

7_23_25 Talk*

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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** There are a few points in all that that I'd like to highlight before moving into my more formal talk. And I invite you to share your own experience in the chat to the extent you'd like to about this. Is the aspect of deliberateness in meditation. There are certain kinds of meditation or moments in meditation when we want to be deliberately not deliberate. We want to deliberate, we want to choose to be choiceless. Really the epitome of open awareness in which we're really encouraging a falling away of any kind of directed effort, any intentionalities, any deliberateness, anything that feels goal-directed, anything that has qualities of self nudging one way or another, there is a place for that. And interestingly, in certain kinds of contemplative practice, in fact, it has a term that I've learned called apophatic, in which we are adding through negation. We are adding to subtraction. We are attempting to let things go, falling away. That can be done in an explicitly theistic religious framework in which we are releasing everything. That is not the ultimate divine, if you're oriented that way. In a more secular sense, we could simply release anything that is other than what is occurring in the present moment. There's a place for that.

[00:01:53] On the other hand, there's also a place for deliberateness, including subtle forms of deliberateness, like a very gentle invitation or a leaning into or an opening into calm. And you might ask yourself, for you, what's the best balance in meditation of deliberateness and choicelessness? In life as well, we encounter the fact that many things are outside our control. You work with other people or you live with other people and you realize there are many things about them that you cannot control. They resist your control. You cannot influence them. They're just a fact. They are going to be that way. They're like that. Okay. And can we let ourselves be choiceless and surrendered? About things that we really do not have a choice about. That's a big implication for meditation. Now in meditation, including in this kind of environment where the meditation is brief and it's online, I deliberately choose to be more choosing. I deliberately chose to be deliberate a little bit. Here there is an invitation to greater calm.

[00:03:18] Now that deliberateness of that invitation does have these two aspects of letting go and letting in. So we can gently intend without clinging, without chasing, without striving stressfully. We can gently attend to become calmer or to invite it if it will come without attachment to the results. There's a place for that. And you might apply this, not just in meditation to other things in your life. What are you gently welcoming? If it will calm. In your relationship with your partner or your family. What are you gently inviting into your mind to be more present as you deal with the politics of our current time in America and around the world? So there is this place for complete, choiceless surrender. And there's a place for choice, for including skillful choice, gentle invitation, gentle welcoming, gentle encouraging. What are you gently encouraging to be more present in your heart these days? That's a really good question.

[00:04:38] And then the answer to it tends to take two forms. One form is letting go of that, which is not what you're encouraging or is opposed to, not merely alongside it, but is in the way of what you are encouraging. So if you're encouraged in calm, you might deliberately be aware as attention moves through your body of parts of your body that are maybe tense. Or braced, or guarded, and ah. Because bracing or guarding attention is bad, just simply because you're aiming to make room for something else. So there's the aspect of letting go. The Buddha called this out as one of the two parts of wise effort of reducing,

preventing, or abandoning altogether That which is not helpful, that which is perhaps painful and stressful. So you could be letting go of that which is in the way of calm. For me, probably like you, something that gets in the way of calm is getting caught up in problem solving in my mind, which sometimes involves other people who are part of the problem. So if I'm wanting to release that, I would be aware of that. And I would let myself know, yeah, I'll get back to that later, but right now I'm doing something else. I'm opening into calm. Which later on will help me solve those problems better. And I think it will.

[00:06:20] Okay, so there's that aspect of letting go. What are we diminishing? What are releasing? What is not yet? A little bit like Michelangelo purportedly chipping away everything that was not David in his magnificent sculpture of David. What is calm? What is David? Okay, and the other part of it is the other aspect of wise effort in which we are inviting what we'd like to be more present. It's okay to have desires. The only question is, are they healthy desires for you? Are they pursued in wise, wholesome, healthy ways? And can you be at peace with the results? In Buddhism, desire per se is not a problem. The question is, what's our relationship to the desire? What kind of desire, how are we accomplishing it, and can we be at peace? So it's okay to desire for more calm to be present in yourself, perhaps in other people too. So then you might deliberately call in, okay, what helps me be calmer? Maybe, you know, imagine fluffy white clouds or being in a place for me that really draws me immediately into peacefulness, Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite Park. What works for you?

[00:07:36] Perhaps it's a feeling of being with people who help you feel calmer and less scared and more reassured and included since the sense of connection is a primal signal of safety or, and resource for safety, whatever it might be. So it's okay to gently call it in. And then we do it skillfully, hopefully, by not grabbing for what we want to pull in, but opening up to it. And then sometimes people move back and forth between what they're letting go and what they are letting in. And sometimes they're let in an awareness of that which is already present but they weren't so aware of it. So they're kind of resting in and establishing themselves in that which already true as an aspect of the second part of wise effort. Welcoming and inviting what it is you want to establish and then grow inside yourself perhaps an ultimate infinite calm Who do do do-do-do, you know if you have some sense of that?

[00:08:45] Quick response to, I will offer a small response to a very big question from Liz in response to what I was talking about, that which could be potentially unconditioned, which the Buddha, in my view, clearly. Does exist. Liz writes, How can anything be unconditioned if we are feeling or thinking it? Couple things here, philosophers get at this a lot. My own untrained, you know, kind of common sense attitude is first of all, we can be aware of and we can reflect on and consider something we've never seen or experienced. So just because it's not present doesn't mean we can't reflect on it, right? We can certainly. That may not have been what Liz was getting at. Maybe what Liz is getting at, if people describe some, let's call it a sense of, or an intuition of that which is unconditioned, how can it be that a person could have a conditioned experience of something that is unconditionally? This is a big topic apparently in philosophy and theology.

[00:10:14] For me, it actually is relatively straightforward. To me, we can certainly have conditioned experiences or intuitions of, or a sense of, or some kind of encounter of and with, or meeting with that which is divine. And many people would describe it in that way. I use the word divine loosely. Let's go back to just unconditioned. If there is, if that which is unconditioned, we can have, I think, you know, some sense of it. Because if that, which is unconditional, is the actual ground and underlying deepest nature of the Big Bang

universe, permeating it in some way, you know the two together, the absolute and the relative, the unconditioned and the conditioned, timelessness and time. Together. If that's the case, it just seems to me, well, of course. Time-bound conditioned reality, if actually the unconditioned is the ground of all. Kind of makes sense. We would be able to have some access to it. So that's all conceptual.

[00:11:40] The bottom, bottom, triple bottom line is what's real for you. I'm reporting that it's real for me, that unconditioned, and I'm not trying to argue the case. This is a very ultimate matter. It's important to consider it, even if one rules it out, as a number of my teachers have ruled out. The unconditioned as relevant to practice. Lee Brasington, Andy Olensky, Stephen Batchelor, I hope I'm not misrepresenting their views in any way, but this is my best understanding. Okay, if you wanna rule it out, rule it, but at least acknowledge it as a possibility on the way to ruling it out. Okay, and now practical, practical, practical, okay? I would love to talk with you about a fundamental piece of Buddha Dharma that is called in various ways. The Brahma Viharas, or in Tibetan Buddhism, often referred to as the immeasurables.

[00:12:38] And so, to use that word, Brahma-Vihara, a Vihara is a dwelling place. It's a location, dwelling place, and so the notion Brahma, Vihar is that these four qualities, which I'll name in a moment, you may know them already, are the dwelling places of the gods, of the exalted beings, in that way of thinking about it. We could relate to this as where we can abide, we can dwell, dwell. We can be at home in, in terms of the typical sequence of the list, I'll do it this way, compassion, kindness. Happiness at welfare of others, perhaps oneself too, and then equanimity. In Pali, perhaps in Sanskrit as well, compassion, karuna, kindness, metta, happiness at the welfare of others. Mudita and equanimity, upakka. So very briefly, the first of these, compassion, is the quality of empathy and caring, combined with the motivation to help if you can or help if you choose to.

[00:14:10] So compassion is really foundational. You know, certainly Buddhism begins with a real recognition of the challenges of life, which becomes suffering when we add craving to them. The challenges of life often include pain, certainly. And I'm making a little bit of a distinction there between pain and suffering. That's real, that's where we start. Where does it hurt? And then what's our response to where it hurts? So I'd like to do this with you a little experientially right now and invite you to take a moment to get in touch with what is compassion for you. Related to something accessible for you, like a friend or a family member or someone you care about, who's hurting? You might bring to mind, I'm seeing right now an image of a dog, a photograph of a dog who is hurting. Don't overwhelm yourself with the suffering. Keep focusing on the caring that helps us to manage our empathy for the suffering. And see if you can track these three qualities of compassion, of empathy, benevolence, caring, and motivation to help. Be aware of all three aspects in one case, some person.

[00:16:14] Okay, you might be especially aware of each of these three as opportunities for practice. For example, empathy. Empathy is the foundation of real compassion, and many people skip over the empathy, partly because it makes us feel, you know, we suffer with, with the empathy, and we often tend to jump to the caring, the lovingness, the Oh, I wish you, may you not suffer the wishing well, which is the motivational aspect. And it's easy to jump past the empathy. I've been on the receiving end of people who sort of phoned in their compassion for me. You know, there was a kind of a caring and a pro forma wish that I not suffer, but no empathy particularly for what it was really like to be me, including their impact on me. So just calling it out, empathy. As well as caring.

[00:17:14] And then being clear that our compassion can be real, our compassion is real, with that combination of empathy and caring, even if we can't do anything, even if can't help. You know, we can be anguished about what is happening in the Middle East, we can anguish about, you know, the impacts, certainly on Jewish people of anti-Semitism. Atrocities while also being anguished about the impacts on Palestinians and people in Gaza today. We can be anguished about that, even knowing that we can't fix it ourselves. We can bear witness. We may, you know, if we can donate to something or sign a petition or so forth, but we're limited. You know, we have losses in our life. We lose friends, we lose loved ones, we We cannot repair that loss, there's no remedy for it. All we can do is to have empathy for the experience of that loss with a lovingness, a caringness, a benevolence in response to it.

[00:18:21] So that's an important point as well, that sometimes, even if we can't do anything about it, our compassion is still real. And there are other times when we choose to not do something about it. We have, for example, limited attention, limited time, limited money for donations to charitable causes, and we choose to give it here rather than there. It does not mean that we lack compassion for the pain of those unhoused people. We could say homeless or unhoused people over there. While over here, our heart is drawn to helping cats and dogs and other non-human animals. And that's where we're focused. So that's an important series of distinctions, okay? Then kindness, kindness is the wish that others be happy, traditionally described. Kindness does not presuppose suffering, although sometimes it's a response to suffering that a person not only not suffer, but be happy as well. And the root of the word for meta, which is typically translated as loving kindness or kindness, the root of that word is friendliness. And it can be really useful to appreciate friendliness as a highly underrated. I don't mean friendliness that exposes you to attack from people who are not trustworthy. I just mean that ordinary wishing well friendliness. You're rolling down the street, you see these people, you don't know them, and no, you wish them well as you go by. There's a kind of an openness to you.

[00:19:57] Or maybe you're in a shop of some kind and you're willing to take that extra beat, that extra back and forth of a kind of a humanness. A basic supportive friendliness, not making it more than it is. The other thing is that often in long term relationships, even with friends, certainly with family members and mates, we can sometimes forget to be friendly. We leave it out. And it's interesting to be deliberately a little friendly. You know, it might express itself as interest or a little twinkle or, you know, listening to them, you now, spending a little more time with them. But what's it like to be friendly with people who are familiar to you? Empathy and caring, good. So Margaret asked right there, empathy is neutral. Empathy itself is not caring. And it's helpful to draw these distinctions, not to be pedantic or, you know, I don't know what, but just to be, to create opportunities. Like, oh, wow, I have empathy for you and I don't care. You know, that's possible. Like, yeah, I understand you're upset about this and I Don't care. So that's empathy without caring, right? And sometimes we choose to, we just don't have it in our heart to care. For a person.

[00:21:24] On the other hand, it's helpful to appreciate that we can be empathic, but that alone is not caring. Sometimes we need to be deliberate, deliberate about... The suffering that we see over there or that which we're empathic about. Very briefly, I just saw a question coming in. I want to be kind of very nuanced here about what I say about people I respect immensely, Andrew, in terms of the denial of the unconditioned. I would turn you toward Stephen's long career, beautiful, important career, writing and teaching and presence, including a book like After Buddhism. And I would say that my experience is that Steven, as well as the other people I named, their stance, I would suppose, would be

agnostic. They're not getting into truth claims about whether there is anything besides the conditioned Big Bang universe. But they definitely, I'd say, are not interested in or they don't consider it necessary for practice to include that which is unconditioned or could be unconditioned. Other people disagree. I really respect and appreciate the teachers, Stephen Snyder, Tina Rasmussen, number of other people who are. Others, I think Bhikkhu Bodhi would be among them, who are very forthright in standing with the apparent naming of the unconditioned by the Buddha and the valuing of it as an important aspect of practice. So I'll just leave that there.

[00:23:16] Okay, then I really want to talk about Mudita. Mudita being a kind of joy, a kind, it's called altruistic joy sometimes, or sympathetic joy, in which we are Happy for others. Cavelling, I guess, over the wellness of another person. Like, oh, what a beautiful doggie you have, or what a Beautiful baby this is, or being glad for somebody. Oh, that's wonderful. You got that job. Or, oh I'm so glad the scan came clean. The recent scan was clean for you. Oh, good. You know, we're glad. In that gladness is a quality of appreciation, even delight. And think about the capacity in humans to be delighted or appreciative or benevolently glad at the flourishing of another person. We do not gain from their flourishing, maybe in some broad sense, but we're not selfishly glad. We're altruistically or sympathetically glad for them. How beautiful that is, that we have that capacity. Mudita, I think of the four Brahma Viharas is sort of the most underrated. People nod in that direction. They don't really see it as a path of practice. Compassion and kindness are so heartfelt and loving. People can call those out as an important path of practice. Equanimity.

[00:24:56] Fourth typically in the list of Brahma Viharas is really called out. It's one of the seven factors of awakening. It is a very important aspect of Buddhism. Many people you could say with growing calm and tranquility, they're trying to develop. But Mudita, yeah, it sounds Think of the openness into the present, the arising immediacy of that which we are glad about. Think of benevolence, the lovingness, the giftingness in Medita. Wow. And here I'm gonna do a little spin that's not baked into traditional Dharma to my knowledge. What about Medita for yourself? Radhita for yourself. Being glad that you dodged some bullet today. Glad that you made it home safely. You know, wow. We tend to habituate to that which we could be glad about in our own lives. We could be so glad that you, who happens to be you, but the you there who wears your name tag, so glad for you that you had dinner today. Partly glad because many people do not have dinner today, right? What would that be like to bring that quality of mudita to yourself? You could do it retroactively What an exploration I'll do it for myself Rick I am so glad for you that you had that opportunity to go rock climbing a Couple months ago with your dear friend Bob. I Am also so glad that you realized that time is a one-way trip And you are really starting to get too old for this. I am glad for Imagine this, and more seriously, you could be glad for realizing that certain relationships were not good for you and that you were able to extricate yourself from them.

[00:27:26] You might be glad for yourself, on the other hand, that you found some really true friends. I would say to Rick, me over there, Rick, I'm so glad for you that you get this opportunity 40 or more Wednesdays a year to hang out. With such fantastic people that are present in this. Yay, Andrew! That are present in this online gathering here. Yeah. Okay. What are you glad for yourself about? How could you apply Mudita to yourself? I just think that's a wonderful exploration. You may need to do it silently, you know, because you're not allowed to be so glad for yourself or just, but you can certainly do it inside your own. And then, last and not least, equanimity. Lots about equanimity, it's important to draw distinctions between, around equanimity. We can be equanimous while also feeling really

sad about something. Right, we can be calm, we were experiencing is a reducing of reactions. And there can be a very, very profound calm in which We're so, we're incredibly tranquil. There's just, it's like a perfectly still mountain pond. That's not equanimity.

[00:29:06] Equanimity is a higher order spaciousness in which there is a non-reaction, it's a equanimit- equanimit- is an underlying spaciousness that does not react to the reactions flowing through the mind. It's a kind of inner shock absorber that allows for the fullness of our experience. It allows equanimity, allows for the full presence. Our experiential range, joy, sorrow, fear, confidence, anger, love, all of it, while underneath it all, there's an undisturbed spaciousness and presence that's wakeful, containing it all. This equanimity is something we develop over time. I wrote about it in my book, Buddhist Brain, including some of the neural, plausible neural circuitry involved in this. It's helpful to appreciate that there is a place inside that is undisturb. While being aware of disturbing feelings and thoughts. And sometimes, often, we are so caught up in our mer, our stresses, our reactions, our chase, all the above, that we don't have the free attention for that within us which is undisturbed. If we slow down a little bit, and that's where trainings in mindfulness and frankly trainings in calming and tranquilizing the body-mind process can be really helpful because then we start getting a little breathing room between ourselves and the roaring stream of consciousness. It's a little like even as we're kind of being carried along by the current for moments at a time, we pop out of the current of the stream of consciousness to sit on the ... Stable riverbank. Oh, wow, am I so upset about that? And I'm carried back into it. All right.

[00:31:21] But those moments of popping out to that, which is stable, witnessing what's unstable and changing become longer and longer and with practice. And then more and more, you start tracking the bodily sense of equanimity. What does it feel like in your body when you're in touch with that underlying. Peacefulness, or that's undisturbed, that underlying undisturbedness. It's helpful to kind of tune into that. And then increasingly you can have a sense in which you're aware, you know, that 80% of what's present in your mind or 95% is the racing stream. While at the same time you have a sense of the banks of the river. The banks of this stream. Undisturbed. Carried away, stable, continuous, and then that sense increasingly grows. Equanimity.

[00:32:28] So some people would say that the ultimate bottom or basis of that underlying undisturbedness is the absolute as an aspect, call it the divine, as an aspect is the unconditioned. And there are many teachings, and see for yourself if they are use for you. There are many teachings about learning to the ways in which accessing a sense of the infinite, a sense that which is timeless. I'm deliberately using words that are not fraught in a Judeo-Christian Muslim context. They're not bad, I'm just saying they're not complicated. So infinite, timeless, vast, unbounded. Deathless, birthless. That which is not, you know, Dylan's line, right? That which not busy being born is busy dying. Neither being born nor dying. You know, you could see that. Does that draw you into something? So yeah. Okay, equanimity. So we have the four qualities which are accessible to all of us. And you might ask yourself these days, does one of these call to you? It might be a combination of things, right? You might have a sense, for me, I don't know why, but you find what works for you, blends that are sort of unlikely collaborations, which is actually a name of a nonprofit, but a philanthropist organization. But anyway, unlikely blends. For me, mudita and equanimity weirdly go together. The ongoing gladness at that which is good, alongside that which, is not so good. That quality of mudita and the process of it, of delight and recognition actually helps me to be more equanimous about what is not-so-good. Find for yourself.

[00:34:51] I think for some people the heart is such a direct pathway. And the Dalai Lama talks about, what's his religion? Kindness. Straight up. Which of course opens into a vast... Collection of teachings and insights and fantastic stuff, but that's a darn good portal into that vastness of opportunity for us. Kindness. Kindness. Equanimity, it is said, enables the other three, because if we are not able to sustain that stability, that is not so disturbed. If we can't sustain it, then it's really hard. Then we get overwhelmed by our compassion, perhaps. We get sucked into what could be called pathological altruism in terms of kindness. We don't want to do that. Mudita without equanimity can become giddy and almost like a spiritual bypass, swerving away from that which is unjust, unfair, you know, sorrowful for yourself and others. Equanimity helps to give a basis, a ground for that which is wonderful in the other three Brahma Viharas.

[00:36:22] Okay, I'm gonna respond now to some questions rolling into the chat. And I encourage you before I do that to ask yourself, okay, these days, of all the things I kind of said about these four qualities or any particular thing, boom, what's the takeaway for you? What do you want to remember to remember? Perhaps you want to remember to slow down and stop for suffering and be compassionate with your partner or friend and not just zoom on to problem solving. Maybe you really want to explore this whole notion of mudita for yourself. You know, gladness for your for your privilege in some ways, not in a more like acknowledgement of it. Acknowledgement of good fortune. A privilege comes from several causes.

[00:37:23] One of them is morally problematic, being advantaged by disadvantaging others. I'm not suggesting that we should have gladness about disadvantaging. On the other hand, a lot of our situation in life is based on luck. You know, good fortune. I appreciate my genetic lottery. I didn't earn it, but I'm like, yeah, I'm glad. Thank you, oof, thank you. So anyway, that might be an exploration for you. Maybe equanimity, like for a lot of people here is kind of calling you here.

[00:38:00] So I'm gonna speak to some of the questions that have come up for, related to this. So. Yes, Brenda, Dr. Brenda, in real time, these qualities mix and in real time, words are only fingers pointing at the actual moon. The moon is what matters. The actual body, mind state of that we label loosely as kindness. That state is what really matters. I'm just using words as kind of pointing out instructions and certainly find your own words in your own culture that work for you. Equanimity definitely can be hard to access, especially in the beginning. It's good to start with calm. Versions of that. And to start with calm, sometimes we have to start with fortifying ourselves. Anam Tubten, who's a teacher near where I live, a great Tibetan teacher, has a lovely article I think recently in Tricycle magazine or from Batai in which he talks about we need to establish ourselves in fortifications. He's coming from a Tibetan Buddhist framework. Not that we're all defensive, but more that we are let's say grounded in ourselves with strong boundaries so we can afford to relax a little bit. Now we can be strong and vigilant while realizing that we're basically all right right now.

[00:39:26] So sometimes we have to do step, we have work backwards from let's equanimity to developing greater calm and tranquility and to do that we need to resource ourselves to feel that it's safe. To be calmer for more tranquil. But we develop it over time. Let's see, so equanimity is the near enemy of equanimity is apathy or indifference. This gets complicated. In a sense of apathy or numbness or a spiritual bypass or indifference in the kind of morally negative sense, that's not equanimity. On the other hand, you may know the opening lines to the teaching, I believe, of the Third Zen Patriarch, often translated as the great way is easy for one with no preferences. Now can that be because

if we prefer the great way, if we refer to have no preferences, that's a preference. If we prefer for children to have food, that's the preference. If we, you know, there's a place for preference, but I think what he's pointing to there in a kind of a Zen provocative way, if I dare say so, as a friend to Zen, but not a deep practitioner in it. He's really speaking to a way of holding to be, you know, non-preferential as a moment to moment experience in ways that allow the unguided, unbidden natural expression of a loving heart.

[00:41:33] So there's a trusting of our innately loving qualities. Enables us to live without preferences, because we know that even without preferences we will not become, dare I say, flaming assholes. Which is good to know. And the question is, can you trust yourself enough your natural, unbidden, unregulated, unchosen expressions of yourself as inherently or as basically good? Can you trust that? Maybe with a little bit of hovering attention so you don't go too off the rails, but can you just that? So yeah, so just in short, as people are saying, you know, equanimity might feel kind of close to indifference in certain sense. You know, we have the great lines that I'll finish in a moment from T.S. Eliot, in which he said, teach us to care and not to care. The not to care is equanimity. It might feel a little like indifference, but it's more profound than that. Well, thank you for this exploration. I hope that this has not been too much. We talked about skillful ways of engaging wise effort in our meditative practice and in life. And we also explored the four heavenly abodes, the four dwelling places that are exalted and accessible to us in everyday life. Compassion, kindness, altruistic joy. Equanimity. And may you practice these, and may the world have more of them, you know, in the days to come. So thank you for your kind attention.