

Brahma Viharas III : Equanimity (continued)  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

We've been speaking in the last several meetings about the Brahma Viharas, which are the Heavenly Abodes or the Boundless States. They are lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. They're called heavenly abodes because to be experiencing one of them is to be in a little piece of heaven. They're called the boundless states because they're not dependent on conditions; they don't have boundaries around them. For instance, you don't feel lovingkindness only for people you like. You don't feel equanimity only when circumstances are peaceful. The Brahma Viharas come from a deeper, wider, older place not dependent on how things are set up or how things are happening in the moment. Boundless also in that we don't have to generate them; we don't have to make them happen. The sympathetic joy, compassion, lovingkindness, and equanimity we can come to feel isn't a matter of our will or even of our good intention. It is what we find things are like when we do the work of deconstructing the obstacles and the obscurations that get in the way between us and reality.

Within the Brahma Viharas, particularly from the Mahayana perspective, is the radical idea that they represent the way things truly are. To the extent that we're not in states of lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity we're being unrealistic. We're somehow off balance from reality, and our job is to try to find our way back to that ground. Which is a radical thing if you think about it — that that's the nature of reality.

I want to keep talking tonight about equanimity, and pick up a couple of threads from last time. I mentioned that in the koan tradition equanimity is called the heart nirvana, the perfect peace of the heart. I want to talk a bit about some of the elements of what that heart nirvana might be like. Last week I mentioned something helpful in terms of understanding what nirvana could possibly mean : it is closely etymologically related to another word that means the coolness that comes after a fever has broken.

If we look at the ways that equanimity was talked about in the earliest Buddhist traditions, there are some important clues. Each of the Brahma Viharas is both an antidote to a certain poison and has a 'near enemy.' Equanimity is the antidote to the poison of prejudice or bias. That's interesting because the way we usually think of equanimity is as a calmness. You'd think that calmness would be an antidote to agitation or the passions, or something similar. But it's not; it's the antidote to prejudice and bias. Which means that the nature of its medicine must have something to do with an equality of the heart-mind, in the sense of coming to things or receiving them with a certain kind of equality and evenness. Those of you who were here when I was inflicting on us the early Zen poem *Trust in Heart-mind* will remember that that's one of the main themes of the *Xinxinming*. We would call it picking and choosing. So equanimity is an antidote to picking and choosing; it's the opposite state. <sup>1</sup>

I want to stress that when we're talking about receiving or coming to or considering things equally, that doesn't mean considering everything the same or treating everything exactly the same. This is what my great-grandfather in the Dharma, Yamada Koun, called pernicious oneness, the idea that everything is exactly the same and we should deal with everything in exactly the same way. There is the somewhat famous (to the extent that anything can be famous in Zen) story about Seung Sahn, the great contemporary Korean Zen master, who said that if you think it's okay to put your cigarette out on the altar, you're suffering from pernicious oneness — the idea that there's nothing different between the altar and an ashtray.

In America, pernicious oneness takes another funny, narcissistic twist which is *I gotta be me. I'm always the same. I say what I think*. That's pernicious oneness. Really, you talk to your grandmother the same way you talk to a three-year-old, because you gotta be you? What makes you so important? We're not talking about that kind of treating everything equally.

We're talking about bringing to every situation the same openness, the same willingness, the same risk-taking and waiting to see what's going to happen. That's what equality is about : the attitude you bring. As I've been saying this past year, my mantra is, "Huh!" to everything, which is a state of openness and waiting-ness, not pre-judging the situation. That's the equality of equanimity.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Xinxinming* begins, "The greatest way isn't difficult if you just don't pick and choose." This is also expressed as "When my heart-mind doesn't arise, all things are blameless." These are invitations to meet things on the bare ground, before reactions and opinions arise.

In this early Buddhist formulation, the near enemy of equanimity is indifference. The near enemy is the thing for which it can be mistaken or the thing that can be mistaken for it. So it's saying very clearly that we are not talking about detachment or indifference. If we think that equanimity is a kind of detachment or indifference, we've fallen for the near enemy. We've made a mistake.

I want to emphasize that equanimity isn't just about the state we're in when we're standing still. Again, we can have a sense of it as a state of calmness that we hang out in and are okay, but actually it is something we bring as we move into the world. It isn't about not moving; it's about not minding that you're moving. It's okay to move; you're allowed to move.

A fruitful conversation in the koan salon recently was about the idea of specialness : we want to believe that we're special either in our attainments, accomplishments, and spiritual advancement, or in our suffering — that our suffering is particularly difficult. Equanimity is also an antidote to that feeling of specialness, either in ourselves or in our relationship to the world. Coming to everything with equality is a way of coming without specialness, coming with an openness when specialness disappears.

Another way we've talked about equanimity is that it's a matter of keeping pace with your life. It doesn't really matter how fast you're moving or what you're doing as long as you're keeping pace with it and it's okay with you. Equanimity is about it being okay with you, not about slowing everything down. Sometimes things aren't slow, and sometimes that's just right. Can you keep pace with that comfortably? Can you easily lope along, or tear along, or sit in absolute quiet with whatever is happening in your life? That's equanimity.

There's a way that we move into the world with equanimity, and there's also a way that we move into the vastness with equanimity. From our perspective, as we understand it, there are things that we can't know, particularly a lot of the really big things. When we turn our attention to the vastness, to how large and distant and unknowable a lot of things are in the vast perspective, we believe that we can never know all of that. We can never figure it out or get enough information about it. Equanimity is about being okay with that. Not only being okay with not knowing some of the biggest things, but actually coming to rest there : to find that there's peace in not having to know, there's a relaxation in finding that we don't have to grasp after understanding, knowledge, opinion, and explanation. We can just stay with 'don't

know.’ There’s a generosity in that as well. When we’re not constantly asking things and people to step forward and explain themselves, where we can just let things be, that’s a generous position in the world. That’s a way of bringing an experience of the equanimity in the vastness into the world.

Walt Whitman talked about experiencing the perfect fitness and equanimity of all things. Then he said something like, “They go ahead and talk and I remain silent.” The perfect fitness and equanimity of all things — that everything is just as it is. Other things have an equanimity too in their being exactly what they are. One of the places we might want to look for an understanding of equanimity for ourselves is in the natural world. What is the equanimity of trees? What is the equanimity of this floor which used to be trees? The equanimity of birds and water? The Polish poet Adam Zagajewski said that “plants and animals refuse no kind of weather. They allow for any kind of weather so that they can live.” That’s a tremendous kind of equanimity — to refuse no kind of weather, to allow it all, and turn it into life.

When I was speaking before about equanimity not being pernicious oneness, but about meeting each situation with the same wholeheartedness, I was thinking too of something that has meant a lot to some people here. The French philosopher, Simone Weil, talked about turning a just and loving gaze on things. That just and loving gaze is connected with equanimity. The loving part is there because it comes out of the big view. We don’t get caught by the blips on the radar screen that are always going up and down. We don’t keep getting caught by the stimuli coming at us all the time. But we carry this larger view of the big cycles of things. That’s the real foundation of equanimity.

From that position of remembering the large cycles of things in ourselves, in others, in the world, it’s easier to turn a loving gaze on things because it’s not a moment-by-moment weather report. *How are you doing now, and how are you doing now, and how are you doing now?* It’s not like that; it’s more like, *How are you doing?* And that’s a long sine wave. At the same time, from that position of equanimity there’s a certain independence, because it’s not conditioned or dependent on circumstances. It has an independent quality that is also connected to a large vision and to not being conditioned by what’s going on. From that independent point of view comes the ‘just’ part of the just and loving gaze. It is possible to see things with a clarity and understanding that’s difficult when you’re sucked in, caught right in the middle of it, when the obscurations are thick.

Equanimity is about bringing that just and loving gaze to things. It's about remembering the large view and seeing things from that perspective as much as we can. It's about not letting our reactions and responses be so quick and dependent on the immediate circumstances. It's about not picking and choosing. It's about the willingness to come to things wholeheartedly and with curiosity, and to say, "Huh!" Because that's about as much as you can say at the beginning of anything. *There it is. Huh!* And then you see what happens.

Q1 : It sounded like you were saying that indifference and detachment are the same thing. I keep remembering a line from Eliot's *Four Quartets* where he says that detachment is not the same as indifference. I'm wondering about the ability to see and feel and live from that awareness of the larger cycle. Isn't that a kind of detachment in the best sense of that word?

JIS : One of the helpful gifts of Buddhist philosophy is to say, well, there's detachment, (which you're right, isn't exactly indifference, but is in the same family) and then there's non-attachment, and then making the distinction between detachment and non-attachment. Non-attachment is the result of that big view. But detachment has that sense of removal. With non-attachment you can be standing right in the middle of it but not have the kinds of sticky stuff and hooks and tendrils that are part of attachment. I think that probably what Eliot was speaking of was what we would call non-attachment.

There's an interesting thing about how we translate equanimity. There are two words in Sanskrit or Pali. The meaning of one is something like "to be standing right in the midst of." So equanimity is the ability to stand right in the midst of. The other one is "having a true gaze." So we're back to Simone Weil's idea. That's a lovely combination, that ability to stand in the middle of things, and to have a true gaze when you do. That's how I think of non-attachment as opposed to detachment, which is a not-willingness to stand in the midst of things, even if it looks like you are.

Q1 : The image of a sea bird resting on the ocean in the midst of huge swells and riding them — that's an image of being in it and yet non-attached. Riding the swells and rising and falling with them.

JIS : Yes. And knowing when to fly up.

Q2 : What if, when you're tuning in to nature, nature feels so off balance that it's hard to get to that place [of equanimity]?

JIS : This is where I would personally bring in the big view. I had an experience before I moved here two years ago. I lived in California right next to a 5,000-acre tract of land that had been owned by a lumber company and badly treated, really trashed. They got tired of us hassling them every time they wanted to poison the trees with herbicides, so they turned it over to a holding company that was going to hold on to it until it could be turned into a state park. There was a five-year interregnum between the bad practices of the lumber company and it becoming a state park where nobody did anything to the land. Living right next to it, it was amazing to watch how in five short years the land started healing itself. The trees and the grasses came back. I remember the first year there were rabbits and the next year there were foxes. How did they know that? Did they send out little brochures — Come on down!

Which is not to say that at the end of those five years it was a pristine primeval forest again, but I was amazed at how if you just left it alone, how quickly it started to come back. I've never forgotten that. So even with the amount of degradation that we're facing now and how heartsick that can make us, we don't know where we are in the cycle and we don't know what's going to happen.

(Maybe I'll say something parenthetical. A lot of times people feel fear about global warming, and that fear feels like the long view. We're not having the long view we need to have, we're not thinking of 2065. But in a way, focusing only on our fear of disaster is a very short view because it doesn't take into account that something might happen; we might get smart. I'm not saying that therefore don't worry about anything, but remember that the long view is that we don't know what's going to happen. So it's not time to give up. It's time to throw our money and our hands and whatever else we can into whatever we can do to make it more possible that good things happen. So don't get trapped in the short view of *We're all gonna die!* We are all going to die, but maybe not like that. What's the response from the long view? We don't know, but that means that there might still be time. So, if there might still be time, what do we do? It's a non-hopeless view.)

That's a long rambling answer just to say we don't know where we are in the cycle. We don't know if it's on the way up or down or if it's going up and down, and it has this amazing

ability to heal itself. And it *does* have an amazing ability for little bits of tenderness amidst all the pain. So let's love that. Let's do what we can to create more circumstances for that.

Q1 : So, the long view is never enough by itself.

JIS : Yes, the long view says that civilizations rise and fall, and even humans will come and go. That's too empty.

Q1 : So what we're all working toward is a kind of stereoscopic vision where one eye's got the long view and one eye's thinking about harvesting rainwater off the roof.

JIS : Exactly. For me, the clearest formulation I can make is that if I have a long view, I don't know what's going to happen. That leaves all this room to do stuff now, because the field is still open and the question isn't closed yet. There's still time to do something, as far as we know. Since our choices are only doing something or not doing something, I'm going with doing something.