

11 EQUANIMITY

23rd August 2000

In the last week somebody asked me to give a talk about *upekkhā*, equanimity. The subject of *upekkhā* is something which I rarely talk about because it's very profound, and how to apply it to one's daily practice of meditation needs to be understood very well. Obviously, the best *upekkhā* is that which happens after the attainment of the end of craving. We can say that the one who has ended all craving is not out there to manipulate the world except out of compassion and loving-kindness. They will most usually practise *upekkhā*, this looking on, this gazing on the world without being involved. However, that's the exalted state of an *Arahant* and in the meantime we have to know how we can use this concept, this practice, this *upekkhā*, in our daily lives, especially in the practice of meditation.

Lessening the Defilements

Upekkhā can be very easily misinterpreted as just allowing the defilements to roll along without getting involved. One of the problems with the idea of *upekkhā* in the face of defilements is that sometimes, without enough clarity of mindfulness, without enough wisdom, one really thinks that one is looking on when in actual fact one is doing something. Sometimes the degree of mindfulness, the degree of clarity of the mind, to really discern whether one is practising equanimity or not, is not high enough. So, we have to be very careful with this practise of equanimity.

People often think that if they just leave the defilements alone and do nothing, just watch and practise equanimity, then if lust or anger come up they will just be equanimous about it. They think this is just the way things are, the way things happen; they think they are letting go. *But in truth they are not letting go*; they are feeding the defilements, the three *kilesas*, sensory desire, ill will, and delusion. By feeding these defilements we can see that we're not really practising equanimity.

One of Ajahn Chah's beautiful descriptions of equanimity is the simile of the leaves on the tree. The leaves on the tree shake, they move backwards and forwards, but only when there is a wind. If the wind dies down or the tree is protected from it so

that the air around it is not moving, then the leaves will move less and less, until eventually they will stop. So the sign that equanimity is actually being practised is that stillness grows in the mind, peace is developing, and the mind is becoming more and more empty of movement. We know that equanimity is being practised because things start to get more peaceful.

So bearing that in mind, we can see that the practice of equanimity in the early stages is done as a skilful means for overcoming some of the defilements that arise from time to time. First of all we must recognise that things like ill will and anger are never justified. Things like sensory desire are always missing the point of the holy life. We need to recognise that underneath all these defilements is a huge amount of delusion. Sometimes we buy into that delusion by believing ourselves and arguing with the teacher, or arguing with the teaching and believing in the delusion. It's wonderful to have the humility to be able to admit, "No, I'm not a Stream Winner yet, I'm not an *Anāgāmi*, and I'm not an *Arahant*". When we acknowledge that to ourselves, so that we do realise that we don't know, then we can have more trust and faith in the teachings of the Buddha and our teachers. Bearing that in mind, the teachings of the Buddha show you that you can know whether the path is being trodden. You can know whether you are practising the right way. You are practising the right way if the defilements get less and less.

We understand that the path to lessening those defilements is the using of all the skilful means that the Buddha gave to us, in particular the Eightfold Path. This particular practice of equanimity must be related to the Four Right Efforts. This was one of the aspects of the Eightfold Path which confused me for many years. How can you put forth effort and then practise equanimity at the same time? Surely *sammā vāyāma*, right effort, is the opposite of equanimity where you're supposed to do nothing. But a closer examination of the meaning of the Four Right Efforts – the striving, grabbing hold of the mind, initiating energy and working hard to abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen, keeping unwholesome states yet to arise from entering the mind, developing wholesome states of mind and maintaining those wholesome states of mind that have already arisen – is needed. How you apply them really depends upon the goal that you want to achieve. You want to abandon and

keep out unwholesome states and arouse and maintain wholesome states of mind, but how you do that depends upon the circumstances. There are times when we grab hold of the mind and we actually do something and there are times when we just practise equanimity; it's knowing when to do what and that makes one a skilful practitioner.

It's like the pain we experience from time to time in monastic life, the physical pain and the pain of disappointments, the pain of doing things we don't want to do. All those things are problems for the mind. We can do one of two things. We can try and overcome the obstacles, try and work hard to do something. But sometimes there is nothing we can do and then we need equanimity. Very often that's the case with physical pain; you go to the doctor, you try to do exercises, you try to change your diet. Sometimes it works but often it doesn't. So the practice of effort means that there are times when we try to do something, but if there is nothing that can be done, then we have to practice equanimity.

Developing Equanimity

Equanimity doesn't mean just to endure. Equanimity should always be practised alongside investigation because otherwise it will not be able to be maintained and will turn into more problems. Equanimity that is practised alongside investigation – especially with pain – means you are not going to try and get rid of the unpleasant physical feelings, nor are you going to just grit your teeth. Equanimity should be done with a sense of interest, with a sense of investigation, with a sense of curiosity, finding out what these things really are. That is a good way of dealing with *dukkha vedanā*, physical pain: you watch it with equanimity. You watch it in the same way that a scientist needs to watch an experiment, without a vested interest in what they are going to find. Because, if you're looking for something, if you're looking to prove your pet theory, then you'll never have that evenness of mind, you'll never have the equanimity to be really able to see the truth. You'll only see what you're looking for. That's what delusion is.

With equanimity you have to put aside all prejudgement and all the past, because prejudgements arise from our past experiences and past biases. Practising equanimity you have to look upon the object that you find painful as if seeing it for the first time. If you can do that then you really can see that thing clearly and you can investigate it

and find out what that pain really means and how it works. It gives you a lot of freedom, especially in monastic life, to understand this thing called pain. As you get older the physical pain will increase and the physical body will be less able to overcome it. It will get worse and worse until you die. That's your future, my future, and everybody's future.

So you have to have some understanding of physical pain and discomfort. That's body awareness, body contemplation, because that is where that physical pain usually arises. If we can do this – look on pain with equanimity and investigation – we can gain a lot of freedom from pain and the fear of pain. So often pain is fearsome because we never really know it. We are always running away from it, trying to overcome it, never stopping to look at it with equanimity to find out exactly what it is. The Buddha said there are two aspects to pain, two thorns, a mental thorn and a physical thorn. You can take out the mental thorn because the mental thorn is due to wanting, not being at peace with, and not accepting the physical pain. That's something you can control. Very often you can do nothing about the physical pain; it's there until you die. But taking away that mental thorn, that mental dart, is something you can do from time to time. The *Arahant* does it all the time but with the *puthujjana*, the ordinary person, and even with the *Anāgāmi* or the Steam Winner, sometimes that thorn is still there. But you can pull it out so that you really are looking on with equanimity. As I said earlier, you know you have equanimity in the mind when everything gets peaceful, when there is no struggle anymore.

When there is no craving, when there is no desire to have any more than you have right now, full equanimity gives rise to a beautiful stillness and peace in the mind. And of course the deep reason for this is that the 'doer' cannot coexist with equanimity. *Pure equanimity is clear and bright consciousness, without the 'doer.'* Many people think they have equanimity, but if they are still doing things, it's not really equanimity, it's not just looking on, it's looking on and getting involved.

So, we can practise equanimity with physical pain. We can also practise it with some of the things that we have to do, things we don't like, things that we disagree with. We can do this to overcome that 'fault-finding' mind, which I talk so much about in this monastery. I talk so much about it because it is one of the big obstacles to living

happily in a monastery, or in any community; it's a great problem for living happily and gaining deep meditation. When one is sitting on one's cushion that fault-finding mind is one of the big obstacles, and you can understand that the fault finding mind is very far removed from equanimity, from just looking on. With the fault-finding mind you are dealing with *saññā*, perception. Perception is searching out things to complain about. It's a fascinating aspect of the mind to be able to see, to be able to capture this essence, because you see that this creates so much suffering and disappointment and problems for you now and for lifetimes to come. Why is it that the mind is bent on finding faults? Sure the faults are there, but they are surrounded by things that we can be grateful for, things that we can develop loving kindness towards, things that we can develop the beautiful *nimmitta* towards, things we can be at peace with. Why is it that so many human beings incline towards finding faults? They find faults with their fellows in the holy life, find faults in the monastery, find faults in themselves, find faults in the Dhamma, and find faults in the meditation cushions. 'It's not good enough, they're too lumpy'. You can see that the fault-finding mind creates work. It creates conflict; it creates things to do; and it goes in the opposite direction to peace.

If, when we look at something which we cannot change in the monastery, or in our daily lives, when there is something which is irritating us – I'm not talking about physical pain, I'm talking about irritations in the schedule, in the routine etc. – when we can't change it we can develop equanimity towards it. We know we have equanimity towards that irritation if the mind starts to become peaceful again. There's nothing we can do, so we do nothing. We just sit and be with it, and if it's true equanimity there's a lack of activity for the mind and it's fully accepted. The mind is just looking on. The 'doer', the fault-finding mind, has ceased and the mind has developed a sense of stillness and peace.

When you start sitting in meditation and something is irritating you – whether it's a thought from the past, in the bottom, or it's too cold or too hot in your room – if you can't change it, if you can't do anything about it, try to develop equanimity. For many years in my early life as a monk I practised that by using a mantra called "No desire! No desire! No desire!" I would use that mantra in the way that I encourage all

mantras, all words of instructions, to be used. I would mentally say it, but I would also listen to it afterwards: listen to its echo and observe my mind, looking in the direction those words were pointing and following in that direction. If I said, “No desire!” I would watch my mind following obediently and having no desire for a few seconds, then I would have to say it again to remind the mind. “No desire, no desire, no desire!” means no ‘doer’, it is letting go. However, I did notice that sometimes it didn’t work and the reason was that the mindfulness, the clarity, was not strong enough to be able to do that. I thought I was doing “No desire!” but there were underlying desires, underlying currents of craving, which I couldn’t see, which I hadn’t as yet perceived in my mental landscape.

It was only later that I realised why it didn’t work. I could get rid of the worst of the defilements, the cravings, and the doings, so at least I could get to some degree of peacefulness. But certainly I hadn’t given up my desire. To be aware of desire, to be aware of the five-sense world – that underlying craving to see, hear, feel, smell, and to touch – is to understand those underlying cravings are not touched by that lesser degree of letting go. That is the reason, I found afterwards that the superficial equanimity needed a bit more power. You have to find a way, a means, to take the mind from the world of activity into the world of letting go, into the world of equanimity.

Deepening Equanimity

The way to develop deeper equanimity is to develop the gradual perception of happiness. To see the happiness of not doing, the happiness of equanimity, you have to turn off the switches of doing, controlling, and desire one by one in the correct order. Then you start to see that concern with the past and the future is nothing to do with equanimity at all, nothing to do with just looking on. You are the one sending the mind off to the future, and you are the one sending it to the past.

I remember the meditation instructions of the great teachers in Thailand, they always said ‘don’t send the mind here and there’. Those great teachers realised that it wasn’t the mind going there by itself, but that you the meditator were actually sending it there. You were ordering it there. However, many people lacked the mindfulness to see that. They were responsible for the mind going off to the future or the past. They

were willing it to go. It was them willing it away from the present moment. With deeper mindfulness, with deeper awareness, you could actually see that the mind would naturally stay in the present moment if you let it. It was only when you were interested, when you valued the past, or when you were interested in or valued the future, that you would send it somewhere else. So, seeing with deeper clarity just why the mind wandered off you could develop equanimity. Having equanimity towards the past, equanimity towards the future, in the sense that you weren't concerned with it, the mind would settle into the present moment all by itself. You had turned off the switch of 'doing the past' and 'doing the future', in the same way that tourists who go over to France or England, 'do France', 'do England', or 'do the United States'.

So you're done with all that 'doing', finished with all that travelling into the past and future. With that degree of non-doing you can see that the next thing which you have to give up is thinking. Because we value thinking, don't ever get the idea that you'll just watch the thinking and it'll stop. Don't think you'll just be equanimous about it, or that you'll just see where the thinking goes. It will go everywhere. That won't stop it because you're not really equanimous to the thinking process. If you were equanimous and you didn't really care about thinking, it would stop. But because you care about it, because you value it, because you give it some degree of importance, because you 'will' it along by thinking 'this is interesting', 'this is fascinating', you continue to get lost in thought.

Thought is always one-sided. It is never the full description of a person or an event. Often in my life I've followed thought and assumed that it could describe the person I was thinking about. Not so. But at least I gained the insight that I could never judge another person, I could never figure them out; thinking could not do that. I knew it had been quite arrogant of me, and extremely stupid, to believe in any of the thoughts I may have had about another human being. Straightaway that got rid of all justification for anger and ill will towards others. Instead I started to disbelieve thinking and take away its value. Then I had equanimity, I wasn't trying to 'do thinking', I wasn't sending the mind off after thinking.

Looking on is not talking about what you're looking at; it's just looking, nothing else,

just observing. Surely the thinking mind has to stop with the deepening of equanimity, with the deepening of just looking, just observing. You're coming close to what is traditionally called the silent observer. It's a very good metaphor for a deepening of equanimity, the deepening of *upekkhā*. The silent observer is someone who can look without saying anything. It's very hard for a person to do that in the world. People look and they give their opinion or they give their orders. They say what should be done. Even in this monastery it's very hard for someone to do anything without giving their input into how it can be done better. Often in fact, it's how it can be done worse, but we all think we know how it can be done better. Why do we do that? Don't we want to have simple lives? It's enough having one abbot in the monastery without having twenty or thirty abbots. If you really want to be an abbot just come along and I'll give you the job!

One of the nice things about being a junior monk is that you are not required to make any decisions; all you need to do is just go and sit in your hut all day. However, when you are the junior monk you want to make the decisions. And then when you're the senior monk and have to make the decisions, it's the last thing you want to do. So, that's just the craziness of life. Equanimity is just bare attention, just watching, just looking and overcoming the thinking mind. If you're practising equanimity things have to stop and one of the things that should stop is thought. Then you're in the centre with equanimity. That means equilibrium, not in the past or in the future, just right now in the present moment; it's centring the mind.

Thoughts always take the mind away from the centre or away from the present moment. Thoughts are usually old: you are trying to describe and find some meaning for what happened in the past, which disappeared many moments ago in the equilibrium of the present moment. The still mind starts to go from one sense base to another. What makes the mind go from one sense base to another? So often it's a lack of the deepening of equanimity because there is still a sense of control – there is a sense of interest in what's happening in the ears, the body, the toes. That interest goes in the opposite direction to equanimity. We have to be able to take one object, the breath, and have just bare attention on the breath, just looking on it without trying to control it.

How often is it that people start to meditate and they can't get the breath to be calm and peaceful? You know the reason for that, it's because they are still controlling. Controlling the breath makes it very unpleasant. Leave it alone, let it go, don't be concerned about it, and then it's very easy. Why is it that when we are listening to a talk, eating lunch, or walking back from the dining room to our huts, we breathe quite naturally, quite easily, quite comfortably? That is because we are not really paying any attention. Why is it that when we pay attention to things they start to get uncomfortable? The reason is because when we pay attention we tend to get involved. It's the 'doer', the 'controller' again. It's the doer and the controller acting in such a subtle way that many people can't see it. They are trying to make the breath peaceful and quiet but it doesn't become peaceful and quiet. Why is that? It is because we are trying to do it; we are not practising equanimity; we are actually doing something.

In the same way when there is pain in the body, or when there's irritation in our monastic life, when there is irritation in the breath that we're watching, try equanimity, *upekkhā*. Don't try to change the way the breath is going in and out. Don't try to make it longer or shorter or smoother or whatever: even if it's uncomfortable be equanimous with it. Just leave the breath alone; just watch and investigate. Be curious about what's happening now. If we can practise that degree of looking on with equanimity, with real *upekkhā*, then it's a great tool for our meditation. If the breath starts to be quiet and starts to smooth out and become comfortable, that's a sign you've been practising *upekkhā*. You know what *upekkhā* means and you also know how to apply it. When we practise *upekkhā* on the uncomfortable breath it turns into a very comfortable peaceful breath.

We gain a lot of insight with such experiences because that degree of *upekkhā* can actually develop the breath into the 'beautiful breath'. If you want the breath to be beautiful what should you do next? Practise *upekkhā*, just look on, just wait, be patient, don't try to do anything. The 'doer' comes from the fault-finding mind: when it sees faults it's not satisfied, it's not content, and it's going to do something about it. That's the nature of the fault-finding mind, it's a condition for doing. Once we have *upekkhā*, there's no fault-finding. We are just looking without judging,

without valuing, without weighing one against the other. We are not weighing the ordinary breath against the beautiful breath. We are not weighing the beautiful breath against the *nimmitta*. We are not weighing *nimmittas* against *jhānas*. We are not weighing anything or evaluating; we are just looking on to see what happens. And if we have done *upekkhā* enough to turn the uncomfortable breath into a comfortable breath, then we can very easily continue that degree of *upekkhā*, that ‘just looking’ aspect of the mind, just *upekkhā, upekkhā, upekkhā*. You’ll notice the breath will get beautiful all by itself. It will get soft and peaceful, slow and refined. It will become calm because this is what *upekkhā* does.

Upekkhā takes the business away, takes all disturbances away. It takes the wind from the leaf so that the leaf wobbles and shakes less and less. This is just what you’re seeing, the mind vibrating less and less as it gets more and more still, as it gets more and more beautiful, as it gets more and more energy. But be careful in these stages: when you start to get energy in the beautiful breath and lots of bliss comes up, that can excite the mind. And so instead of looking on with *upekkhā* you start to get excited. Looking on with excitement. “Wow! This is really good; at last I’m getting somewhere.” That’s not *upekkhā*, that’s another type of wind, and it starts to shake the leaf again.

The Perfection of Equanimity

If you develop *upekkhā* from the very beginning you can very easily carry it though as an important aspect of your attention. Remember also, *upekkhā* is just looking closely. Be very careful here that when the breath becomes refined, you don’t get lost in a lack of mindfulness, where you can’t really see clearly what’s going on. If you cultivate *upekkhā*, it’s a very clear seeing, but a very silent seeing. It’s like seeing just with eyes and having no hands to mess things up, just the armless seer. If you can do this then everything starts to happen as a natural process because the ‘doer’ has been taken away and you are just looking on with *upekkhā*.

When the beautiful parts of the meditation start to happen, the beautiful breath and the *nimmitta* start to come up, the mind doesn’t wobble and shake because it’s been set up with *upekkhā*. The mind is generating the ability to just look on clearly without

getting involved, just being a spectator to the whole process. And if you are just a spectator to the whole process, the process takes over and carries you into beautiful *nimittas*: you don't care if that turns into a *jhāna*, whether it disappears, or where it goes or what it does, because your job is just to look. You're a passive observer, just like a person in an aeroplane looking out of the window, you can't tell the pilot to go faster or to go slower. The pilot will go according to his own reasons; your job is just to look out of the window. With *upekkhā*, this is what you're doing just looking out of the window of the mind on to all these beautiful things happening. And if you're just looking on, you're looking without fear, without excitement, without doing anything. With real *upekkhā* there is no fear, there is no excitement. If any fear or excitement comes up it means you've lost the *upekkhā*.

Using *upekkhā* as the key you can enter into the *jhānas*. *Upekkhā* becomes an inclination of the mind. With that inclination of the mind prominent, when you enter the first *jhāna*, that will take you through the wobble of the mind. The wobble of *vitakkavicāra* in the mind, even though it's subtle and pre-verbal will be seen by *upekkhā* will see that as 'doing', as a movement of the mind. The inclination to *upekkhā* will unlock and discard that last bit of 'doing', and develop into the second *jhāna* where there is absolute stillness. *Upekkhā* will discard the bliss of the second *jhāna*: bliss that is so joyful, so what! *Upekkhā* will look and, because it's just looking and inclining towards bliss but not giving it any more energy, just like the leaf it will begin to wobble less and less, until the bliss will just give way to the most refined happiness you've ever experienced. If the inclination towards *upekkhā* has been strong in the beginning been maintained in the middle, it will be the cause for the abandoning of happiness and the consequent abiding in the fourth *jhāna*, where there is just the perfection of *upekkhā*, pure mindfulness, with no doing or movement of the mind.

In the fourth *jhāna* you have the summit of *upekkhā* and, if you can experience something like that, then you know the full meaning of the word *upekkhā*. By developing immaterial *jhānas*, eventually the *upekkhā* of equanimity, ceases too. When one emerges after experiences such as that, it underscores the problem of this thing we call the 'doer'. You start to see what we call the 'doer' and why *upekkhā* is

so difficult to attain. It is because the ‘doer’, as well as consciousness, is taken to be a self, to be me, to be mine. It is my problem, something that I am concerned about, something that is so close to me. It is something that we cling to no matter what.

Conclusion

We have to see though the practise of *upekkhā* that all these things have to disappear so we can uncover the truth of *anattā*, non-self. There is nobody in here; the five *khandhas* are just completely empty. There is no one who owns these *khandhas*. These *khandhas* don’t constitute a self or a soul; there is nothing there. And then through the experience of *upekkhā*, we get so close that we can see these truths. As soon as those truths are seen, *upekkhā* becomes just a natural manifestation of that insight. When we see that there is no one who owns any of this, why should we cling to those things when we know that they are just the play of nature? Why should we try and do all of this? This is the understanding at long last that the rain will come down and the sun will shine according to nature. Who can predict it? No one can. We then stop craving for a sunny day or craving for rain. It’s foolish to crave for such things. They are completely out of our control. In the same way we stop craving for pleasure and pain. We stop craving for things to be this way or that way according to our convenience. What about other people’s convenience? Why do we always want things to be our way? In the end we know we can’t get our own way, so we give up, we let go, we abandon, and develop that equanimity to the world we know we cannot control. All that we can do is guide it from time to time.

The *Arahant* has been through that process, has seen the value of equanimity and how equanimity is an Enlightenment factor. The occurrence of that equanimity will manifest as the *Brahmavihāras*, as beautiful loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. If there is something to do then they will do something for others, to try and encourage that same equanimity. When there is that full equanimity established, then there are no more *kamma* formations manifesting. That which creates rebirth, the distinction between pleasure and pain, distinction between what I like and what I don’t like, all that is disappearing, and there is just equanimity. With that degree of equanimity, looking on with curiosity, you can see so easily that the causes of rebirth have disappeared. Equanimity is like the fire going out; it’s cool.