Evenness of Mind:
Upekkhā Pāramī

As we arrive at the last of the *pāramī*, we're looking for the highest, the best, the tops. So it could seem like a disappointment to find that as far as perfections go, as far as actions and intentions go, the top is equanimity, evenness of mind — where the mind refrains from delight and sorrow, ups and downs. This may not sound all-transcending, but as a practice it's deep, attentive and full. And if you consider it in the light of what the mind normally does, and how it's motivated to get to the pleasant and the exciting, and to get away from pain, blame and loss — then you'll probably acknowledge that to establish equanimity takes some doing.

But is it any good? What good does being equanimous do? Well, previously we were looking at kindness and compassion, and these are the first two of the four *brahmavihāra*, or divine abodes, which are those lofty, abundant and uncramped states in which one includes others as oneself. The third is appreciative joy, the intention to appreciate the good fortune and happiness of others. But the most profound of the *brahmavihāra* is equanimity. In this context, it's an even-minded acceptance of oneself and others. With equanimity I can tune into where you're at, up or down, and that doesn't change my empathy with you. Further, it comes with the understanding that whatever you're going through right now will change, and I trust your capacity to pass through this phase. In that sense it's an immense offering of respect, and also of perspective on wherever we find ourselves in the present. With equanimity we can allow ourselves and others to grow past all

views and perspectives — to the point where we might wisely realize that everything that manifests as ourselves or others is a passing show. And if we don't mess with it, doubt, take sides, blame or get stuck in ourselves, we have access to an openness that can't be put into an opinion. That's quite a realization, and quite an asset. With equanimity, there is no panic, defence, claiming, rejecting, blaming, worrying, doubting or treasuring; it's a state which allows all that to empty out. So it's the tops. It's something one could justifiably get a little excited about.

Inclusion, not Indifference

Outside of contemplative circles equanimity is not highly rated; in fact, it's not really understood at all. True enough, the Pāli word *upekkhā* can mean 'neutral' in terms of feeling; it can give the impression that one is indifferent and doesn't care — a nonchalant, laissez-faire attitude. But this is stupid equanimity: there's nothing furthering in it. Nonchalance carries delusion that does not fully acknowledge the feeling or the consequence of mind states. It's an escape in which one gets vague and fuzzy; it's a defence, a not wanting to feel — which is understandable when you consider how many terrible things you can witness through the media every day. So instead of fellow-feeling and empathy, people pass comment, philosophize or talk about suffering as if it's a statistic. Sure enough, being aware and tuned in, and still remaining equanimous isn't easy.

Normally when there's unpleasant contact we block it, look the other way, take a pill, or otherwise filter it out so that it doesn't throw us into some unmanageable state. Until, that is, we get something that knocks us down, like getting really sick. With sickness, you find your mind can be reasonable and stoical at first. But if the illness hangs on for week after week, shows no sign of abating, or gets worse, it takes us to the end of being cool and balanced about it all — we can get moody and desperate. Even without a physical illness, if the mind gets anxious or stressed to the point where we can't sleep, then crazy moods or suicidal instincts start coming up. And when you think of people who are

dying, losing control of their bodies or becoming senile (which is likely to happen to many of us), it's a disturbing prospect. When loved ones are losing what we know of their minds, losing the ability to form sentences or getting panicky and angry, when you witness human beings falling apart — it isn't so easy to be philosophical about it all. But it's through these and like contexts, through feeling the feelings and letting them move through you, that you get a chance to develop and know the value of equanimity.

This *pāramī* is actually useful all the time because, even when we are living in a controlled environment where we can be clean and adequately fed and sheltered, things don't stay comfortable or interesting for long. This isn't just because situations always change so radically, but also because of the changeable nature of feelings and perceptions — through which 'interesting' or 'comfortable' becomes 'tedious.' In a situation that is fairly agreeable, we take things for granted, get bored, feel that we're wasting our time, and so on. Just staying with things as they are, in a relatively neutral context, is a major Dhamma practice. I've seen it myself in monasteries where requisites are provided for free and you're living with people who keep precepts and are committed to Awakening — but 'so-and-so's chanting is unbearable ... and the Dhamma talk is so boring ... and I've got a great idea for a building project — if only those others would agree with me ...' and so on.

The mind always finds something to get irritated about or fascinated by; it always finds something to need, worry about and sorrow over. This is because the mind receives input in terms of perceptions and feelings that register experience as pleasant or unpleasant — which is natural enough. But then an undeveloped mind adds mental activities and programs of craving, aversion and self-interest on top of that. These are the latent proliferating tendencies (*anusaya*) that are embedded in the mind's awareness and that take form as the mind rises into its activities. With these, our heart-capacity and vision shrink. We lose touch with the good

fortune we have and of how much worse it could be; we forget and lose empathy for the misfortune of others; and we edit out all the ugly, smelly, rough and tedious aspects of our lives.

So our comfort zone is only a percentage of what is actually going on. The other stuff is on the other side of the border where, as soon as we touch into it, there's a twitchy reflex, because the mind just can't be with that fear, pain or inadequacy. And this weakness gets ignored. Instead we tend towards a mind-set that imagines the best, wants the best, and wants to be a winner. That's the message of the society. And anything that can't fit those criteria is second-rate, and to be excluded. Society in general tends to exclude the poor, the illiterate and the incapable. So we reject them; then we fear them; so we reject them some more. And that same kind of exclusive mind-set also turns on ourselves. No one is ever good enough, and no one can be good enough when regarded from the perspective of that critical mind-set. Seen through that lens, we can never be good enough, strong enough, bright enough, calm enough — and it's our fault. So we reject ourselves, remove the support of warm-heartedness, and still demand that we come out on top.

Even-Minded Empathy

The only way out is through a different approach: one of developing equanimity as self-acceptance. Cultivating this is one of the ongoing themes of Dhamma practice. For example in meditation: when painful memories or ugly mind states come up, we pause, set aside how things should be, and let go of trying to analyse or fix the mind. In checking those reactions (without judging them) an even-minded empathy spreads over the mind. No need to struggle: 'I can be with this.'

I like to define this process as having three stages: pay attention; meet what arises; and include it all. That is, feel the thoughts, feelings and emotions as they are; widen the focus to feel how they're affecting the body; and let empathic attention rest over the whole of it. Don't get busy, and don't just wait for things to

end — that isn't a full inclusion. Instead, soften those attitudes and include it all. And let that process continue for whatever arises next. There will be a release — which might not be what you were expecting. However, through following that process, you begin to trust the effect of equanimous awareness. And that's the real turning point. Because when you have the tools, you get eager to include your whole life as Dhamma practice. You want to see where you get itchy and defensive, and you're on the look out for the tell-tale signs of fluster and contraction — because if you pay attention, widen, soften and include it all, the movement to Awakening continues.

As a perfection then, equanimity is an intention or 'mental muscle' rather than a feeling. It's the big heart that can steadily hold feelings and perceptions in full awareness without getting rocked by them. And it strengthens into a mind state when it is supported by other *pāramī*. Equanimity allows a feeling to enter, be fully felt and pass. This is what makes it supremely useful: we don't dismiss the world, but get a heart that's big enough to embrace it. And with that there also comes the realization that the world — forms, feelings, perceptions, mental activities and even consciousness — is a passing thing that doesn't own us. So there's no need to run, and nothing to shut off. Equanimity then is the crucial firebreak that accompanies all the *pāramī* at that stage when resistance wells up. You know: the mind gets itchy about being patient, or mutters, 'Why should I?' about being generous, or whispers, 'They don't deserve it' when cultivating *mettā*. With equanimity towards those floods, you don't get caught and swept away by them. Instead this *pāramī* becomes your ground.

The Three Knowledges

As an introduction to the reflections on the *pāramī*, I brought up the story of the Buddha-to-be sitting under the bodhi tree and meeting, then repelling, the host of Mara through calling the Earth to witness the vast store of perfections he had accumulated over past lives. Another description illustrates the part equanimity

played in that. In this account (*M. 36*), the Buddha describes having three successive realizations: that of his previous lives; that of the nature of good, evil, and their consequences; and that of the ending of the biases and floods that cause suffering.

So first of all, with his mind 'concentrated and attained to imperturbability,' his focus widened to include a panorama of his many lives. Now just imagine doing this to the one life that you can remember — or cast your mind over a project or a relationship — and contemplate the twists and turns of its drama: now exciting, now struggling, now a waste of time, now persevering, making choices, feeling bad with a stroke of misfortune, and then feeling good with a lucky break ... and so on. Can you do that without reacting, flinching or getting nostalgic? Can you stop the tribunals, get past being a victim or a star? If you can keep going and witness all these with equanimity, can you say this life is good or bad? Or wasn't and isn't it just what it was, or is — and isn't it a learning experience? That's the first stage of wise equanimity. With that absence of final judgement the mind remains open, and the learning deepens.

In the case of the Buddha-to-be, the second realization was through a further widening and deepening: extending beyond the reflection on himself, he contemplated all beings going through the ups and downs of their lives as he had done, and reaping the results of their actions. This was the realization of *kamma* — that any action, even mental, has consequences. This is the law of cause and effect. It's impersonal, and doesn't apportion blame. The law says that acts, thoughts and speech lift you up to a bright state or drag you down to a dark state dependent on the ethical quality of the intention that initiates them. Intention chooses heaven, hell or somewhere in between — one moment at a time. And if you get past the reactions and the explanations, you get in touch with the mind's intention. Then you can investigate and set the right course.

So the intention of equanimity creates an unbiased strength which gives you the chance to see more clearly. And to offer this strength

to yourself or others is a precious gift. One time a friend of mine was cheating on his medical prescription and acquiring addictive drugs under false pretences. His wife knew of this and naturally was deeply concerned. But instead of criticising him, she just bided her time, and at the right moment coolly and caringly pointed out to him that what he was doing was going to bring him into deep trouble, in terms of a loss of self-respect, psychological well-being, and in terms of the law. But she made clear that the choice of action was up to him. Her unhurried tone and absence of drama and blame penetrated deeply, so with this encouragement to carefully consider cause and effect, he promptly changed his ways.

Equanimity then isn't about being passive and not assessing actions. Instead, applied equanimity makes us feel less guilty, defensive and reactive. A natural sense of conscience can arise to guide us to what, in our heart of hearts, we know is right and makes sense. A heavy-handed approach merely closes the mind in defence, or sets off a counter reaction. On the other hand a passive approach, in which everything's fine and we suppress wise counsel and feedback, leaves us prey to our impulses and blind habits. The Buddha's middle way takes in the knowledge of cause and effect while making intention, rather than self, the owner of action. So the Buddha's teaching offers us calm and clear guidelines that respect our innate moral sense, rather than righteous rants that render us as infants with irredeemable corruptions.

However, it takes an unflinching and steady attention of ongoing equanimity to bear witness to all of our actions. So it's a matter of unconditional self-acceptance: this is what you've been, and what you've done for good or for bad. No censoring, no justifications — just stay tuned in. Then the mind can operate outside of the tribunals and parades of self-view. It deepens to see that what each of us experiences as 'myself' is actually the current of cause and effect, for good or bad. It is *kamma*, not blind destiny or a flawed self, that carries the mind along and creates a 'personal' history. The Buddha-to-be didn't rest with that realization, but penetrated

deeper. Giving up sorrow or elation about what he had now understood, his mind deepened to review the assumptions that support *kamma*: the seeking for happiness through gaining and getting rid of; the questing for security through acquiring a philosophical or religious view; the grip that holds the mind as an unchanging self; and the denial of not owning up to the day after day unsatisfactoriness of doing all this. As we have seen, these are the floods of sensuality, views, becoming and ignorance. As he penetrated past these biases, through seeing them for what they are, his mind released from all suffering and stress. This was the third realization.

Calling a fully-released person anything is a potentially confusing business, so he referred to himself as 'Tathāgata' (Gone Thus), although we generally use the easier word 'Buddha' (Awake; Fully-Knowing) as a designation. Not that he personally needed a title to take a stand on. He was pretty cool about all that. For example, in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (*D.1*) he advised the monks on how to respond when they hear others either disparaging the Buddha, or praising him. His comment was that whether the monks felt angry and displeased in the case of disparagement, or elated in the case of praise — '*That would only be a hindrance for you.*' The correct response was simply to refer to the disparagement or the praise as either incorrect or well-grounded. There's no need to defend or affirm a person; such an effort encourages views, identification and conflict. But it's not as if there's no assessment, and that it's all the same; there definitely is assessment and a response. But the response comes from a mind that is equanimous around identity and allows discernment to speak clearly of actions and behaviour, not personality. Things are seen as 'thus,' 'just so'; the 'Gone Thus' sees even truth as 'thus' without attachment.

So equanimity is a deep humility that allows the mind to step out of adopting any identity, any view, any judgement. With evenness of mind the intentions of wisdom and relinquishment make the choice to abandon the cause of suffering, and kindness and compassion encourage others to do the same.

Developing Evenness in Meditation

As with many of these perfections, putting equanimity into practice begins at home. All the *pāramī* acquire their full power only when they are grounded in the intimate attention of meditation. Simply speaking, meditation practice develops equanimity in two ways. The first is by steadying the energy of mind. This comes around through calm, mental unification whereby the process of focusing the mind on one theme unifies, smoothes and strengthens its energy. When the mind puts aside external sense contact, and the agitation and fascination that accompany it, the mind's energy settles and unifies with the energy of the body. Such a mind can then enjoy its own vitality and extend its awareness more widely without losing centre. This is *samādhi*; and as it deepens, the mind's composure and ease refines and steadies, leaving clarity and equanimity. This is called developing 'mind' — referring to the energy that trembles or tightens, rises up or radiates, dependent on perceptions and feelings.

So in meditation we get to know the energetic aspect of mind, and through developing and purifying it we can rest in that element rather than in all the comings and goings. Then one's mind remains equanimous: it isn't pulled out, pushed in or shaken about by events. And accordingly, the mind settles on this elemental ground; in the midst of the world, it still feels whole, healthy and well.

The second way in which meditation practice develops equanimity is through the intelligent and insightful capacity of the mind. This is an aspect of wisdom (*paññā*) called *ñāna*: a penetrative knowing that can know, 'This is a thought, this is a feeling, this is a mood. This is liking, this is disliking. This is remembering, this is losing it.' Such discernment can be trained to be equanimous and unbiased; whilst being touched by thoughts, sensations and mind states, it can be trained not to flinch, fudge, congratulate or blame.

The more we have the capacity to receive and reflect on experience, the more we see it as caused (and therefore subject to

dissolution), changeable, and not belonging to anyone. This insightful focus *(vipassanā)* sees experience in terms of the three gates to the Deathless: desirelessness, signlessness and selflessness. In a way, they all come down to the same thing, a corrected view of how we normally mark or perceive things. Without this corrected view, we unconsciously label things in terms of their desirability, that is their agreeable or disagreeable character. And so we try to get the agreeable and get away from the disagreeable. But in meditation you discover that you can't get or get away from what arises. The more you want to have peace and stillness, the more agitated and uptight you get. The more you try to get rid of the stupid and ugly mind-moments, the more persistently they assail you. After a while you discover that the only real option is to pay close attention and adopt on-looking equanimity. Then the hot stuff starts to boil off, and as the peaceful intention of equanimity spreads over the mind, a natural inner stillness can be realized.

Deepening into the Signless Mind

Insight furthers this process by penetrating the perceptual process that labels or 'signs' everything. Perception is the activity of recognizing an object as something that is known. It is the manager of the tiny mental memos that label things: 'This is dreadful, this is humorous, this is a threat, this is fantastic,' and so on. But when we recognize that what we experience is impermanent and changing, then we see that all memory labels are not true in a final and lasting way. In other words, the signing of things as being always this way or that way changes with our moods, our perspectives and the context in which we experience them. So things are desirable dependent on our desire, not innately in themselves. For example, lively music is great when you're dancing, but terrible when you're trying to get to sleep. To focus on the impermanent, moment-at-a-time nature of the experience may not get you to sleep straight away, but its equanimity will quell the restlessness and irritation. Insight shifts the signs — to the realization of signlessness.

Sometimes perception, the sign-maker, gets quite frantic: say, in a situation where there's conflict and the sign-maker wants to designate right and wrong. Then the need to be something gives rise to a need to take a stand and hold a position. This in turn causes us to form strong views; we favour and condemn people as good guys or bad guys. (And of course, we also do this to ourselves). In terms of events in the world, there is always somebody you can lampoon or vilify: the tyrant of the moment or the corrupt minister of the year. And then there are the ones you can cheer, the white knights. Then the next year, it turns around, and the white knights have been found to be flawed by self-interest so they become the villains.

This is the story of politics isn't it? How the Western powers can seem to be liberating other countries from their tyrannical regimes — and are then revealed as being motivated by economic self-interest. And, how our allies are discovered as indulging in the same kind of corruption as our enemies. We focus on the sign of the good and ignore the other signs, or we do the same with the sign of the bad. But when discernment is equanimous we recognize that perception is affected by self-interest: '*My* people, *my* religion as against those others.' Insight reveals the bias of self.

I was given a lesson in signlessness and selflessness whilst attending a sky burial in Tibet. In a sky burial, a corpse is laid out on the ground and slashed open to attract the vultures — who then descend in a flock to devour the flesh. The bones are then smashed to powder and scattered. It's grim enough when described in words ... but in real life, when one sees two or three freshly dead bodies tossed off a cart, there's a perceptual shock — because the mind 'signs' the bodies as 'people asleep.' Then when the butchers start slashing them as if they were cutting up a side of beef ... and when within a few minutes a flock of eager birds completely covers the bodies in a heaving mass ... and then within a few minutes they are gone leaving only a scattered heap of bones ... the signs of 'person,' (someone's father or mother), 'human body,' 'meat' and 'bones' flash through the mind with emotional intensity and disappear. All that's left is a sober and empty clarity.

Then you look at your own body and those of people around you: old, young, male, female, fat, thin. And you say, 'Who is this?' In itself a body is neither something nor nothing. But it certainly isn't 'me' or 'mine.' And when we recognize that an object is not what we label it as, the labelling stops; there is signlessness and nonidentification with that object.

This also has a profound effect on the mental agent of making signs, that scurrying inner secretary who's always handing us the name, the opinion — the sign. Busy isn't it? But when all signs are seen as relative, and when compulsive self-interest is laid aside, then the secretary can take a break. With the sign-maker on holiday, we can get a taste of deep peace. This is called 'not-making-it-that' (*atammayatā*), the realization of the source of the mind. There is no identification, even with the knowing which is the last hideout of self-view. There is no inner need to know and describe anything — and yet there is clear awareness. This is the ceasing of 'name' that is synonymous with full Awakening.

Equanimity, framed by other perfections and applied to the mind's reflexes in meditation, keeps releasing the preferences that form our world. When the mind completely lets go, this is *atammayatā* — the deepest layer of awareness where there is no labelling and no intention. The mind's energy is untroubled, and its discernment is clear but not making any signs. Deliverance of mind (*ceto-vimutti*) and deliverance of wisdom (*paññā-vimutti*) have combined. There's no trembling to respond to or ward off, and there are no ideas to hold on to. A more fundamental property, the 'Nibbāna-element,' is realized.