Cultivating Equanimity

This talk reviews Upekkha (ooh-peh-kah), the Universal Wholesome Cetasika that conditions the mind to bring equanimity, emotional balance and mental detachment, as a characteristic of each moment of self-experience that is free from dukkha—distress and confusion. Upekkha is found in several categorical lists that represent effective self-organizing elements in the process of Awakening:

Upekkha is among the Four Divine Abidings. Lovingkindness, Compassion, and Empathetic Joy are balanced by Equanimity so that Lovingkindness does not manifest as idealized attachment or flip to its opposite, aversion/ill-will. Compassion is balanced so that it does not manifest as pity, which degrades the humanity of a person, including oneself, or into the opposite of cruelty. Empathetic Joy is balanced so that it does not manifest as insincere appreciation or generosity, or into its opposite, jealousy and envy.

Upekkha is manifested in the experience of the extraordinary characteristic quality of concentration called jhana (jah-nah), and is the primary characteristic of the fourth jhana, which is almost total disenchantment with the belief in a separate, autonomous self.

Upekkha is characteristic of advanced stages of vipassana (vih-pah-suh-nah), insight into the three characteristics at the core of Buddhist practice, anicca (ah-nee-chah), the transitory characteristic of subjective experience, anatta (ah-nah-tah), the absence of an enduring, autonomous self, and dukkha (dew-kah), the distress and confusion that are the result of craving and clinging.

In regards to the third characteristic described above, another concept is key to this insight—*tatramajjhattata* (tah-trah-muh-jah-tah-tah), translated as *that which arises from the middle*. Here is an excerpt from the commentaries regarding this characteristic:

When there is equanimity there is neither elation nor depression. The object which is experienced is viewed with impartiality and neutrality, just as a charioteer treats with impartiality his well-trained horses. Equanimity effects the balance of the citta and the other cetasikas it arises together with.

Here is a quote from a talk by Gil Fronsdal that further reviews the meaning and application of this balancing process:

The second word often translated as equanimity is tatramajjhattata, a compound made of simple Pali words. Tatra, meaning “there,” sometimes refers to “all these things.” Majjha means “middle,” and tata means “to stand or to pose.” Put together, the word becomes “to stand in the middle of all this.” As a form of equanimity, “being in the middle” refers to balance, to remaining centered in the middle of whatever is happening. This balance comes from inner strength or stability. The strong presence of inner calm, well-being, confidence, vitality, or integrity can keep us upright, like a ballast keeps a ship upright in strong winds. As inner strength develops, equanimity follows.

Equanimity is a protection from the “eight worldly winds”: praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. Becoming attached to or excessively elated with success, praise, fame or pleasure can be a set-up for suffering when the winds of life change direction. For example, success can be wonderful, but if it leads to arrogance, we have more to lose in future challenges. Becoming personally invested in praise can tend toward conceit. Identifying with failure, we may feel incompetent or inadequate. Reacting to pain, we may become discouraged. If we understand or feel that our sense of inner well-being is independent of the eight winds, we are more likely to remain on an even keel in their midst.

This description focuses on two characteristics of this way of being, emotional balance and mental detachment. The emotional balance addresses the potential for either too much drivenness, which can manifest as too much excitability when the sympathetic system in the body is overactivated. The mental detachment consideration involves either too much certainty about what the mind is created or too much skepticism, which manifests as the hindrance of skeptical doubt, which creates a difficulty in identifying and acting in response to a situation. The process is dynamic in the interactive, mutual effects of this sort of imbalance when it is not appropriately investigated and regulated. `+Here is a graphic that helps understand this:

**EXCITEMENT**

Too much energy

(restlessness & worry)

**INVESTIGATION OF MENTAL PHENOMENA**

**MINDFULNESS**

**DOUBT**

Too much skepticism

(skeptical doubt)

**CONVICTION**

Too much identification

(sense desire, aversion)

**DYNAMIC BALANCE**

**EQUANIMITY**

**TRANQUILITY**

Too little energy

(sloth & torpor)

How is this balance understood and maintained? When practicing mindfulness of breathing we can investigate the levels of energy in the mind, noticing when the mind is out of balance in one or more of the areas described in the graphic. The process is dynamic—the focus of attention can quickly shift from one extreme to another, so it is important to cultivate three functions of attention and self-regulation: mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena and Right Effort to address the two polarities, attention, on the horizontal plane and energy on the vertical plane. The Right Effort category involves being able to manage the flow of energy through the mind. Here are some suggestions regarding how to apply these functions:

**Attention**: Use mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena to discern when there is too much rigidity and then apply Right Effort to redirect attention back to the breath. When there is too much uncertainty, use mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena to observe the doubt. One antidote for skeptical doubt is to simply look more closely into what is occurring at that moment. The optimal circumstance is to be clearly aware of whatever is in focus without being identified with it as a certainty or as an enduring ego-state that must be defended or gratified.

**Energy**: Use mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena to discern the level of energy in that moment of consciousness. Often, simply knowing the breath with clarity and persistence brings balance with emotional calmness and mental alertness.