

EQUANIMITY

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Equanimity as a Brahma Vihara

As we practice the first three Brahma Viharas—loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy—one thing becomes very clear, that we are not in control of other peoples' lives. We may wish for someone not to suffer; we may wish for someone to be happy and have deep joy in their life. But however much we wish for these things, ultimately we cannot make them happen. Everyone has their own path.

So it takes deep letting go, as well as deep compassion, to practice the Brahma Viharas. This is the reason that the Brahma Vihara of equanimity comes last in the practice sequence.

Why Equanimity is Last

Whether or not we are aware of it, as we have practiced the other Brahma Viharas we have probably experienced far more equanimity than we might have expected. Equanimity underlies and informs all of the Brahma Viharas.

In the Tibetan tradition, equanimity comes first rather than last when the Brahma Viharas are practiced. This makes a lot of sense because all of the Brahma Viharas, when deeply practiced, arise from a place of equanimity. In the Tibetan tradition these beautiful qualities of heart and mind are called the immeasurables because they are spacious and boundless.

As I looked at the symbols that I chose for the flyer for this series, I contemplated how the blue roots and trunk shown in the image of the tree represented equanimity. Like equanimity, the root system and trunk support the rest of the tree.



All of the Brahma Viharas are Interconnected

Once I sat a six-week retreat where we practiced the Brahma Viharas daily along with our Vipassana. Towards the end of the retreat, one of the yogis commented that after a while it felt like no matter which Brahma Vihara he was practicing, it was all beginning to feel like the same practice. The teacher's response was, "Yes, they are all really just one BRAHMA VIHARA, but ordinarily our minds need to differentiate to help us practice."

Jack Kornfield described it this way: "A peaceful [or equanimous] heart gives birth to love. When love meets suffering it turns to compassion. When love meets happiness it turns to joy."

Equanimity or true peace underlies all of the Brahma Viharas, and for that matter it underlies our Vipassana practice as well.

Equanimity as Parents and Grown Children

As a Brahma Vihara, equanimity is often compared with the relationship that parents may have with their grown children. The parents have nurtured their children, cared and provided for them, and taught them what they need to know in life. Now it is time to let them go. But most parents don't just say "see you around" and shove their kids out the door. .

Like a parent's love for a grown child, equanimity is not cold. It has all the warmth and caring of loving-kindness, compassion and joy, but it also has the wisdom to know that we are not in control of someone else's happiness. We all have our own paths and struggles in life. It is from this understanding that the phrases for the equanimity practice arise:

You are the owner of your actions, your happiness or unhappiness depends on what you do and not on my wishes for you.

Or when we say the phrases for ourselves:

I am the owner of my actions, my happiness or unhappiness depends on what I do and not upon outside forces.

Karma

Often we hear these phrases as: “You are the owner of your karma, your happiness or unhappiness depends on your karma and not on outside forces.” I have chosen not to use the word karma here because there is such a misunderstanding of what it means. In popular lingo it often refers to the results of our actions, their karmic fruits, rather than to the actions themselves.

But the word karma means “to act” or “to do.” So personally I prefer the first option for the phrases, to use “my actions” rather than “my karma.” I like this quote from Ayya Khema: “Karma is not what other people do to you. That’s their karma. Karma is what you do.”

Equanimity as a Contemplation

The practice of equanimity is a contemplation of the truth that people are responsible for their own actions. We can wish the best for them and wish them not to suffer, but ultimately they, themselves, are responsible for their happiness. This is wisdom. This is peace.

The formal practice of equanimity is extremely empowering. It allows us to understand that although we may not be able to control the external circumstances of our lives, we and we alone control how we are going to respond to those circumstances.

Yet, as I said before, equanimity is not meant to be indifferent, cold, or dismissive. Instead it relies on a deep understanding of life as it is. Practicing this Brahma Vihara of equanimity involves repeating the phrases with intention but, at the same time, it is also a profound contemplation of balance and letting go. So it is both a practice and a contemplation.

How is contemplation different than meditation? Contemplation involves holding an open question. Holding a question without needing to know an answer—just letting the question be in the mind, knowing that answers come in a very intuitive way.

Indifference

Equanimity is not the sullen turning away of indifference, nor is it the deluded perception that everything is always “just great!” “Gee Whiz! If I practice the Brahma

Viharas, everything is always going to be smooth and easy.” Indifference—the withdrawal from a situation or from life—is a subtle form of aversion. It does not rest in compassion for ourselves or others. Indifference is not dynamic or engaged.

Donald Rothberg lists a range of contemporary forms of indifference, referred to as equanimity’s near neighbor, which can be mistaken for equanimity. Some of these are denial, complacency, resignation, acquiescence, numbness, intellectual aloofness, rationalization, cynicism, dogmatism, and fear of strong emotions, in particular, anger.

Equanimity Encompasses More than Brahma Vihara Practice

The practice of equanimity as a Brahma Vihara is just one facet of equanimity. The subject of equanimity is profound because equanimity is an underlying quality that pervades all of practice. Also, like all of the other Brahma Viharas it is a naturally occurring quality. Without a certain amount of equanimity humans would be overwhelmed by all of the vicissitudes of life.

I am always amazed when I turn on the TV and see that there has been a huge natural disaster in some county—an earthquake, a hurricane, a mud slide. Then the next week, people are rebuilding, commerce has returned, there are pedestrians on the streets, children are playing in the ruins. The resilience of the human spirit is such a good example of the naturally occurring equanimity that we all have.

Sharon Salzberg has asked, “. . . how can a human heart . . . absorb the continual, unremitting, contrasts of this life without feeling shattered . . .?” It is not that people are unscathed by life, but somehow they have the resilience to go on.

We can sometimes feel battered by the immense changes in our lives. Who hasn’t seen people shut down when confronted with pain? No one experiences all pleasure and no pain in their life. Some people and perhaps some cultures seem to have this quality of balance and peacefulness in a greater degree than others. Another way to ask Sharon’s question is, “How can we hold all of life’s difficulties with a sense of balance? Can we learn to cultivate and develop this quality and make it grow and increase? How can it be done?”

How Can We Have Greater Equanimity?

Just bringing attention to life's vicissitudes helps us develop this kind of wisdom. So, first of all, equanimity comes from just living consciously. And it also comes from sitting practice. Sometimes I like to think of sitting practice as a magnification of life. We don't have to wait 80 years to find equanimity. Sitting practice shows us all the forces of life in all its intensity so that we can learn more quickly. Just being able to sit with pain or pleasure helps us learn where the point of balance is without falling too deeply to either extreme. Equanimity is a spacious balance that stills the mind before it falls into extremes.

Balance

Finding our balance is a dynamic process. Anyone who has tried to stand on one foot in yoga class knows this. Finding balance involves falling a few times, maybe many times.

For me the balance and the experience of equanimity have more to do with accessing a place of deep stillness that is at the same time filled with potential action. It seems a little like looking at cats when they are completely relaxed and draped over the back of a couch. I know they are relaxed, but I also know that in their relaxation there is the potential for movement at any moment. This could be just yawning and stretching or it could be leaping straight up into the air, fur standing on end.

A very wise teacher once said that practice was not about reaching the heights of bliss but instead was about having a mind that was ready for anything.

The Mind Wants to Be in Balance

Once when sitting an intensive retreat, I started going through a lot of deep turmoil. It was very painful. Then one day I made this amazing discovery. It was a great eureka moment, but it was so simple. I suddenly realized that the mind *wants* to be in balance. It doesn't want to be blown hither and yon. All I had to do was get out of the way and let my mind seek its natural balance.

Now, on the surface this may not seem like a great discovery. It is pretty apparent when you think about it. After all, we think of ourselves as part of nature, and when we look at nature we see that nature always seeks balance. After a storm or a huge cataclysm,

nature will always try to find a dynamic balance. And in fact, we are not *part* of nature, we are nature. We, our minds, are also always trying to find a dynamic balance.

Most insights in practice are like this. Something simple and perfectly obvious is right in front of us, but for some reason we never saw or understood it until this moment—like my insight that the mind wants to be in balance, and that dynamic balance is its natural state, the cat on the back of the sofa.

Most often, it is our own need for drama that throws us out of balance, or it may be simply wanting things to be different than they are. These are truths that we observe with increasing frequency as our practices of equanimity and Vipassana mature.

Passivity

Sometimes being balanced can be confused with passivity. Buddhism is often accused of making people—or even whole cultures—passive. This is a misunderstanding of equanimity. But over the centuries there may be some truth to the accusation. A false understanding of equanimity can and has made people passive.

The American essayist E. B. White once wrote, “I wake every morning unsure whether to save the world or to savor it.” With practice, we can be both compassionate and equanimous; we can both savor the world and try to save it.

When we sit with our experience, our compassionate action will come from a place of wisdom and not from anger. It won’t be a knee-jerk reaction. And our hearts will not be tied to the result.

Being with things as they are does not mean being passive. It means being with things as they are *in this moment*. If we can’t be with our experience in this moment, how can we take honest and wise action in the next moment? Our actions will not come from the truth of our felt experience.

Wisdom to change ourselves or change our world springs from first knowing ourselves or our world in this moment. From the depths of his equanimity, Buddha took many unpopular social and political stands, such as refusing to accept the caste system and trying to stop wars between neighboring kingdoms.

Letting Go

We often hear in practice that we have to learn to let go. “Just let go and everything will be fine.” Easier said than done. But learning to be with our experience does not mean that we do not experience pleasure and pain. It means that we do not get caught in them.

Being with our experience helps us learn the limits of our control. How much control do we really have, anyway? Maybe not as much as we think we do. Realizing this can sometimes produce an angry response, but this realization is what letting go is—not getting rid of something but seeing that we never had it, never controlled it in the first place. Maybe the old Beatles song offers a better description of letting go—just “let it be.”

Peace

With learning the limits of our control comes a deep sense of peace. Can we actually experience peace and happiness in the midst of life’s turmoil? Equanimity is knowing that what we do now and the intentions behind our actions will bear fruit in the future. It is knowing that we are empowered in the moment to cultivate the conditions that lead to happiness.

To understand this is immense—that we actually have the power to create our own happiness. Happiness is not just an accident of fate. “Our happiness or unhappiness depends on what we do and not on outside forces.” My we all know the deep peace that comes with this understanding.