. Oh, I'm so happy, you know, and then I'm hurting and, you know, and then, you know, struggling and suffering and... You know, I think many of you are familiar with this, right? You've had a little bit of this and some a lot more. Or, you know, just being tossed by gain and, you know, gain and loss. You know, my, oh, my concentration is so good. That was such a good sit. And we're kind of, you know, glowing, you know. And then a couple of sits later. It's like... Oh, what did I do wrong? You know, this was such a, you know, I'm just so scattered and my mind just won't focus, you know, and then we're just kind of bummed out, you know.

And it took me some time in my practice to not give too much credence to the times. You know, I still appreciate, you know, those really wonderful sits, you know, that are so enjoyable. But I've learned just as much about clinging with the sits that were really challenging, or the

sits that were really boring, or the sits that I just didn't want to have. And so with practice, the equanimity towards them, it's like, well, it's awareness we're training, not a particular experience. It's non-clinging we're developing, not an experience. And no matter how much I heard that, there's a part of me didn't quite believe it.

You know, and then sometimes we're tossed around by praising and blaming ourselves. You know, and making a lot of self. Oh, I'm being such a good yogi. I made it to every sit on time. I got up, you know, before everybody else did today, you know, and, you know, just a little bit of pride, you know, and at other times, you know, I slept through the bell, you know, and I'm such a bad yogi, you know, etc. You know, the ways to identify with these things. Yeah.

And even fame and disrepute, okay, you know, it comes up on retreat. You know, and one of the ways, there's a couple of ways that's really classic. One of them is in practice discussions. You know, when I first started having practice discussions, I felt, okay, I'm going to sit really extra long so that I have something really cool to tell my teacher. You know, I mean, this is not opening up to experience. It was I was going to have something cool to tell them. And, you know, I want to be seen a certain way.

And, but the story that really that struck me was told by a young Dharma teacher. She was at IMS, you know, on a three-month retreat. And she, you know, her first time sitting at a retreat as a teacher, she was a teacher. She wasn't teaching. She was a yogi. And she became incredibly self-conscious. You know, and, you know, she said, I felt I had to be a good advertisement for the Dharma. You know, so all the self around being a teacher, you know. But there's such different ways we do that, but it's the same flavor of a self, you know, being somebody who's someone, you know, that kind of self-referencing.

So there's, we can point to two different aspects of equanimity. You know, the word we're most familiar with is *upekkhā*, which means to look over an overview of the situation. The other word, I have no idea how to say it, so I won't even try. But it means being in the middle of things. And, you know, so there are two different ways of relating to equanimity.

And the classic metaphor is the person who's, you know, there's a little village below, and there's a little mount, you know, a little hill. And they're sitting at the top of the hill, looking down at the village. And they're seeing people running around, people struggling, people laughing, maybe playing music, playing games, people fighting, all sorts of things are happening down there. And they're like kind of above seeing it all. You know, and they're seeing it all with connected, still connected and engaged with them. They're not, oh yeah, those people down there, you know, they're, you know, those poor little people, you know.

But it's about being engaged with them, you know, with a warmth, a warm affection towards them. You know, we're still, we're seeing the overall picture. And the fray isn't all that, that we're not caught in it. We're seeing it. And... It reminds me, like an example of how this kind of thing happens in daily life is this like back in the 70s, you know. At Stanford Hospital, they were, I don't know if it's a good example, but I'll use it anyway. At Stanford Hospital, they were updating their, completely redoing their radiology department. And, you know, I wasn't involved there, but I was talking to the fire inspectors who, you know, were very involved with them.

And, you know, so there's this whole team of people who figured out how to make this happen, you know, remodeling something to, you know, in a different way. It's much more work than starting from scratch. You know, so they had the architects, the engineers. You know, the people shopping for equipment, you know, the timing, scheduling, the administrative stuff. You know, it took all of that to a tremendous amount of detail, detail, detail, detail. And so the day came, the room looked beautiful, everything was set, and they brought the equipment and the doors didn't fit, didn't fit through the doors. It's wide double doors, but not wide enough.

And so there was a lack of overview. You know, everybody was so concerned with their area, doing their area, and they did all those areas really, really well. Now, they were very engaged in those areas, but they didn't have the overview. And in the same way, you know, I found myself like really trying to practice well, you know, and really, really hard and really, really diligent, you know, and I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that with this very, very serious attitude. You know, forgetting, totally forgetting the big picture, that the purpose of practice is freedom. You know, the purpose of practice is not this little accomplishment here, that it's about clinging, letting go of clinging.

And I was, and not even seeing my, that I was clinging so hard to making progress, doing it well, you know, getting into *jhāna*. That was my favorite one where I, where I created a lot of pain trying to get there, you know, and, um, and a common pain. And, and, you know, uh, I have a lot of compassion for people who get caught there. Um, you know, we're practicing for freedom from clinging, you know, and in the same way, you know, with our wonderful fantasies or creative attacks, you know, with our wanting to accomplish that striving, that's tight and contracted, is losing the big picture, losing the idea.

The other way to view equanimity, as I mentioned, is being in the middle of things. You know, I forget what it's called, but it's the image, the Da Vinci image of, you know, there's a man with the arm stretched out and, you know, the star and the crosses at the center of their being at



the *hara*. And, you know, it's just this feeling of balance, of being in the middle of things. And when we're breathing, you know, that's in the middle of us. You know, when we're in our bodies, you know, that's the middle of things. That's centered when we're centered.

So it's a... And when we're centered, we're... You know, we used to play this game. You know, my husband and I did all the time where we would stand, like, arms apart. And then we would, you know, plant ourselves in the ground, really centered, and then we would slap the hands to see if we can get them off balance. I don't know if any of you played that, you know, and just kind of surprised them throwing them off balance. But there's this feeling of, you know, I could tell when I was really solid, you know, I would just be so here in this body, in this center, you know, and then he would make a wise crack and he would just knock me down, you know.

But, you know, there's, you know, there's, there's, I like the image of a tree that's really deeply rooted. So it's like very strong, very solid. And life happens, the winds, the storms, the sun, all of it happens. But the tree is just so deeply rooted, just stays there, solid, strong. And yet it's affected by the winds, but it's not thrown off center.

Another... Another little, little short little story, you know, that I heard. Sometimes some of these stories have no idea where they come from, you know, but it's called an insult, you know, and a man approached, I don't know if it's from the *suttas* or just a story someone made up, you know, that often happens. A man approached the Buddha and began shouting insults, you know. Yeah. And the Buddha just kind of waited in silence, allowing him to, you know, be angry with him and say all these terrible things to him.

And, you know, when he stopped talking, the Buddha asked him, if you offer a gift to someone and they don't accept it, to whom does the gift belong? Right? And the man replied to the giver. And the Buddha smiled and said, well, I decline your gift and it remains with you. And the anger, you know, remains with you. And, you know, we don't have to pick up those things. You know, when we're centered in ourselves, we're centered in the Dhamma. We don't have to pick up insults. We don't have to pick up praise either.

And then... I think one aspect of equanimity that I really value reflecting upon is equanimity in the *Brahmavihāras*. You know, the *Brahmavihāras* are these... One sec again. Allergic to something in here. Okay. So the *Brahmavihāras*, you know, many of you know this, are these four, you know, wonderful, they call them the divine abodes, these states of mind, the states of heart where the heart's open, loving. And it has known as having the four faces of love, four different faces. But it's the same love. It's just the situation changes. Yes.

You know, *mettā* is just goodwill and friendliness towards everyone. *Karunā* is when somebody's suffering. So the love looks very different, you know, when you meet a friend down in the street and you're very friendly, or you meet a stranger and you're happy to meet them. It's very different, the flavor of the love, you know, of when somebody's suffering, you know, if they're, someone's dying, someone's lost someone, all the compassion that arises. But it's still the flavor of love is what's underneath it all.

And *muditā* is appreciative love. It's when we're happy for others when they have wonderful experiences. I've had so much *muditā* in this retreat when I meet with people. It's just been beautiful, yeah. And then lastly, it's equanimity. You know, how is equanimity love? You know, it's unconditional. It's what's there without a situation. It's just a heart that's wide open. It's a heart that's really wide open.

It's sensitive. It's ready to love in any of the other directions. It just happens in that moment. Nothing's required. Just this wonderful sense of unconditional love. You know, like the sun will shine on everyone equally. It doesn't matter whether you're in a bad mood or you're, you know, doing bad things or it just shines equally on everyone. And that's the heart of equanimity.

You know, I've heard equanimity framed as a deep respect for life. A deep respect for people. It's where we allow everything to exist just as it is. Accepting the universe just as it is. The world, the universe is easier to accept than the specifics sometimes. You know, but really accepting that things are as they are and allowing that. It can be a very profound place when we meet everything that we meet in our lives with that kind of unconditional love.

I think, I don't remember who said it. They said this equanimity as a profound respect of life, it's like bowing. It's like how our hearts feel when we bow to the beauty of the heart. This is very sweet, profound, bowing. And this includes ourselves. It includes ourselves.

So insight, you know, this is an insight practice. Practices allow us to have insight so deep in our experience that it allows us to let go, to let go completely. And it depends on equanimity. You know, we're not willing to look at clinging unless there's some level of equanimity. You know, we can have an insight into the truth of *anicca*, of impermanence, that everything changes. And we can have that at an intellectual level. We all know everything changes, nothing lasts.

But equanimity is one of the factors that are essential to be actually willing to experience that fully enough that we no longer grab to something that we're familiar with. We no longer have to grab something, attach to something to keep us, to keep our control, our control of

the situation. You know, we can have insight into the truth of *dukkha* that nothing, nothing out there is going to satisfy us completely. How could it be? Everything changes. Nothing can satisfy. And with that, you know, if we can have equanimity, if the equanimity is strong enough, it can allow that truth to really penetrate.

Yeah. You know, like one of the things that I reflected on, you know, somebody was talking about, you know, you know, what about progressing the rest of my life? And I remember the teacher said, well, what makes you think you're going to be alive tomorrow? You know, and so it's a, yeah, it's a way to, you know, to feel that, feel that, you know, how would it be if you, you know, if we could die tomorrow? Anything can happen. Anything can happen. Yeah.

And the insight, you know, that there's no place for the I to stand. There's no, nothing lasts long enough to be called a self. You know, this moment I'm cooking, I'm the cook. Another moment, you know, the reader. Another moment, I'm the spouse. Another moment, you know, nothing of that, nothing of it is like last. Nothing we call the self last. Nothing we call I last. It just keeps moving along.

And there's nothing to hold on to because we really can't. When we really see this, you know, it's like, what's there to hold on to? You know, none of that, none of that is, has any substance. And let's say one more, you know, in Tibetan Buddhism, they refer to developing one taste in practice, a taste of awareness. You know, when all experience is being seen as one taste, we no longer cling or reject joy or sorrow. We don't cling to anything because it all has the same taste, this taste of awareness. And that's the heart of equanimity.

You know, that's like the core of that. You know, in many ways the practice is very simple. You know, it's be here, pay attention, and lack of clinging. And that's it. You know, we give all these talks, all these beautiful ideas. But really, that's it. Just be here, lack of clinging.

And, you know, we keep kind of talking around it because, you know, we resist that. And slowly these ideas show us how to make the mind more wholesome so that we can actually do that. Be here. You know, being here when I first start practicing looks very different than being here now. And I'm sure that's the case for all of you. Even those of you who are new to practice, you know, being here looks different at the end of the retreat at the beginning of your first retreat.

And so I'll just end with a poem, you know, from Ishigio. He's a 14th century Zen monk.

Empty-handed, I entered the world. Barefoot, I leave it. My coming, my going, two simple happenings that got entangled.

So thank you. And let's share a minute of silence together.