

**Equanimity in Compassion**  
**Lovingkindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening**  
**Rob Burbea**  
**February 8, 2007**  
<https://dharmafeed.org/teacher/210/talk/12289/>

Okay, so today I want to talk about equanimity – it's the fourth of the *brahmavihāras* – and specifically I want to talk about equanimity and its relation to compassion (actually, maybe broaden it out if we have time). So as you know, there are these four *brahmavihāras*, four divine or sublime abidings, dwellings of the heart, and we've been working mostly on the loving-kindness (the *mettā*), the compassion (*karuṇā*). Catherine, I think – Monday, or one day – talked about joy, which is the third one.

And just a word about that: usually, that third *brahmavihāra* gets translated – the Pali word is *muditā* – usually it gets translated as 'sympathetic joy,' which has the meaning of, if someone is happy, if some good circumstance befalls someone, something happens in their life to make them happy, then instead of being jealous or indifferent, we are happy for their happiness. We're happy for them to be happy. And that's the usual way that *muditā* is translated, sympathetic joy.

I think that translation actually came from the commentaries, and in the Buddha's original discourses, I'm not sure that he used it that way. The meaning that I prefer is more something like 'spiritual joy,' which isn't a great word, I know, but what it really to me means is a joy, a happiness in life that's not dependent on the ego getting something, or being pumped up by something, or inflated, or feeling superior or whatever. So a joy in life that is not about the ego getting. And then, of course, as a sort of small piece of that, there will be sympathetic joy. When someone else is happy, I will be happy as well, as a piece of spiritual joy. But it would also include things like wonder at nature, like that kind of receptivity that I was talking about, like an openness to be touched by life, and touched by the beauty, the awe, the wonder of life, in a way that I can't own, I can't possess it; it has nothing to do with me. It has nothing to do with me being great, or giving me anything particularly. So some kind of joy that's not so based on the ego. That's the third one.

And then the fourth one is this word 'equanimity.' The Pali word is *upekkhā*. And this is a strange word. It's not a word we use much in English. And again, if you wandered down Newton Abbot high street and you asked people, you know, "How often do you feel equanimous?" or whatever, you'd probably get some puzzled looks! [laughter] It's not a very common word. And sometimes it can be hard to understand what it actually means.

It's a kind of steadiness, a steadiness of the heart and the mind. And again, there are two kinds of meanings. One is in relation to all things, so the mind, the heart, the being, stays steady, stays balanced, stays kind of unshakeable through its contact with all things in life. So in relation to whatever comes, however difficult, however wonderful, the heart, the mind, stays steady, stays upright, stays balanced. And that's the broader meaning of equanimity, and the way that the Buddha more often used it.

And again, I think through the commentaries, it has come to have a kind of second meaning in relationship to beings – so specifically as a kind of balancing factor in terms of compassion. Here we are cultivating compassion and opening the heart, sensitizing the heart to the suffering in the world, the

suffering of others, and our own, and sometimes acting in the world to try and alleviate the suffering, to be of service, to be of help. And yet, what we often find is that the suffering of others is *not* alleviated. It's not helped. There's still suffering for whatever reasons. Or there's just *too much* suffering in the world. It's actually endless. It's impossible for me to end all the suffering in the world. Can the heart stay steady with that? Can the compassion stay steady, so that we're not keeled over, bowled over, closing down or feeling depressed by that? So in relationship to beings, this is what equanimity means. It's a hugely important factor in compassion.

I want to just go into a little bit how that factor of equanimity feeds into the compassion practice, how we can develop it within the compassion practice, and then broaden it out. Some of it, we've already touched on, but I just want to draw it out once more.

The first aspect is (which I've said a couple of times at least) – in the compassion practice, it has two elements. One is this, what I would call 'empathy.' We are opening the heart to receive, to resonate with, to sympathize with the suffering that we see. So I see sorrow, and something in the heart trembles with that sorrow, it resonates with that sorrow. Somehow, I don't know – mystically, almost – sorrow that isn't ours, we witness it, and something happens in our heart. Our heart vibrates sympathetically with that.

That's only half of compassion. The other half is this energy, this intention that comes out of the being, so to speak, that goes out of the being, that wants to heal, wants to alleviate and soothe that suffering, wants to comfort it. In the practice, we can actually feel where the balance is in any one moment. So sometimes it will feel like we're very much in the 'feeling the sorrow' side, where very much there's quite some sadness, or grief, or just being moved. And sometimes it can be very lovely, and there's a sweetness to it, there's a beauty to it; the heart is open and touched. And sometimes it feels like the balance is more, we're just feeling in, tuning into that energy that's going out – the lovely quality of healing, of light, the balm, the comforting.

This is a balance that's always moving. It's always moving. So part of the practice is to be aware of, in any one moment, where the balance is. If we're tuning into that healing quality, what's going out, the comforting, the balm, it actually has a feeling of feeling pleasant, and of feeling quite healing. So in coming out of *our* being, it's actually touching us on its way out to others. And we feel healed. And there's a kind of pleasantness in it. There's a kind of brightness in it. There's a kind of healing in it. And there's even a kind of sense of well-being, of happiness in it.

So sometimes there are times, and periods, even, when there's a lot of grief. There's a lot of grief, almost, in the compassion practice. Something in the heart is opening, and it's almost like a veil – we're removing a veil, and the heart just comes in a very raw contact with the suffering of the world. We see, like a veil has been removed from the eyes, from the heart, and we're touching directly the suffering in the world. We see the immensity of it. We see the universality of it, the fact of death, the fact of change, the fact of disease, the fact of all of it.

And the heart can, in that – there is a grief, and there can be tears and sorrow and a real being touched at a very deep level, which in a way is important. For some people, that will be there at times, and it's part of the heart opening. It's not everyone that goes through something like that, but it can be there at times, very subtly, or more strongly. And in a way, it's part of our humanity to be touched.

We're not, in a way, wanting to be untouched and inhuman. It gives the heart a quality of some kind of opening, some kind of tenderness that's really important.

But we need to really be conscious of this balance in our practice of compassion. And I would say that in order that compassion in our life is something sustainable – in other words, we really feel like we can practise compassion all day every day for the rest of our lives, and not feel tired, not feel overwhelmed, not feel burdened by the suffering in the world – we need to keep tuning into that loveliness of what's going out, the nourishing quality of what's going out, the happiness of it, and keep being touched by that and our selves nourished by that. That gives the compassion, in that moment and in our lives, in the being, a kind of strength and sustainability. That's very much part of what equanimity means – strength, sustainability. It also gives a steadiness, gives a balance, and this unshakeability, which is all part of what equanimity means. And gives the heart a kind of buoyancy so that we don't feel, as I said, burdened, overwhelmed, sinking underneath the weight of the suffering of the world. This is hugely important. So there's that balance.

The other, or one other, piece that's really important with equanimity is *samādhi*, going back to near the beginning of the retreat. *Samādhi* in one sense is a kind of non-distractedness, you could say. When the mind is distracted, what's really happening is it's toppling over, pulled out to reach things. It's pulled out towards this, or pulled out towards that, and that very distractedness is a non-balance, a non-steadiness of mind. So really not to underestimate the benefits and the power of *samādhi* in the deepening of equanimity – *samādhi* in the *mettā* and the compassion practice, and *samādhi* generally.

I remember last year, after, I think it was after about two weeks, and there was one retreatant who, very thoughtfully, I thought, he said to me in an interview, "I think I don't want so much *samādhi*. I feel like when I go out into the world and deal with compassion in the world, the fact is, I'm moving in life. I'm moving. There's busyness, there's distraction, there's all of that. There's basically not a lot of *samādhi* compared to ..." He was getting in relatively deep states here. "It would be more relevant," he said, "to practise here the rest of the time in states of non-*samādhi*, you know, actually when I'm quite distracted." I didn't ask him how he was planning to distract himself, but ... [laughter] Anyway.

And so this was quite thoughtful, but as I say, not to underestimate. There's something that happens with *samādhi*. It sort of allows any quality, whether it's insight, whether it's *mettā*, whether it's compassion, whatever it is, to kind of sink into the cells, and to be there, woven in almost to the fabric of our being. So what's more common is to *not* have so much *samādhi*, think we've understood something, think we've developed a lot of compassion, and find that when we go out it's a bit shaky.

So again, not to say there's a cut-off point, but just generally that we want to be not underestimating the power of the *samādhi*. Having said that, what he said was also important, because sometimes we *are* very busy, very distracted, and it's important to practise, too, when we're busy and when the mind isn't that settled. So both are important.

Generally, as *samādhi* deepens, as a general quality in the being, it actually leads to equanimity. It's part of the natural progression of *samādhi* – through physical *pīti*, what I talked about; through happiness; through peacefulness; to actually descend to depths of equanimity. And then, in the course of that – and this is usually a progression that takes months and months, but in the progression of that, the equanimity, too, gets kind of sewn into the being, and it's really something that's accessible in life, not just in the *samādhi*.

Okay, so there's this balance in the practice that I was talking about. There's the *samādhi*. There's also this factor about how much the self is *doing* the compassion practice. So sometimes, especially from the beginning weeks, really, if you're on retreat, it can very much feel like I'm sort of pumping away at the phrases, and then sometimes there's a feeling of compassion, and then sometimes not. But it feels like the self is doing it, and the self is sort of trying to get this compassion to happen, and then feeling the compassion if it's there.

But some of you, I think, have noticed this – and again, not to make any kind of measurement out of this – but sometimes, as the sense of deepening happens in the practice, it can actually feel like it's not the self doing it. It's not *me* making compassion. It's not me kind of pumping everything up with the phrases, and sort of making sure it's okay. It's more like compassion is just something there that we can tune into, and the self a little bit gets out of the way. It's not the self doing it. This is quite an important area, or shift, that can happen in practice, if it happens. Self and equanimity have a very, in a way, clear and interesting relationship. Basically, the more the self-sense, the bigger the self-sense, the stronger the self-sense, the less the equanimity. It's actually that simple. It's either one or the other. As the self-sense gets quiet, as the ego gets quiet, equanimity is the natural state. There's less self in there, invested and worrying about, “Will this work out? Will it not work out? How's it all going?”, and equanimity is a natural settling, of when there's less self being built up.

Sometimes, too, and some of you have reported this, as well: when there's less self doing it, there can sometimes feel like a spaciousness comes into the compassion practice. And again, it's not the self doing it, but it's almost like there is a space, like there is space in the universe, and that space is imbued, is kind of shot through with compassion. And that space, that space of compassion, holds any suffering that comes up in ourselves, in others, in an effortless way, through all time. So any suffering that was, any suffering that is now, any suffering that will be is just held, effortlessly, naturally, organically in that space.

And this is a sense that can open up. It's not me, little old me, holding someone else's suffering. It's actually, whatever you want to say, the universe holding it, the space holding it, the vast heart holding it. Spaciousness, space, is also a really significant factor of equanimity. So we could talk about equanimity as being steadiness and balance, but it's also a kind of spaciousness. That's a very prominent feature of equanimity.

Now, both of these – whether it's the self doing it, and it just feels like this being over here giving compassion to that being over there, or it feels like there's not really much self doing it; it's just compassion, it's just suffering being held in the space, just being held by a space of compassion – both are important and both are necessary. So it's not to feel like, “Oh, one's irrelevant after a while.” This self giving compassion to that self is very human. It's part of our humanity, and it is a necessary aspect of our humanity, a necessary level, in a way, of compassion.

So there's the balance, the *samādhi*, the busyness (or not) of the self, and the openness to space and spaciousness. And also something a little bit more complicated, or potentially more messy, which is: sometimes when we are involved in a relationship, any kind of relationship with someone, or involved in helping or compassion, something gets out of balance, and what's really happening is I am wanting or needing something from that person or from the situation. Sometimes it's clear, and sometimes it's a little more under the surface. So sometimes to ask oneself, “What do I want or need for myself here?”

This can be quite complicated and messy and not clear, and it's not to say that we shouldn't have wants or needs either.

If we're talking about compassion to a friend or a relationship, sometimes we feel when the other is suffering, when there is a lot of suffering in the other, we feel, and especially if it goes on for a long period of time, we feel that "My needs in the relationship are not being met. My needs in this relationship are not being met." Or we are involved in a relationship or a situation of care for someone who is clearly causing suffering for themselves in an ongoing way. They're maybe in some addiction or some destructive behaviour or whatever it is, and again, it can feel like, "My needs in this relationship are not being met." So this is quite a common scenario, and I know, in my past, I've certainly been involved in these kind of situations. Someone once said to me – I mean, it's strange language they used – but it's a very high level of care, to be in that situation in a healthy way, and caring for someone who's doing that, without having it be unhealthy – on both sides.

Am I taking care of my needs, if that is the situation? So maybe I *do* have genuine needs. And again, this goes back to a talk a while ago: we can talk about loving-kindness and compassion, and it can sound all very abstract and completely clean and pure, but the reality of our life is that we are involved in relationships, and we all have needs and wants within that. So am I taking care of my needs? Am I finding a way to do that?

So it may be that we're in a situation where we actually end up feeling quite lonely. Or we feel like we need a friend. Or that, as I said, we're not being met, or we're not feeling loved. This is quite common. Sometimes it's a little bit even more complicated; we may be involved in a situation where we are actually invested somehow in being needed. So we're interested in compassion, but another sort of stratum in there is that a part of us actually wants to keep the person somewhat down so that we are needed. And again, this can come in in very insidious ways. Not, again, not to be scared of all this, because this is part of humanity, and it's part of being human. I think some psychotherapies call that co-dependence, that kind of – it's a whole system in place of, "You be messed up so that I can feel needed," and it's just something that human beings do sometimes.

Or we may be involved in service, in helping people or trying to help people, and we're actually wanting a sense of achievement. We want this person to get better so we can feel like, "Yeah, right, something happened, you know. I did something. I was helpful." And this is completely understandable and completely normal. Or we may be involved in – and again, totally normal, totally human – we want some recognition for our efforts. You know, we work really hard to help, in whatever field it is, and then just feel like, "Well, it's not really being seen," or being seen in the way that we want it to be seen.

So all of that. And it's quite, you know, complex and messy, and very human. Can I take care of myself in a healthy way? Can I get at least *some* of what I need in a healthy way? So some of this is not easy, but to begin asking that question in the situations. When we're involved in compassion and love, in a situation where it's difficult, where it feels like the person is difficult or there's aversion, there's judgement, there's irritability with them, or we're just frustrated, we're frustrated with the situation, with the stuckness of the situation, we're frustrated with this person, whatever – really, really skilful to turn the compassion on oneself. So again, we tend to assume, to go straight into, "Oh, I just need to inject more compassion towards them and clean it up that way." *We're* suffering there, and to really notice that and touch that with compassion. And then sometimes our relationship to the situation, the

person, and the flow of compassion in that situation begins to soften, the perception begins to soften, and we're able to work more easily.

You know, it's an immense task, I think, to take these *brahmavihāras* on in our life. And it's really a lifelong thing, to say "I'm really deeply interested, deeply committed to living a life, living in the world with love and compassion and joy," and somehow be steady through all of it. That's immense. And we do see that part of where the wisdom comes in is just realizing (and a lot of it is very clear) that there are limits to how much we can help, there are limits to our influence. So certainly we see this politically. In all political situations, all political structures, systems that I can think of, there's a real limit to the individual's, one individual's capacity to change. So we could see something like – well, all kinds of things that are going on now; just the limits of our influence politically.

A big part of bringing equanimity in is actually seeing the web of conditions, seeing that someone's freedom from suffering doesn't just depend on me. I can be doing all I can to help them, I may be the closest person to them, but it doesn't just depend on me. And so to begin to shift the seeing – this takes quite some time – to begin to see all the factors, all the conditions, the web of conditions that comes in to make any situation what it is.

So, for instance, a Dharma talk is quite an interesting example. It can seem as if I'm sitting here giving a Dharma talk, and you're listening. My experience is that's, you know, on one level, of course, that's what's happening. On another level, we're all giving this Dharma talk. It's a complete co-dependent arising. What's coming out of my mouth, the feeling in the room, the words I choose, the tone of voice, all of it is as much dependent on you and how you're feeling and what you're mirroring back to me, and this kind of interplay that's inextricable, as it is to what we all had for lunch in the day, and how tired I am, and everything is coming together. And I am quite tired! [laughter] Everything's coming together to make a Dharma talk. We tend to see it in terms of selves, and selves being responsible for things. It's a complete coming together.

Then, I'll say, as a teacher, you know, you want to put something out there, and you want to say, "Well, I hope this changes people. I hope there's some transformation. I hope it makes a difference in people's lives." And that's a very earnest aspiration, desire. But as a teacher, I have to remind myself this is probably just one little drop, or one little seed, which will meet a whole web of other conditions later on. So it may be something happens. Maybe, you know, as I'm talking, someone says, "I've got it! That's it! Actually, I don't need to stay for the rest, Rob. I'll be having tea if you want me." [laughter] Maybe. That would be great. But mostly it's actually just a little drop, and then one goes out into that infinite web of conditions in the life. Maybe it's just a seed. It meets another condition, then it begins to sprout. Maybe it sprouts a little here, and then it gets watered. Maybe it meets the wrong conditions and it just gets covered over, you know?

So we have to see that what we put into a situation in terms of compassion and care is only one little ingredient in a vast web of conditions. So even, it seems that we're doing all we can to help someone, just to realize that – certainly if they're going to live longer – they will meet other conditions, and maybe something you've done or said, it will just be enough that it can blossom later for that person.

But it's tricky, I mean, it's really tricky. This is a hard one. All these *brahmavihāras* are difficult, but certainly equanimity is difficult. And equanimity, just to be really clear, is not a kind of detachment,

coldness, greyness, disconnection. It's not indifference. Indifference is actually the near enemy of equanimity. So it can look like equanimity, look like, "Yeah, I'm fine. If you get healed, fine. If you suffer, that's fine," but actually, there's no real care there. So indifference is what *can* look like equanimity, but it's not. And this is quite interesting, especially in spiritual circles, when a lot of stock gets put into non-attachment and peace and kind of, you know, being 'beyond' things, etc.

In the Eastern religions, there's this doctrine of karma and past lives and everything, and sometimes people say, "Well, they're like that because of their previous suffering, and in a way, it's their fault, you know." Or in the West it's, "Oh, it's just God's will." I just can't really relate to that at all; to me, it's really not a useful way of thinking. Or rather, one has to *check* if it's useful, in the sense that, is an attitude like that bringing indifference? So once I was meeting with someone who was not on retreat, and she was talking about reincarnation and past lives, and she said, "Is it right? Is it wrong?", and I said, you know, "I don't know." I asked her, "Is it actually opening your heart or not? Are you feeling more care coming from it? Are you feeling more commitment to kindness, to compassion?" And she said "Yes," so I said, "Great. If that's what's helping, then go for it." And the view might change later on, but the barometer is really: what's it doing to the heart? So what is my responsibility? Responsibility – my ability to respond. It's not karma or God's will as a sort of, you know, leading to indifference, and this is really important.

So sometimes all those pieces of self-interest that I was talking about, and the way that self can kind of get entangled in a whole situation of care, sometimes that's relatively *not* there. The self is not so invested in an unhealthy way or in any way like that. And still, we vibrate, we resonate with the suffering. And the question for equanimity is: can the compassion stay steady and stay strong, but stay tender, that that tenderness of the heart remains? And sometimes it's very clear that we're seeing someone cause and perpetuate suffering for themselves through ignorance. They're caught in some pattern that they're not understanding – some addiction, some behaviour or whatever it is – and they're just perpetuating the suffering, causing suffering and keeping it going through ignorance. And that's hard to see. It's hard to be with. Especially when the compassion is there, it's hard to see. When there's love there, it's hard to see.

So traditionally there are these phrases for equanimity. And it's trying to make clearer to the heart that is already open, already soft and tender with compassion, it's trying to make it clearer, the limits of our responsibility and the responsibility of an other, and how suffering actually arises because of conditions, and often a person's actions.

Just to say, of course there's suffering in the world that comes – it's nothing to do with the person; it's just descended on them from the environment or political situation or whatever. And then there are other levels of suffering, other kinds of suffering, that are really what humans bring on themselves through ignorance. And this is what the Buddha's really interested in as well. So these phrases – I'll actually just read them:

"All beings are the owners of their actions. Their happiness and their unhappiness depends on their actions, not on my wishes for them."

"All beings are the owners of their actions and inherit the results of their actions. Their future is born from such actions, companion to such actions, and the results of their actions will be their home."

Third one, “All actions with intention, be they skilful or harmful, of such acts they will be the heirs.”

So to me, even just reading it, it’s quite sobering, you know, to a heart – when there’s compassion, it’s quite sobering actually realizing the limits. And so the equanimity practice in this very formal way is just bringing that recollection to mind, bringing that recollection to mind to balance the compassion, if it’s not already balanced.

And so, we *do* live in a world where, as I said, there are limits to our care. There are limits to the effects of our actions that we can see, certainly, and limits to what we can do. And so we see, and if you’re involved in service, you are involved in situations where one’s trying everything one can, one puts everything that one can in, and there’s still suffering, there’s still the situation. But, and I think John said this in the opening talk, loving-kindness and compassion, best way to live. The best way to live. So even if the action, even if the results, are not what we want them to do, the heart of loving-kindness and compassion is the best way to be in the world. And that heart balanced with a sense of freedom, balanced with a sense of equanimity. So this balance is not a tightrope. It’s not a kind of razor’s edge that we’re walking. That’s quite important. To me, it’s more a sense of a softening, a spaciousness. So it’s not something very tense, to keep on this balance of freedom and compassion. There’s a kind of softening that can happen as the wisdom deepens, as the equanimity deepens, also as the compassion deepens. And a spaciousness that comes with that.

So the more we see into the emptiness of self and the emptiness of all things, the more that kind of spaciousness and that kind of softness can come in, and we’re able to walk this tightrope (which really isn’t a tightrope), we’re able to walk that in a much more relaxed and effortless way. I would still say that’s very difficult, but the movement is towards a kind of softening.

To me, as we go deeper into really understanding what emptiness is and having that touch the heart – I think I said this the other day – what comes out of that is a sense of freedom, and joy, and peace, and wonder. Another sense that comes out is some kind of sense of devotion, I would call it. I don’t really know another word for it – devotion. And that can take all kinds of forms. A heart that has opened, or is opening to emptiness, there’s a kind of devotion to the world, at one level, that just comes in. So paradoxically, we see the emptiness of self, the emptiness of beings, the emptiness of the world, and we’re even more devoted to it somehow, even more devoted. And that devotion has a quality of not being so attached to the result. There’s a real softness in it. There’s a softening in it. So seeing into emptiness is not a kind of nihilism. I think I said this the other day as well. It’s a strange translation, but ‘emptiness,’ it can kind of make you feel like, “Well, there’s nothing. There are no people. There’s nothing. Nothing matters.” But to go into what’s called the extreme view of nihilism would give rise to indifference, which would be the near enemy of compassion. It’s a kind of disconnection – disconnect, not caring, disinterested, aloof.

So as we talked about in the compassion and the *mettā* practice, the more we actually contemplate this *anattā* in the different ways, the more we actually find it’s opening up love, it’s opening up a sense of connection. It should be, if we’re sort of on the right track with it. And we talked about doing that with contemplating just mind moments, ownerless mind moments, not really anyone owning these mind moments of suffering. And the different ways, and we talked about *anattā*, and also talked about this sense of emptiness being fullness, being non-separation, so that I cannot actually find a separate



being. It seems the most obvious thing in the world: here we are, a room full of whatever it is, numbers of beings, but as I look deeper and I go into it, I cannot actually find separate beings. Cannot find myself separate, cannot find others separate. And in that, the love is there. So there's that emptiness of selves – my self and other selves – and that brings the compassion, it brings the equanimity. And at a whole other level, there's even the emptiness of suffering. You can say, "Okay, well there are no beings, *really*," but even suffering, too, as you go really deep into it, that's also empty. And yet, paradoxically, seeing that brings compassion in a way that there's equanimity for it.

Okay. So at the beginning of the talk, I said that the most usual way the Buddha talked about equanimity was not so much in relation to beings, but in relation to all conditions, all things. So the mind, the heart, the being staying steady, staying balanced, unshakeable, whatever happens, whatever's going on, whatever is coming to the senses. Sometimes to ask ourselves: how much does my mind state depend on what's going on? This happens or that happens; how much does the mind state wobble with that? A steadiness with it is what equanimity is. All conditions, absolutely all conditions.

There are particularly eight, what's called the eight worldly conditions, that the Buddha placed a lot of emphasis on. So all conditions he's talking about, but there are eight in particular that he said, "These ones, pay particular attention to." They're four pairs: praise and blame, success and failure, gain and loss, and pleasure and pain. So four pairs. One pole of each pair we like. We like praise, success, gain, and pleasure. And the other pole we don't like, we don't want it. No one wants to be blamed or to be in pain or to fail or to lose what we like. And whoever we are in this life, whatever our history, whoever we are, whatever our credentials, we are going to be subject throughout our life to the wavering of those four polarities – no matter who you are. The Buddha certainly, Jesus certainly, Gandhi certainly, Mother Teresa, David Beckham [laughter], whoever. They're inescapable facts of life, the eight worldly conditions. To be in the world means to be subject to the movement along those four polarities. How steady can the heart be with that?

So often when equanimity's talked about, and the question is, "Well, *how* can I develop equanimity?", the contemplation of impermanence is usually given as the sort of – *that's* where it's at. And certainly there's a great power in contemplating impermanence. But I was talking a few weeks ago with another teacher, and she was saying whenever she starts giving a talk on impermanence, she notices people just sort of, "Impermanence, right," and this kind of screen goes up: "God, I've heard it before," which is understandable, because Buddhists just, you know, yap on about it. [laughter]

I would say, it is curious. Impermanence is extremely obvious. A five-year-old can agree that everything is impermanent – well, some pretty low age [laughter] can agree that everything's pretty impermanent. It's very clear to us. The question from the Dharma perspective is: are we seeing, are we contemplating impermanence in a way that's actually bringing a sense of freedom, bringing a sense of equanimity? And if we're choosing impermanence as an avenue of contemplation, finding a way of doing it that brings that. Because sometimes people are contemplating impermanence, and "Yeah, it's change, change, change"; there's no freedom coming out of it. So to find ways, and to talk with teachers and friends and whatever, and to find ways of working with impermanence, actually bringing, in the moment, a sense of freedom. In the moment, one feels as one's contemplating it, "Ah, oh, yeah, release, release." I think I touched on impermanence in one of the other talks, and I'm actually not going to go into that right now.

I touched earlier in this talk on *samādhi* and the progress of *samādhi*. The natural progress of *samādhi*, as it gets deeper and deeper – and I’m talking about really quite deep states of *samādhi* now – naturally move into equanimity. Naturally and organically, equanimity is a state of deep *samādhi*. How does it deepen? How does equanimity deepen? It actually deepens by letting go of grasping and craving. So the more, in the moment, we let go of grasping – of craving after something or trying to get rid of something – the more the being moves into equanimity. It’s actually that simple.

And we can do this at subtler and subtler levels, and the equanimity just gets deeper and deeper. So we notice some very obvious grasping or aversion or craving, and we just relax that, let go of that, and the being, there’s some degree of calmness. And then we pick up on a more subtle level, and we let go of that, and there’s a bit more calmness, and it just goes deeper and deeper. That’s how equanimity deepens.

One kind of subtle form of grasping is grasping at the ‘I,’ at the ‘me,’ at the self, so identifying with things. Another way that equanimity deepens is by just letting go of identification, letting go of identification, letting go of identification, and equanimity kind of descends on the being – or the being descends into equanimity; whatever way you want to put it.

We’re almost near the end of the retreat now, but as a state, when there’s a sense of the equanimity deepening, the other factor that helps it deepen is actually the mind tuning into how it feels. So it has a certain feeling-tone, equanimity, to it, a certain peacefulness, a certain stillness, and it’s the mind kind of tuning into that wavelength, that resonance, and just being there with it, noticing it, feeling it, opening to it, and enjoying it, enjoying it, that allows it to deepen, to settle in the being.

It’s interesting. For a lot of people, it’s really an acquired taste – deep calmness, deep stillness, deep equanimity. It’s really an acquired taste, because generally our sense of *oomph* in life, and *va-va-voom*, and you know, things we get excited about, are generally *not* in places of equanimity. They’re in places of the self getting really excited about something, either something that we take as good or something that we take as dreadful, so some big drama we’re caught in. And to steady and let the self kind of get quiet, and just stillness, and just stillness, and just equanimity – that can be, for many, many people, as I say, it’s an acquired taste.

And just to mention briefly, also, the place of *muditā*, of joy, in the deepening of equanimity. I don’t have time to go into this today, but joy, you know, whatever word you want – well-being, joy, deep nourishment, happiness, whatever word – that forms a basis for the being being able to really open to equanimity. Certainly in the *samādhi* it’s also a basis, but in one’s life, when there is more a sense of joy in one’s life, we are less dependent on the external circumstances being this way or that way. It makes less of an impact, because we feel like we have enough. And this is a very gradual journey for most people, and a very non-linear journey. But looking into: how is it that my well of joy, my reservoir of inner happiness, can be deepened in life? And so looking into: how does the being open to wonder? How does it open to the mystery of life, to the awe of things? What’s the place of art and music in that? What’s the place of our relationship with nature? All of that. Certainly the *mettā* and the compassion practice build those reservoirs over time, build the inner reservoirs of happiness.

Sometimes we lose our balance, we lose our equanimity in relationship to a situation either inner or outer, because we are caught up in future thinking, and “What will the future be? Will this situation get better? Will this person get better? Will this inner situation get better? This emotion, will it ever go

away? What's happening with my body, will it ever go away?" We're caught up in future thinking. And so, for instance, something like climate change, how much of what's going on with that and the way that we as a species are (*if we are*) addressing it, how much of that is actually caught up in the future thinking. The scenarios on the front page of the newspaper: what will it be like in 2056? It's a lot of future thinking, which is fine. There's a real skill in future thinking. So again, in Dharma practice as well, what will my life be like if I don't take care of the kind of intentions I have in life, of the kind of actions, of the kind of speech, of cultivating what is beautiful? How will I be in twenty, thirty years if I'm still alive? What will have happened to the heart? And you can see this in other people, over decades. I shouldn't say this, but one just sees in other people – they've been cultivating or not certain qualities, and as they get older, one sees the being.

And so sometimes future thinking is actually really skilful, to see: where does this lead? Where is how I'm living, what I'm choosing, where is it leading me in my heart? But sometimes future thinking is actually not that skilful, and it can be quite skilful to drop it, to just drop future thinking. Not compound a situation, build up a sense of problem, by kind of tacking on the future to it. So here's this difficult situation internally or externally, and I'm just kind of imagining it going on forever, or "When will it end?" Do you see what I mean? You're building a solidity to it by time concept. And this goes on without us even realizing it.

So sometimes it can be really skilful to practise shifting into another mode where one's just kind of snipping off the past and the future, and just seeing, "There's just this moment. There's just this moment." Experientially, existentially, that's all there can be. There's just this moment. And in this moment, all there can be is an impression in awareness, experientially. So I'm not saying anything about "there is a world or there isn't a world," but from a sort of meditator's contemplative perspective, all there is now is this impression in awareness, whatever sense it comes through.

So I can get caught up in the idea of losing things, or "my house" or "my this" or "my that." All my house can ever be is an impression in awareness in the moment. All my anything can be is an impression in awareness in the moment. We get so caught up in a sense of solidifying things in a way that experientially they're actually *not*. Now, of course that view has its limits, but as a skilful means in meditation, it's actually very skilful. Really practising that, the whole sense of life can shift, over time – this whole sense of life being not as substantial as we tend to take it. This is another kind of approach to emptiness. It's quite a popular approach, actually: just seeing things as impressions in awareness in the moment.

A slightly more sophisticated approach is seeing things as just perceptions. They're perceptions that are built, that are fabricated. So this practice that we've been doing this week, with directing kindness towards things, and sometimes the things fade – one actually sees that, through the lack of kindness or the lack of acceptance, a perception is actually getting built, it's getting fabricated or compounded, to use the Buddha's words, constructed in the moment. Without the mind doing something, that perception cannot be there. So something, whatever's going on, is just a perception. It's just fabricated. It's empty, in other words. It's empty.

So through our practice and through our life, when we begin to stop elevating certain things and putting down other things – whatever they are, inner experiences, or outer things, or other people, or situations or whatever – when that movement gets less, when there is less pushing away of what we

don't like and trying to keep or pull towards us what we do like, when that push and pull gets quieter (and it goes through a whole range of getting quieter, very, very subtle), this is the movement into equanimity. And similar to the practice that we're doing now, there can be, as the push and the pull gets quieter, there can be a kind of fading of experience. Things just get quieter. They make less of an impression in consciousness. They just begin to dissolve a little bit.

Sometimes they can dissolve completely. There's virtually nothing left. Sometimes there's just a little dissolving. Sometimes it's almost like the world has become a very soft, gentle flickering of sensation in a very quiet and spacious and relaxed way, and that's all that remains of the world. It's just a little burst here and a little burst there, of something that's almost nothing. That's a very deep level of equanimity.

And then, at that level, we may think, "Well, hasn't it completely turned round?" So used to think, used to define equanimity as being a steadiness in relation to what's difficult or what's great, or what's exciting or whatever, and the heart just stays steady. As the equanimity really deepens, not much really arises anyway. There's nothing really happening. So I can't really be equanimous in relation to what's difficult, because there's nothing there to be equanimous in relation to. It's gone. It's taken a whole different level of meaning.

If, sometimes, equanimity deepens to that kind of level, there's a real beauty in that. So again, sometimes we hear this word, 'equanimity,' and it's a strange word, as I said, and it can sound kind of cold and dry and grey or whatever. But to people committed to practice and open to that kind of thing, there really is a wonder in it and a beauty in it. There's a juiciness in it. I don't know any other word. It's not dry. It's absolutely not dry, and there's also love in it. There's absolutely love in it. In that state, there's a kind of non-separation. We're not building a sense of self and other, a sense of separation, by getting involved in this tussle, in this push and pull. In the non-separation, there's love, effortlessly.

There's a very important thing here. Sometimes, you know, describing kinds of experiences or states – it's not to snatch at the experience. What's much more important is the understanding. So sometimes there's an experience, sometimes there isn't; the more important thing is the understanding. And the understanding there is that, again, similar to the practice that we've been doing this week, how a thing appears depends on my relationship to it. Whether it appears at all depends on my relationship to it. How a thing is, then, depends on the push and the pull, and is inherently immeasurable. There is no *real* way it is. It's immeasurable.

So this is more important than a certain kind of experience. We're actually beginning to see into, in a very deep level, the immeasurability of all things. All things, so-called 'inner,' so-called 'outer,' their true nature is immeasurable. And that understanding begins to go deep in the being, and we really begin to understand that in an unshakeable way, and it's that understanding that brings the deepest equanimity. Because then whatever happens, we know that it's not real in its own right. It's actually immeasurable. And that brings a really deep equanimity, and also a really deep love, a really deep compassion. Because we see the universality of it all. That principle is something that applies to all consciousnesses – not even just human beings; all consciousnesses. Whenever there's a consciousness, the appearance of things to that consciousness depends on the push and the pull, the relationship with. And that's universal. That universality, seeing that, understanding that, brings equanimity, as I said, but brings very deep compassion, because it's got very deep wisdom with it.

Shall we just sit for a minute together?

Okay. So I do have some practical announcements, but we can take a little time, if you like, if there are any questions, either coming out of what was said now or some other talk or the practice right now. We have a little time if there are any questions.

### **Q1: equanimity through *samatha* or insight**

Yogi: In terms of generating *samādhī* and equanimity, is *samatha* the best approach to that?

Rob: Yeah, that's an important question, yeah. *Samatha* in the sense of taking one object, like the *mettā* or the compassion or the breath or whatever it is, and just going deep in that, yeah, eventually that will lead to a deepening, through different stages, and there will be equanimity. So that's one way. The other way is more a kind of insight way, and that would be what I touched on here – being conscious of grasping, of pushing, pulling, aversion, holding on, craving, etc., in the moment, and just relaxing that, finding a way to let go of the craving, the aversion in the moment. And then what happens is, craving and aversion is actually an agitation of the being, and so there is a relative degree of calmness. Then, potentially, I mean, you could call *that* a deepening of equanimity, but in that calmness, because of the calmness, the calmness allows a more subtle seeing, a deeper seeing, so one actually can sometimes pick up on more subtle levels of craving, grasping, aversion, clinging, and feel that, and let go of that. And so one way that the whole thing can deepen is just by getting more and more subtle with that. And at a certain point, it gets very subtle, and will include things like just taking some experience to be me or mine or whatever, and we'll go through a whole range of subtlety with that. So that would be going at it via an insight way.

Yogi: So in a more open, spacious way.

Rob: Exactly, yes. And so in the open, spacious technique, there's a degree of resting, but there's also some degree of *doing*, but the *doing* is a kind of letting go – one just keeps letting go, and then feeling the loveliness, the release of the letting go, and then feeling, “Ah, there's a bit more,” and letting go. So it's not a great sort of [huffing and puffing]; it's quite spacious. And there's just enough doing, in the letting go, to keep the space alive and soft and deepening in equanimity, all of those things. And some of the clinging gets extremely subtle, *extremely* subtle as you go deep into it. If you get really skilful at all of that, what you can do, especially if you have a background in *samatha* practice, is once that open space is there, it's almost like you can filter out the equanimity and choose to focus in on that, and then have a much more contained equanimity which is more like a deep state of absorption. That takes quite some practice, but it's possible, so one can actually move between these two – between a more open kind of equanimity.

### **Q2: which is best when the mind is distracted (*samatha* or insight)**

Yogi: Early on in the talk, you mentioned that a lack of equanimity is the sense of the mind sort of reaching out and grasping after things. If you're noticing that going on in yourself, which of the two approaches that you just described would you recommend?

Rob: If it's relatively gross, in the sense of I'm trying to concentrate on this thing and the mind keeps getting distracted by this and then that and then this and then that, and one feels like one can't keep the mind with the *mettā* practice, that sort of level, I would just keep doing the steadying of the mind with one object. If there's already a sense of steadiness, then that's enough steadiness to pick up on the sense of just how it feels to grasp after something or to push something away, and you can kind of feel it. If there's a bit more spaciousness, you feel it in the subtle, physical, in the subtle body sense. It's just a kind of contraction of the subtle body sense or a contraction of the sense of space, that it contracts when we grasp or push away, and one notices that and then one just lets go. If there's a bit more steadiness of the awareness, that's a really good way too. They're both valid, and in a way, the answer is really to experiment. So sometimes even in the course of trying to stay with one object, and there's a lot of restlessness or something, sometimes the best way is just to be more open – feel the pull of that restlessness, so that you actually feel it as a “Ungh,” and you just relax it.

Yogi: Yeah, it's like there's almost like a feeling of suffering that's coming out of that and ...

Rob: Yeah, yeah, that's great.

Yogi: [?] You said when there's a degree of spaciousness already. I'm just feeling the push and pull and the suffering that's in it.

Rob: I would just feel free to experiment with both ways. Feeling the suffering is important because, in a way, there's a lot of insight in this approach. What we begin to realize is that something's catching our attention in the environment, maybe, that's very simple – a pain in the body. It's unpleasant. There's a pushing away of it through aversion, and there's suffering there. And actually noticing, feeling the suffering. Sometimes it's very subtle suffering that we're talking about. Sometimes it's less subtle. But sometimes it can be just the sense of contraction is a sense of suffering. And one notices that when there's pushing or pulling or aversion, there's suffering there. As I relax that, the suffering goes. And being actually sensitive to the suffering and the release of suffering is really key in the deepening of equanimity. So there's a real sensitivity to suffering and its release, and suffering and its release, and suffering and its release, as the process deepens. So it's actually good to be sensitive in that way.

In the moment, which will be the right approach, it's hard to say. And it's more a question of which practice you're kind of doing at the time. It can be quite important to have, “This is the practice that I'm doing. This is what I'm doing 90 per cent of the time, and this is my sort of emergency backup practice that I'm taking out in emergencies.” [laughter] And then, you know, when I'm trying to stay with the *mettā* or whatever, and it's really not happening today or this sitting, and I've been plugging away for forty minutes, half an hour, whatever it is, okay, now I plug in the other practice. Other times, the more spacious practice is the main one, it's really not happening, and I need to settle the mind with

one object. But it's good to have like one thing: "This is what I'm doing. The other one's a backup." That will help, I think.

*[Transcriber's note: this ending was followed by some practical retreat information, omitted in this transcript.]*