

5_27_26 Talk*

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[00:00:00] What I've chosen to talk about is equanimity as an expression of love. And we'll see how far I get in a half an hour. We may move on to other things. There are a lot of other dimensions of equanimity that I'd be delighted to explore with you, or maybe we'll do that another time. Um, and... I also want to take advantage of the fact that we're a Dharma group tonight.

[00:00:38] So often I'm presenting in academic or mainstream audiences and I kind of can't go quite as deep in the Dharma as I might like with that group. So I feel I'm hoping that we can do that here tonight in terms of equanimity. And I'll just say briefly that I originally planned to write a book on equanimities just from a Buddhist perspective, but the book had its own ideas. And those of you who are authors, I'm sure can relate. And the book became much broader and I explored equanimity through. All the Dharmic religions, all the Abrahamic religions through philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and even spoke with a politician and looked at equanimity through the perspective of activism. So I looked at it through a lot of different angles. But tonight I want to focus a little more on the Buddhist perspective on equanimity. And it's also true that Buddhism has more to say about equanimity really than any other tradition, except perhaps the Dharmic traditions. There's a lot about equanimity in Hinduism and in some of the kind of Chinese, Taoist and Confucian traditions.

[00:02:22] But Buddhism has really unpacked equanimity. And some of you may know that it appears on a lot of lists. You know, we Buddhists love our lists and equanimity often has a prized place kind of as the ultimate quality of the list.

[00:02:48] And the list that we're gonna be focusing on tonight is the four immeasurables. And I'm gonna be talking about equanimity from the perspective of the four immeasurables. So you notice, and I saw a note that came up, two notes. Can I please explain equanimity? I've done a lot of book talks in the last few months, and that's always the first question. It seems like an obvious question. It's a little less obvious than it appears. Because equanimity can be understood in several different ways.

[00:03:33] And we're gonna focus tonight on equanimity as an expression of love, but that's not the only definition of equanimity. And I think this is why, in some ways, not as much has been written or shared about equanimity as the other Brahma Viharas. Because it's pretty subtle, it's quite profound, and like a prism, it has a number of different aspects through which we can understand it. So just to get this off your minds, those of you who want some conceptual framework to begin a definition of equanimity, I tend to think of it as the capacity to fully feel everything, all of life's experience without being caught in reactivity. That's the simplest definition of equanimity, but it's one that bears a lot of unpacking. I'll do a little unpacking of it before we move into equanimity as an expression of love.

[00:05:04] And the one thing that I think is really important to qualify this definition of equanimity, I made up a new word, uncaughtness, un-caught-ness as a synonym for equanimity, un caught-ness. The qualification of this that's really important that I discovered as I looked deeply into a more kind of granular understanding of what equanimity really shows up like in our day-to-day lives. And that is that at some moments, we simply are not hijacked by experience. So we develop what Dan Siegel calls the

window of tolerance that I'm sure many of you are familiar with, a wonderful expression for increasing this bandwidth. To tolerate a stronger and stronger stimuli without being disturbed by it. So that's one fundamental way of thinking about equanimity.

[00:06:34] However, what's important to add to this is that equanimity can also be understood by shortening our recovery time when we are hijacked, because the reality is we will always be hijacked. None of us are likely to develop the mind of a Buddha in this lifetime that is never disturbed by provocative stimuli. And in fact, I'm doing a bit of a digression here before I get into equanimity. As an expression of love. So this is part of the extemporaneous part of this talk. So bear with me. In fact, the research that I lean on for this comes from Richie Davidson's lab, from Antoine Lutz in particular. They were, in Madison, the first people to really look at the brains of adept meditators in real time with fMRIs in the lab. This was seminal research that happened quite some time ago. And one of the things that they saw, and these were people with more than 10,000 hours of experience and meditating, and we know since then, you know, Minjer Rinpoche, I think Sokny Rinpoche, a number of people were in Ritchie's lab for these experiments. When they showed them provocative stimuli in real time with their looking at what was happening in their brains through fMRIs, they discovered that these adept meditators actually had bigger responses to provocative stimuli, bigger. Rather than smaller, but that they recovered more quickly and there was less anticipatory anxiety for the next provocative image. This is very, very important actually for all of us mortal humans when we think about equanimity as a quality that's accessible to all of use.

[00:09:11] It's certainly true that with all of your mindfulness practice, and I'm sure a lot of you have experienced this, you are increasing your window of tolerance. You're not as reactive as you used to be, right? You have a greater bandwidth before you get activated. But you do get activated, right, it happens. And so we can understand equanimity. There's a term for this in psychology called affective chronometry. Affective in terms of emotion, chronometry in terms time. How quickly do we recover? This is another wonderful way of thinking about equanimity. And going back to our guided meditation that we did together, I emphasized contraction. Expansion, and balance. Because we lose balance all the time. With every step we take, we lose balance and we regain it. And this is part of nature.

[00:10:27] So with equanimity too, we lose balance and we regain it. Regaining it more quickly is a hallmark of equanimity. Okay, so that was a long digression before talking about equanimity as an expression of love. So the Brahmaviharas, I'm assuming that you all know what they are. I'm going to repeat them. The first is loving-kindness or metta. The second is compassion, karuna. The third is sympathetic joy, mudita. And the fourth is acronymity, or UPECA. And I recently was interviewed by Sharon Salzberg and James Shaheen for Tricycle Magazine has a podcast. And Sharon said, you know, when I first encountered the Brahma Viharas, the four measurables, I couldn't figure out what Akut Numiti was doing there because the first three. Really seemed about love, but equanimity didn't really. I see somebody nodding your head, and I felt the same way.

[00:11:47] So let's talk about how equanimities fits with these other three expressions of love. Frank Ostrowsky, the Zen teacher some of you may know from the Bay Area, talks about the Brahma Viharas as four flavors of love. I really like this, four flavors love. So we're going to go through them and see how equanimity can be a flavor of love The first flavor of love is the one we think we all know. Which is metta or loving-kindness. I would like to challenge this a little bit and suggest that the flavor of love that we're talking about in this context of the Brahma Viharas and metta is not exactly the love that we normally think about.

[00:12:54] So... Perhaps you've all heard that it's unconditional friendliness or goodwill. And intellectually, I'm sure that makes sense to you. And I imagine a lot of you have done loving kindness practice where you direct this love first to easy targets, to loved ones, to benefactors, and then gradually right to strangers, to challenging people, and finally to the whole world. You might have practiced it, you probably have an intellectual understanding, but I wanna dig in a little bit here about how different this kind of love is from the love we typically think about when we use that word.

[00:13:56] So we start off with the easy target with a benefactor, with a child. And we send them love and it feels really easy. But that love very often has to do with a feeling of closeness and specialness, right? You're so special. Our children are so special, aren't they the most amazing children in the world? The most beautiful, the most brilliant, except when they're driving you crazy, and our grandchildren likewise, right. And the love that we crave. That whole idea that's gotten a lot of play in psychotherapy, see me, know me, love me, you know, acknowledge me, right? That's... The love that the ego craves, the love that tells me I'm special, that's sorry, this is not that kind of love. This is not the kind of Love that makes you special. That's the good news and the bad news because most of the time we are hungry for the kind Love. That acknowledges us.

[00:15:28] My husband and I took a trip in France a really long time ago. We were driving around, and there was a billboard that said, love moi. And love moi became this funny little thing that we would say to each other. Still to this day, I think that was like 35 years ago, when we smile at the recognition that we're seeking. Approval, you know, praise, affirmation. It's fine, it's human. That's not Metta. Metta, this kind of love, wishes for all of life to flourish, and you're not special. I'm so sorry. From the perspective of Metta you are not special, And that's why we can extend. The same love to our very special children that we can to all beings everywhere. And it's not that the love, the special love we feel for our children is bad or wrong, it's wonderful, it's sweet. And you may notice that it actually can be kind of conditional that when they say I want to drop out of high school, you might not feel quite so loving as when they get an A. You know, it's human, right? It's natural. And it might take a little effort to find that unconditional love when they say, you know, I'm sorry, I, I took all this money out of your bank account and I spent it on drugs. Ow, whoops, ow. You know, a lot of things happen that challenge our so-called unconditional love. Have you noticed that? It's okay. It's natural.

[00:17:43] And I think I'm gonna add here that I don't know if any of you are familiar with Marshall Rosenberg, but he's a wonderful teacher. I studied with him. For many years, and he's a big advocate of unconditional love. And he talks about, I mean, he really puts his money where his mouth is. And I remember he told a story of his son deciding actually to take off from high school. And his wife at the time was a physician. He had a PhD. And their son was dropping out of high school and it was, and he wanted to play music and he wanted to go to South America. I can't remember all the details. It was a long time ago. But, you know, he really had to put his money where his mouth was. Like, can I love you in this way that doesn't demand that you be like Khalil Gibran spoke in his beautiful poem? You know, the person I need you to be in order to be a certain reflection of me, or whatever our personal needs are. Okay.

[00:18:59] So that's loving-kindness, that's meta, that's the first of the four immeasurables. And the other ones, from the way I'm gonna talk about them, they build on this particular flavor of love, what it really means to have unconditional goodwill. That doesn't depend on the strokes you give me, on how you behave, whether you satisfy my needs. I mean, this

is really, you know, it's a dimension of the love that we have in our close relationships, but they also have lots of other things that we call love. When this love, this unconditional goodwill, encounters suffering, it becomes compassion. Same love, different, a specific context of suffering. This love encounters suffering and it naturally becomes the wish to relieve that suffering. The good news is that this is actually hardwired. Into all social creatures. That in order to survive in community, as we do and as many species do, we depend on compassion. You know... They're beautiful stories. I'm sure you've read them about elephant compassion and many, many species demonstrate compassion. It gives us an edge in survival if we care for one another and support them when they suffer.

[00:21:05] So Compassion is the natural arising of care in the heart of this unconditional goodwill when it encounters suffering. So we can turn it towards ourselves with our own suffering or the suffering of others. It can go awry in a lot of different ways. This talk isn't about that tonight. But in its purest form, there is a natural response, a quivering of the heart that responds to suffering and gives rise to a motivation to relieve that suffering. Even though, as we discovered in the equanimity meditation and in the course of life, often we cannot relieve the suffering. But the motivation arises spontaneously in the heart. Okay, same love.

[00:22:15] Now it meets the good fortune of others, their success, their wellbeing, their flourishing, and this love becomes sympathetic joy, mudita. It becomes an unselfish. Joy at the well-being of others. Same love, the context changes, as, you know... I think traditionally the Brahma Viharas focused more on the other person. I think we in the West struggle so much with self-esteem and self-criticism, self-hatred. We include ourselves in different ways, and that's fine. But I will say that each of these Brahma viharas, as you know, has a near enemy and a far enemy. The far enemy is obvious. It's the opposite of this virtue or mind state. The near enemies are more interesting because we often mistake them for the thing itself. They masquerade as the Brahma Vihara. And So, near enemy that I talked about already with loving kindness is often called attachment or conditionality. I will only love you if or I need you to be whatever or you know you must something else. I'm attached to you. Don't go away. Don't ever leave me. The near enemy of compassion, a classic one is pity. Another important near enemy of compassion is overwhelm. Um, something that's important to say about these near enemies is that the focus turns from the other to ourselves.

[00:24:26] So instead of feeling unconditional love, there's this flavor of me, love moi, what I need. Compassion, pity separates me from you. I'm up here looking down at your problem. Poor you down there. And also with overwhelm, where we often go with a near enemy of compassion, now I'm concerned with how much your suffering hurts me and triggers my own suffering. So these are two near enemies that actually separate me from you, which is a hallmark of the near enemies. One way of noticing if you're in a near-enemy is that you're separating. From love or from experience. So, in Sympathetic Joy, you know, one of the near enemies is a kind of manic excitement where I kind of use your good fortune as a kind high, like a drug. There are different ways. It's a tricky near enemy of sympathetic joy. So let's go on to equanimity, the fourth of the Brahma Viharas that doesn't feel like juicy and warm and fuzzy. Like the other ones, although we've already qualified metta to be a little less warm and fuzzy, right? It's not quite the ego warm and fuzzy love that we normally think about. It's a little more dispassionate in a way because it can extend to everyone without exception.

[00:26:23] So this love, when it meets vulnerability. Vulnerability. The reality that I cannot prevent you from suffering. I can care for you. Loving you in having children, in having

partners, in having friends, we take on the craziest thing we can possibly do as human beings, which is to know that the people we care about the most are going to suffer. And there isn't a hell of a lot we can do about it. And we can't stop it. It's Crazy. And we choose to do this all the time. We can be compassionate, we can hug them. Sometimes we can bring them food or things like that, but we can't prevent them from suffering. That reality makes us extremely vulnerable. And we work very hard to avoid the reality of that vulnerability. The ego is busy at work doing this all day long. Have you noticed?

Speaker 1 [00:27:49] Some people think about equanimity as dismantling all of those ego defenses and basically being open to the joys and sorrows, what we call in Buddhist philosophy the vicissitudes, right? The eight pairs of gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, and pleasure and pain. Instead of defending against them and trying to get praise and avoid blame and trying to feel good and avoid feeling bad, with equanimity we open to the profound truth that we and our loved ones are going to feel all of it and that we actually choose rather than curate our lives in the futile attempt to have one and not the other, the futile attempt to manage the world so that nobody will suffer, to open to the truth of it and choose to continue loving in spite of this absolutely insane thing that we're going to encounter suffering, especially with our loved ones, where often it hurts the most, and it's unavoidable. Okay, it's 7.19. It was pretty easy for me to fill this time. And there's so much more I could say about equanimity. But I really want to pause here. And I wanna check in with the chat. And I want to see if there are questions about what I've shared. Oh, here's it. Yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:30:03] Yeah, I don't know. Maybe you just saw it at 717, our sympathetic joy and empathic joy the same. Yeah.

[00:30:17] That's an interesting question. Sympathy and empathy are very, very close. Sympathetic joy is an English translation for *mudita*. I don't actually think that in this context, sympathy and empathy, are very different. Sometimes, we might say that empathy... Suggests more fully feeling with the other person, some people feel, and that sympathy is maybe slightly more removed than empathy. I don't feel like we have a definitive answer on that because these are translations of the Pali and the Sanskrit. And I think from the of Buddhist philosophy. And the third Brahma Vihara, the idea is to fully feel, you know, allow yourself to fully celebrate the joy, to embrace it open-heartedly. And for some people, empathetic joy might, that word might work a little bit better than sympathetic joy, and that's fine. So we're fully feeling it. With the temperance of equanimity of not being caught in it because the reality is that it will pass. So we feel it fully without the fear of losing it that sometimes makes us close down or buffer or limit our willingness to have a whole bodied embrace of the joy that we feel. For others? How is awakening the same or different from equanimity?

[00:32:27] That's a really good question, and I can't speak from any personal authority here about awakening, but I will say that I was just actually listening to a talk, an interview that Dan Harris did with Joseph Goldstein. A recent one, Joseph has been, you know, my teacher for 47 years, and he did say, as many people say in the literature, that the moments that we experience equanimity, that we experience non-clinging and non-reactivity are tastes of awakening. It's my sense that it's a question of how long we abide there. But I personally choose to believe without knowing any better from firsthand experience that those moments are. Manifestation of awakening that are available to all of us.

[00:33:40] Okay, so I see some hands raised and what is self-awareness? What's self-awareness and self-love? What is the difference between them? Um, you know... I will say that since I started practicing Vipassana a long, long time ago, you know, I asked, actually I asked Jack Kornfield this, I interviewed him for my book, and I've known him 47 years too. And I said, Jack, I noticed that in recent years, I don't know, 10 years or so, you now talk about mindfulness as loving awareness. You know when did that change, and why did that change, why did you bring loving into awareness? And he said he got the term from Ram Dass. But I think most of us now feel that it isn't really mindfulness without this quality of metta, this quality of warmth, that in our tradition, Vipassana, which I think is what Rick mostly teaches you, even though we've all explored other traditions, in Vipassana, mindfulness has a warmth, a wholesomeness that's embedded within it.

[00:35:19] Okay, is awakening related to noticing one was lost in thought and coming back to the body? I'm not sure I would call that awakening. That really, noticing your lost in thought coming back to the body, that's attention. And attention doesn't necessarily have the flavor of awakening. And in a sense, I appreciate this question because it lets me say a little bit about the relationship between mindfulness and equanimity. We might close with this depending on our time, but without this quality of non-attachment and love. We would say it's just paying attention and it's not mindfulness. And that's a very different flavor. That simple act of bringing your attention back to the body when you notice the mind has wandered, that's important. That's a muscle, right, that gets strengthened each time you do it. But it's about paying attention. And it doesn't really speak to the quality of your attention. And I think awakening is predicated on a particular quality of paying attention. There are a lot of different ways we can pay attention. And you can bring your attention back with irritation. You can do it in a perfunctory way. You can do it with a lot of different subtle feeling tones. That are embedded in that quick mind moment of bringing your attention back to the primary focus.

[00:37:19] But that quality of attention, everything kind of hinges on that. And... I think, in closing, I'll say that quality of attention, we might say, is really what equanimity is. Sharon Salzberg says, "'Equanimity' is the secret ingredient of mindfulness." And I asked Sharon and a number of teachers that I interviewed for my book, and here's just a- a shameless plug, it's called Quiet Strength. I hope you'll get curious about it and take a look. I asked Sharon, if you could imagine a Venn diagram with two circles, mindfulness, one is mindfulness, one is equanimity, how much do they overlap? And she said, completely, they overlap completely. And I thought, really, there's like no distinction.

[00:38:29] Not everybody agrees, and I'll say very briefly, David Cresswell, who's at Carnegie Mellon, a researcher that I interviewed who was researching mindfulness and MBSR for many years and now has started looking at equanimity. He set up a study with three different arms, actually, but one of the arms was MBSR. Quote-unquote, with equanimity, and one of the arms of the study was MBSR without equanimity, mindfulness-based stress reduction. Well, many of us would argue, without equanimity, it's not mindfulness and it's no MBSR, but he found a way to teach it where it was really just kind of attention training, and he took out all the language of noticing without judgment, notice with warmth. Loving awareness, all of those adjectives that I think most of you now are really familiar with in terms of how you pay attention. And that how is really the heart of equanimity. So here we are with a minute till 7.30 equanimity phrases.

Speaker 1 [00:39:59] I do want to share that part two of my book is all about ways to cultivate equanimity. Meditation is one of many, many, many ways to cultivate equanimities. And I also, over the years, collected dozens of equanimity phrases and I put

them all in the book, so there are dozens of them. And there are kind of cognitive hacks and a lot of different ways that we can interrupt the cycle of reactivity and reclaim balance in life. So I think, you know, since I'm so attached to poems and I brought up Joseph, and I imagine a number of you know Joseph, and if you don't, you now, please go find his Dharma talks and listen to him. He is a wonderful, wonderful Dharma teacher. Joseph, in his senior years, I would say in the last maybe three or four years, has started writing poetry and Joseph gave me permission, Joseph Goldstein to reprint one of his unpublished poems in my book and it's at the end of my book. So I'd like to close with an unpublished poem by Joseph that I think as many poems capture better than any kind of language can, a poem that I think is a beautiful evocation of equanimity. And it's called Venus in the Western Sky. My companion, in its brightest month, a diamond cool radiance lingers above the horizon, reminding me in the words of the poet, to care and not to care, as all the earthbound madness engulfs our lives. Steady, faithful, a light in the darkness. As the day morphs into night.