

Karma & the Sublime Attitudes

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Try to maintain the intention to stay focused on your breath. What this means is that as distractions come up, you have a choice. You can go with the distraction or you can stay with the breath. So keep reminding yourself that staying with the breath will accomplish a lot more. The distractions may be interesting, they may be entertaining, they may insist on their importance, but you have to remind yourself that you have more important work to do. You're trying to develop your powers of mindfulness, your powers of alertness, your concentration, because these powers will allow you to develop your discernment. The discernment is what frees the mind—frees it from all the restrictions it places on itself, all the unnecessary burdens and suffering it places on itself.

So the results of staying here much longer-lasting, much more solid than whatever pleasure you might get by following your distractions. As you stay with the breath, you can see your intentions a lot more clearly and you're in a better position to act on skillful ones.

The problem is that, as you go through daily life, it's harder to stay focused like this. You have to keep reminding yourself of your values so that when you catch yourself choosing something unskillful, you can pull yourself back. And among the helpful values that we keep in mind are the sublime attitudes that we chanted just now. Goodwill: a wish for happiness. Compassion: a wish that those who are suffering can put an end to their suffering; that those who are creating the causes for suffering can stop. And empathetic joy: wishing that those who are already happy and well-off may stay that way, and that those who are creating the causes for happiness and well-being will continue in their efforts. Those first three of the sublime attitudes go together: wishes for happiness applied to different circumstances.

Goodwill wishes happiness for all beings in general. Compassion wishes happiness for those who are suffering. Empathetic joy wishes continued happiness for those who are already happy.

Equanimity, the fourth sublime attitude, is something else. You may have noticed in the chant that with goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy, the phrases all begin with “may, may, may.” “May this happen.” “May they be this way.” With equanimity, though, there's simply a statement of fact: People will receive the results of their actions for good or for ill. Equanimity is the reality check for the other three. When we're dealing with people that we want to make happy but we can't do it, we have to realize there are times when it's going to be beyond us.

Even the Buddha couldn't help everybody in the world. On the night of his awakening, he saw beings on all levels of the cosmos. He realized that he'd be able to reach only some of those beings. As he said, he was the foremost teacher for those fit to be tamed—in other words, those

ready to train themselves—realizing there were a lot of beings who were not ready to train themselves yet. He had to develop equanimity toward those he couldn't train so that he could focus his energies on those he could.

This is why we say equanimity is the reality check. Our desire for the happiness for all living beings can be infinite, but the actual happiness that's going to be coming about as a result of our actions will be finite. We have to keep that in mind so that we can focus our finite energies in the areas that would be most productive.

Now, this doesn't mean we give up easily. There will be cases where it'll be difficult to have compassion, difficult to have empathetic joy, when there are people you know who have been acting in unskillful ways and are now reaping the results of their unskillful actions: suffering. You still have to have compassion for them. You can't simply say, "Well, they deserve what they got." After all, some people do have the potential to get out of that suffering. That teaching on equanimity doesn't say that people suffer because they've done something that makes them deserve to suffer, simply that they have some actions in their past that lead to suffering. Yet they may have lots of other actions that lead in the opposite direction, to happiness, which may not be showing their results yet. But maybe, if you give them some help, those good actions may start showing their results.

Sometimes the teaching on karma is said to be hard-hearted. If you see somebody suffering and people think that karma is just, the thought is, "They simply deserve to suffer, so leave them be." But that's not the case. Karma is complex. Think about all the many actions you do in the course of the day—all the different intentions and choices you act on. You're creating all kinds of karma all the time. Everybody is creating all kinds of karma all the time. So when you see somebody suffering, then even though you know they've been doing unskillful things, you hold in mind the thought that maybe they have some skillful potential, too. It's only when you try to help and run into obstacles that you may decide, "This person is beyond me." That's where you develop equanimity.

Empathetic joy can be difficult at times as well. Somebody has a happiness that you would like to have but you don't have. Empathetic joy means that you're not jealous, you're not envious. You don't resent their happiness. After all, here you are saying, "May all beings be happy," but then when somebody actually is happy, you don't like it. Empathetic joy is the test for the honesty of your goodwill.

Then, of course, there are people who are happy and well-off and behaving in unskillful ways. With them, you have to develop a double attitude: compassion for their lack of skill, empathetic joy for the results of their past good actions. That can also be chastening. Here you're seeing an example of someone who did good things at some point in the past and is reaping the results of those good things but has now become unskillful. It should make you stop and think about your own self, trying to create the causes for happiness but the happiness hasn't yet reached a noble level. In other words, your discernment hasn't freed you from a lot of

the things that would keep the mind trapped and fettered. Even happiness doesn't protect you from starting to be unskillful again. It's chastening, this thought. It's a good motivation to want to focus your efforts on developing a happiness that's more noble, more solid, more reliable.

When, while you're trying to develop compassion and empathetic joy, you run across cases where you can't help the other person, either to become happy or to maintain happiness, that's when you have to develop equanimity. This is the equanimity of a good doctor who realizes that he can't solve all the cases in the world. But if he lets his heart get broken over all the cases he can't solve, he won't have the energy to help the cases he might have been able to solve. So for the people who come to him and have the karma that allows him to help—and he himself has the karma that allows him to help them—he should think of that as a precious opportunity. It's not always there. Make the most of it and don't let yourself get distracted by things you can't control or where you can't be of help.

Because, as I said, karma is complex. The combination of the patient's karma to be in a position where he or she can be cured, and the doctor's karmic connection with that patient: It doesn't always happen that these things are in alignment. So when they are, focus your energies there and don't get frustrated by the cases where your karma is not in alignment at that time. It may happen at some time later. Or, when things line up for that particular patient, the karmic alignment may have to involve another doctor.

This is the sign of wisdom among doctors: when a doctor has a patient and yet he knows that he's not the doctor for that patient. Maybe somebody else is. That requires a certain amount of humility. It's all the better part of wisdom—because that's what equanimity is in the brahmaviharas: the voice of wisdom. It keeps reminding you that you have to understand your karma, you have to understand the karma of others, realizing in both cases that it's quite complex. You can't let simplistic emotions get in the way of making the most of your karmic opportunities.

As the Buddha taught it, karma has nothing to do with the popular conception where karma is bad karma or bad fate coming to you. The Buddha taught karma as the power we have here in the present moment to shape our lives and to take advantage of the opportunities that come our way to do something really skillful with our abilities.

We do make choices.

We are responsible for the choices.

So we live in a world where our lives have meaning.

If we couldn't make choices, if we'd be just like machines. Or if everything were preordained, predetermined, we'd be like machines. Life would have no meaning at all, just as the running of a machine has no meaning. But the fact that we can make choices and there are choices that have consequences—they shape our world, they shape our lives, they make a difference: That gives meaning to our lives. It offers us the possibility to give as much meaning

to our lives as we can. We're the people who decide what do our lives mean. What are we alive for? The choice is ours.

That's the wisdom that lies behind equanimity. Equanimity is not simply indifference. It's an acceptance of our responsibilities, it's an acceptance of some limitations on our abilities, but it's not meant to stop there. It's when we accept our limitations that we sometimes can find our way around them. Or, at the very least, make the most of the opportunities we *do* have.

That's why the Buddha taught karma in particular and why he taught it in general. People can change themselves. They can change the world. Even if it's within limits, those changes are meaningful. This is why we meditate: to give ourselves the wisdom, the strength, and the clarity of insight needed to make the best use of that power.