

## Equanimity as a Means of Love

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So good morning everyone, and welcome. Some of you might know that since the beginning of January, in some of my teachings I've been focusing on love as a topic, the Buddhist notions of love. In particular, what's called the four divine abodes of love: goodwill, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. I think it's one of the great tasks of human life that some people engage in, which is to understand what love is. Many people take it for granted, and just assume that they know what it is. But there are things that look like love that maybe aren't love.

There are things that love is that get obscured, or get complicated, or mixed up with things that maybe even go against the very nature of love. So the idea of understanding what our love is, what isn't love, and how we complicate it, I think is one of the wonderful tasks of life. It's certainly something that I've engaged in in my adult life in being a Buddhist practitioner, that somehow the engagement in Buddhism has continuously kind of had me look at, question, and understand my own experience of love, and try to understand it better. Also, the Buddhist practice has surprised me quite a bit because it opened up, or it kind of released inside of me, forms of love that I didn't know about. It was quite a great delight to discover new aspects of love.

So one of the things that I've come to the conclusion about is that there isn't just one form of love, that we should say it in the plural. There's loves. There are many forms of love. So the question of what is love means to look at the different facets of it, the different ways that it appears, perhaps. For today, the topic is a form of equanimity that is understood in Buddhism to be a form of love. Those two sometimes don't go together.

It seems counterintuitive for some people, even opposed, that equanimity and love could go together. How can you bring those two together, equanimous love, loving equanimity? The

reason for doing it today is that in going through this series I've been doing since January, tomorrow when I come back to continue it, the topic will be this form of love. So a little bit I'm warming up with you, and also it gives me a chance to say a little bit more of it, because the morning teaching I do is only 15 minutes long. So I kind of explore it a little bit more here.

This equanimity love is one of the four types of what's called divine forms of love. The reason we call it divine is that it's associated with the great Indian god Brahmā, who lives in a lot of sublime feelings, in a sublime, pleasure-filled heavenly realm. That's characterized by these four forms of love: *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*, the Pāli words. So goodwill, I call it goodwill or loving-kindness, compassion, usually it's called sympathetic joy, I prefer appreciative joy, and then the final is equanimity.

There's two things about this equanimity in relationship to the other three. Equanimity love, the form of love called equanimity, is what's useful when the other three are not. Sometimes goodwill, loving-kindness, is not really what is called for, nor compassion or appreciative joy. Some situations are quite difficult. They don't call for those.

So what do we do? If we have no role, we can't change anything, this is how it is, can we still love? Or will that look like indifference? Will it look like you don't care? The argument is no. Care and equanimity can go together.

The profound form of care is just a love that we stay present for, present for people, present for the situation, even if we can't do anything for it. What's very interesting in terms of these other three is that the classic understanding of goodwill, compassion, and sympathetic joy is that it does involve a kind of action, a kind of movement, if nothing else, a movement of the heart. Goodwill or loving-kindness kind of just wants people to be happy in a way, or wants the best for people. Compassion wants suffering to end. Appreciative joy wants other people's joy and success to be celebrated, enjoyed even more, let it continue.

But there are times when those three are not really called for. So equanimity, the form of equanimity of love, is less complicated. It doesn't involve any desire, any wish that something continue, or someone be better, or may they be happy. It kind of leaves the situation, leaves the person, much more alone, but we stay present with love.

The example that came to me this morning walking here was when I sat with my mother as she was dying. At some point she was a little bit distressed. She was kind of very, very sweet, smiling a lot, kind of disappearing from even ordinary conversation. She had dementia. I spent a little bit of time being distressed because she had trouble breathing at some point.

But at some point, that passed as well.

I just sat for hours with her, and she seemed comfortable. In the days before, she was in bed, and she looked totally cozy. I mean, it's just like every day I went there, she was cozier. Every day I got there, her sheet, her blanket, was higher up on her chest or her face, and she was peeking out with her eyes, just kind of like so delighted, right? I think that part of it for her was that because she had dementia, I got the sense there was no past or future. There was just this moment. So every moment was then fresh for her, and she was just delighted by it.

We couldn't really speak at some point, but at some point she kind of looked like she was going to die that day. I sat with her. It didn't really make sense to have compassion for her at that point. I mean, she had a good life, and she was almost 90, and she was in this state of dementia, and she was just there in her cozy, simple way. Having goodwill, I guess I could have done that. Could I have had appreciative joy, celebrating her joy right then? That didn't really make sense either.

But I had a very strong, palpable feeling of love that, in a sense, had no desires as part of it. It was uncomplicated. It was like, oh, this is the situation. This is what I'm called for to be present for. I'll sit here and just be here, and appreciate my love, my time with her, and the situation here. I don't know how well she could know I was there, but I just assumed something in her knew.

My job was just to sit there and let my natural love for my mother be in the forefront. I didn't really feel so sad. There was some grief that went through, more after she died. But at that point, it just seemed like a really good, peaceful, nice place to be with her. The love was very simple, and it was equanimous.

What equanimity here means is that I was not agitated. I was not trying to problem-solve. I was not resisting. I was not holding myself at a distance. I was not coming to some big conclusion that unless I do something, then I can't prove that I care. If I don't do something, then otherwise I'm a bad son or something.

So all these things, the ways that complicate it, were not there. But the primary one was that I wasn't agitated or anxious. That's one of the reasons why this equanimous love is called equanimous. It's also because in that state of deep equanimity, there's no reactivity. There might be responsivity, the way we respond, but the reactivity is the impulsive kind of triggering of emotions and feelings and action that maybe serves no purpose. Maybe it's even harming ourselves if we react in an impulsive way.

So I was not in a reactive state. If she needed something, I was ready to do it, to respond. Equanimity is without reactivity, without agitation, and without anxiety. It's also without a lot of desires or expectations or planning to make it different.

Now, that's a nice example, maybe in some ways compared to what I'm about to say. But there are situations which are not so nice, where maybe we've tried to help someone. We've tried to be involved. We have compassion for them. We have goodwill for them. If they give us a chance, some appreciative joy for them. But they're simply not going to respond.

They're going to do it their way, and they push you away. They don't want to respond. So at some point, it's clear that we have no role. Then, okay, we'll allow you to do it your way. This is your choice. I'm going to love you still. My love doesn't diminish. I'm here. I'm available with my love. I'm here.

But the fact that I don't have a role here, because you're not allowing me one perhaps, doesn't mean that I'm going to turn away. It doesn't mean I'm going to shut you out or give up. I'll just stay. There's lots of people in our world, I think, who have this kind of equanimous love.

I saw this kind of love in my mother's assisted living place, where the people who work there seemed always equanimous, but they felt very loving. They had seen every possible thing that could happen in a memory care home: patients screaming, people falling and breaking their legs, all kinds of things. My mom fell and broke her hip there. They were always there. They seemed very attentive, very present, and they were always there. They seemed always to be doing the right things, the impression I got, but they were always unruffled. They were always kind of non-reactive to it.

So maybe professionally, maybe because of that role, they weren't so identified. But I felt, oh, these people have a profound care that is equanimous. It might be that people have more personality difficulties, or they have anger issues and they're really pushing you away, or they're disappointed in life, or maybe they're depressed in a way that we've tried everything we can to help and they're not available. To get anxious, to get agitated, to get reactive in those situations are ways of making it worse. Situations can be bad enough. Why make it worse by suffering ourselves? Why make it worse by continuing to do the very things that the person doesn't want us to do, that may even be driving them into their reactive state?

So there's a time and place to stay present. That's the strength and the gift of this equanimity love, that we're willing to stay present together. We're there in this very simple, maybe clean, uncomplicated form of love that is not there to change anything, not there to make

something else happen because it's not possible. But I think to know about this kind of equanimity of love, to know the simplicity of love, can be very helpful. Because if you don't know it, then people are going to keep spinning in their heads, I've got to figure out what to do here, I've got to do something, I've got to fix it, I've got to do something.

Then the flip side of that for some people is they blame themselves. They get angry with themselves. I needed to do something, I have to do something, I'm not doing it, therefore I'm a failure as a family member, failure as a friend, failure, whatever. So we take it very personally. In all these ways of reacting, the love now has become obscured. That's a pity.

This equanimity, when nothing else is possible and nothing else is needed, there is this equanimity of love, this simplicity of love, which is appropriate, is beautiful. It might be something that the person can feel. I've known people who felt someone's love in this kind of simple way after the fact. Afterward, they realized, oh, wait a minute. You didn't reject me. You didn't run away.

I once had someone tell me, "Gil, you were the only one who never rejected me or ran away from me when I got angry." So I was kind of surprised by that, but okay, that's nice. It made a difference for her, for someone to stay present. I think she got to see her anger much better than she had at other times.

So to be able to meet people without retreating, to meet people without retreating into ourselves. One of the things about anxiety and agitation is that sometimes when the fear is big enough, we're not seeing the other person anymore. What we're seeing is our fear. Or if we are seeing the other person, we're seeing the person through the filter of our fear, through the filter of our agitation. So we don't really see the person clearly.

To be able to stop and see someone clearly is one of the big tasks. That's where mindfulness is so helpful. Because one of the things we're learning to do sitting in mindfulness meditation is to learn to see clearly, without the filter of all the projections, all the reactivity, all the complicated emotions we might have that obscure how we see things, skew how we see the situation. Many times our clarity is skewed by our desires. I really want something here. Everything is about the desire. It's skewed by our aversion. Everything is wrong.

So mindfulness helps clarify, settle that. To have that settling in meditation then allows us maybe to know what it's like in social interactions to not get triggered, not get caught in the things that make our love compromised, or sometimes maybe even make it disappear. So to be able to see a person without the filter of fear and agitation and these kinds of things.

Some people have this idea that care and calm, care and equanimity, are opposites. But they

really can be partners, because we can care better for people when we have some modicum of equanimity or calm. As I saw in my mother's memory care home, I was really touched by how well and carefully they did things there. Maybe it's because they had a lot of people working there. I was just amazed. At some point, I became friends with the director. At some point, I mentioned that to her. It turned out there was, I'm not going to explain, but a really good reason why they could do that.

So everyone was professional in how they did stuff. It was always a calm place, even though some of the residents were not. Part of this ability to stay present with love is better than collapsing, giving up. This is not a giving up. It's just that we realize that there's nothing else we can do, but we can stay present. We can stay here. We can sit with someone next to their bed. We can care for them. We can cook them dinner. We're staying present, but here's dinner. Well, if you're not going to eat, that's okay. But my love was there. Here it is, and I'll just clean up afterwards.

Sometimes with teenage kids at home, there was the exercise of love that created maybe a lifelong atmosphere, but you wouldn't have noticed in the moment. So the equanimity love is sometimes a meditation practice that people do, or it's a practice people do more actively. There's a phrase that's very commonly used with it, or variations of phrases, that maybe captures a little bit the wisdom that's behind this equanimity love. That's the phrase, "The choices you make are yours. I love you anyway." The choices you make are yours, and I'll love you anyway.

So we're granting people their autonomy. We're granting people, we're recognizing, that we don't have a role. They're not allowing us to have a role. We are kind of saying, in the sense that you're responsible for what you do, and I can't take responsibility for it. I love you, and I care about you. I'm here for you in a certain way, that way.

In the Buddhist philosophy or psychology of this kind of equanimity love, it's facilitated by that very point that everyone's responsible for their own choices, and you can't take that away from them. The Buddhist notion of *kamma* is really based on this idea that everyone's responsible for their own choices. So even if someone makes a choice that's poor, and you go and clean it up for them, the *kamma* of that still lives in them for them to have to work with, even if you cleaned up the worldly thing. That's theirs to live with and work with, and they have to be responsible for the psychological consequence of what they've done.

Sometimes we help that if we clean up for them. If someone's angry at you or angry at the world and they throw a plate across the kitchen, that's their choice. Maybe you clean it up just to make room for them to kind of relax. But the inner ramification of what they did, they

have to deal with their anger. They made a choice, and that choice has karmic consequences on them, they say. So the choices are yours.

One more thing I want to say about this equanimity is that there's a different form of equanimity in Buddhism that overlaps. Buddhism loves equanimity. It's considered one of the highest states in Buddhism. One of the other forms of equanimity is the seventh factor of awakening. So it's one of the seven core inner states or qualities that get strengthened and come into balance for awakening to occur. Equanimity is the final one, the most important one.

In this regard, cultivating these good states in Buddhism is more important than what you believe. Believing is not so important in Buddhism. There's some things to believe in that are kind of useful pragmatically. But the important thing is believing that it's useful to develop certain inner states. What are the states that you have? What are the states you're living with? Equanimity is one of those states.

This equanimity factor of awakening, I liken to a redwood tree that's standing tall and straight. It sways in the wind, but it doesn't break usually, compared to a tumbleweed that just blows in the wind. Some people live like tumbleweeds. Equanimity helps us to live like a redwood tree, if that's a nice image for you, just stable and strong and upright, but also not resisting the wind, but kind of swaying with it.

The word that I associate with this equanimity, equanimity love, and maybe equanimity factor of awakening, is a word for which you need a dictionary to explain all the different meanings. The tone of voice makes a big difference, and that's the word okay. Today I was walking down here, and I overheard some people talking, and this man said, "You know, okay," like, okay, like a question mark, like he was actually disagreeing or something. But, you know, okay, that's the way it is. Okay, I understand the state. It's offering a spaciousness. Okay, this is the way it is. Okay, so this is how it is. Okay, okay.

Some of you might leave here today and find your car has a flat tire. Equanimity would say, "Okay, that's just how it is. So now let's see what we do. Let's take care of it." As opposed to, "Uh-oh. Okay, now this." So can that okay like that, that gives spaciousness, be appropriate as a form of love? Okay. You're making that choice. Okay. Okay. Not to dismiss it or belittle it, but okay, we'll live with this now. I'll be present for this now.

So I hope I've said enough about these topics, just enough maybe to spark your curiosity, your interest. I've given you some orientation, some ideas of how to look at it. How is it for you? What have you learned over your lifetime about love, what isn't love? What have

you learned that complicates love unnecessarily? Do you know something about a time and place where it's appropriate for love to be equanimous, to be non-reactive, to just be present for something rather than doing anything about it?

I'm not going to ask you to talk and say anything about it now to anyone. These are very personal things. But I do hope the talk will encourage you to spend a good part of today, or the rest of your life, reflecting on these questions. I think it will be a life well spent if you explore this and live with it. Don't assume that the answers you have one day are the answer for the next day. Keep discovering it.

So, we have comments or questions? Yes?

Thank you, Martha. One of the things, I think those are really great points that you have, and as I listen to them, I feel like I'm a lot of times able to do the first three, and the equanimity is more of a challenge. I can do that sometimes too, but one of the things I was thinking as a psychotherapist is that sometimes I've given clients encouragement to keep distance from toxic relationships. So I'm wondering how that, or if it does, fit in with the equanimity thing. Because I can be equanimous and say goodbye and step back now. That's a little hard if it's an intimate family member that you've been with your whole life, but depending on the level of the relationship, how would one do that in various circumstances?

I like that. I mean, this is a big topic, so to be brief, I like very much that you said step back, because my dream is that we never turn our backs on anyone. But sometimes we have to step back. Sometimes we have to step back far and say, you know, and sometimes we step back and say, I'll only step forward again if certain conditions have changed. Right. I love you, I care for you, but every time I'm with you, you're angry. At some point it's just too difficult for me. But when you feel like you're no longer angry with me, then let me know, and I'm happy to be with you again.

So it's stepping back, but setting conditions or explaining what's going on. Sometimes we can't have those conversations with people. Sometimes we step back. It might look to them like you're withdrawing or shutting them out. But in your heart, you're just stepping back until something changes, and you just wait. I knew someone, a friend of mine, who waited, I think he waited 12 years for this challenging thing. He stepped back and he was available, but something had to change with other people. After 12 years, it took 12 years, and then he was ready. He was present and ready to go.

Okay, thank you. Last one here, right?

Hello. My question is about the day after being equanimous, because in the moment, you

know, it takes a lot of work to be mindful and to be empathetic to me and the other person, and watch, like stay in love and kindness, all the things. Then the next day I'm wiped out for like two days.

Yeah, so then I don't think you're really being equanimous. You're just holding it together. One of the great discoveries, mostly through meditation for me, but some people have other things that do this for them, is that there can be peace for no reason, and there can be love with no object. To have that sense of that possibility then makes it like, oh, this can be even social. There can be peace here, even in a situation that's conflictive. There can be love here, even in a situation where conventionally no one's loving each other. But I'm not loving people. I am love. So we'll see what happens.

So I think that, I don't know you, and this is a big topic that you're bringing up, so I want to be careful not to say something disrespectful. But listening to what you have to say, it might be more important for you to understand why you have to hold yourself together, why you have to work so hard. What is going on in you? What's the reactivity? What's the alternative? If you didn't do that, what would you be doing? Probably if you understand better how you're responding to the situation, that's going to be the key to how to find some kind of calmer way of being.

Thank you. It says more about managing yourself than the other person. Okay, so it's potluck. Okay.