

Dharmette: Equanimity as Space in the Heart

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 21, 2015

There are practices we do in Buddhism, which are also the attitudes or mental states we are trying to develop. We talk about the practice of mindfulness, so that we can become mindful. We practice generosity, so we can become generous. We practice equanimity so we can become equanimous. Equanimity is one of the great, practices and also attitudes to have in life. It is good to be reminded of it from time to time, because a good dosage of equanimity is useful in all our lives.

The Pali word for equanimity is *upekkhā*. The etymological root of the word means to have an overview of something, to have a bird's eye view. You are not caught in the middle of it. Imagine yourself at a very noisy gathering of people in someone's living room. Everyone is yelling, talking politics, and you can hardly get a word in edgewise because it's all so busy and active. You are in the fray. Then for some reason, you go out on the balcony, or you go to the bathroom. When you come back to the edge of the room, you stand by the door and look in. You see what's going on. You can

feel the difference between being outside of it looking in and not being caught in it, versus being in the middle of it, and completely caught in the drama of it all.

Equanimity is that stepping back, or having the overview, where you see what is going on, but you are not in the fray. You are not lost in it, not caught in the details. To step back and have a bird's eye view or an overview of the situation is a way of not identifying so strongly, not being caught in the reactive mode, where you are constantly reacting to what's going on. Rather, there's an ability to have some space in the mind and heart to not react – and to see.

One of the aspects of equanimity is not being aloof or indifferent, but instead, it is not giving in to automatic reactions to your situation. The situation might impact you. You might be at the edge of the room looking in where people are arguing. You might feel discomfort; you might feel compassion; you might have a feeling related to it; but you are not reactive. You are not taken over by your impulses. You are not on automatic pilot in what you think, what you do, or what you say. There is space for it all. There is kind of a balance, because you are not giving in to the swings of reactivity, even though you're not aloof or indifferent.

A number of things can be helpful in the cultivation of equanimity. One is to remember that it's always an

overview. How far do you have to step back to see the whole situation, as opposed to the particular detail of the moment? Step back... and step back... and step back. What is the larger picture? What's going on here in the larger picture? Sometimes the large picture is the whole room. Sometimes it is in the context of time. Sometimes, if you see someone who is angry, the larger picture is the challenges they've had in their life: "Oh, with those kinds of challenges, no wonder that person is angry." You see it in a wider, bigger view.

Sometimes we take the bigger view as we consider the human condition. In terms of equanimity towards ourselves, it is easy to take our particular situation, our particular suffering, our particular challenge as so important. Because it is happening to us, we take it personally. When we take things too personally, there is not much equanimity. If you can understand that you are not alone in your challenge – not dismissing or diminishing it – but understanding that this is a common phenomenon, whatever challenge you have. There are people with health problems, people with relationship problems, people with personal psychological problems. There are all kinds of things we can experience in the human condition. And to realize you are not alone can loosen up the idea that it's personal. Maybe you have had the experience of meeting someone who has the same situation that you do. And suddenly you relax: "Oh, you too!!" You are seen by someone. You know it

is not just you. One of the teachings of Buddhism is to step back far enough to see it as part of the human condition, rather than something that is intensely personal – me, myself, and mine.

How do we step back? What is the bigger picture? What is the overview of the situation we are in that allows us to have space for it, to be spacious around it, to not be claustrophobic, not caught in the middle of the dynamic of it. Part of the reason I like the concept of equanimity is that I associate it with having lots of space. The difference between being claustrophobic, with winter fever, in a small cabin with all of your relatives all winter long, versus finally being able to go outside, and you get great vistas, lots of space, the vast panorama of the mountains. Walking by yourself on the mountain trails, you can love all of your relatives. But in that cabin, it's a little hard.

So, how do you make space in the mind? I associate having lots of space in the mind as almost synonymous with equanimity. How, with mindfulness, do you create space?

Sometimes people bring a certain attitude to their mindfulness, particularly if whatever issue is going on for them is intensely personal. They focus the mindfulness firmly on that issue – and they're glued onto it – to fear, for example. "That fear is so important.

I'm going to be mindful of it!" Maybe we are not supposed to be so close. What kind of overview can you have? Can you have a more spacious, wide angle lens to hold it? Maybe then there can be some equanimity to it.

Again, it is important to remember that equanimity is not indifference. Equanimity is not aloofness. As a *brahmavihara*, equanimity is a kind of love. So, with an overview of the situation, chances are you can look at it more wisely. You can see it more respectfully, for what it is. If you are glued to it, if you are caught or involved in it, there isn't the respect of seeing something clearly. Maybe there can be the space to love it – to have some love, or kindness, or friendliness in the situation.

In the space of the mind, if there is love, what is it? Even just evoking the word or the concept, "love", can change the whole inner ecology. "Oh! Love. I don't know if I want to love this, but at least I don't have to be so judgmental." So, make space for something else to happen: equanimity – to have an overview, a bird's eye view, or the large perspective of the situation.

One more thing that can be helpful to have the wide perspective equanimity in a given situation is to consider, "What's best for everyone concerned?" When you are involved in conflict, in a difficult situation, it is very easy to take a "me versus you" stance. Sometimes,

we are in the camp of the other people, and we deny ourselves. Sometimes, we are in our camp, and we deny the other people. But what's best for all of us? I think somehow, approaching interpersonal challenges and difficulties with, "What is best for everyone involved? What is best for the person I'm in conflict with? What's best for me? Is there some way we can find our way together to what's best for the group as a whole?" I think that is another avenue for interpersonal equanimity. It is a very different perspective from how most people operate. People often consider, "What's best for me? What's best for you?" It is not an "either or" kind of a thing, but it's both. We can all benefit. We can find the greater good for all of us.

I encourage you, from time to time, to consider the topic of equanimity. When you do, ask, "What is the overview? What is the bigger picture that would allow me to have more space – space in the heart, space in the mind – for whatever is going on?"