

Marcela Clavijo
Facing Fear
Week One: “The Importance of Equanimity”
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Hello, my name is Marcela. My ordained name is Samten Drolma, and I'm here today because I was very kindly invited by the Tricycle team to offer you a four-week course on the topic of the four immeasurables and how we can apply them to overcome any negative emotion or challenge that we have. I thought I would focus specifically on fear and how these four immeasurable practices can help all of us overcome different experiences of fear.

The four immeasurables have different names. Sometimes they are called the four divine abodes, and in Sanskrit sometimes they are called four brahma-viharas. They are all practiced the same way. All Buddhist traditions practice them. Usually, we practice them before we start a formal practice of meditation and before we listen to the teachings.

Each tradition has different orders when practicing the four meditations. For example, some traditions first begin with the practice of lovingkindness, then practice compassion, then practice joy, and finally practice equanimity. Other traditions begin with equanimity, move on to lovingkindness, then compassion, and end with joy. They all aim [to accomplish] the same goal. It is a matter of personal preference.

In these four weeks, we will begin with equanimity. It is my belief that until we have some experience of non-preference and equanimity towards all beings, it'll be very difficult to successfully and effectively develop the other three [immeasurables]. Before we begin, we'll discuss each one of them, so we can get an overview of the four weeks to come. Each week, we will give a few minutes of practice with each one.

The four immeasurables are four positive emotions of lovingkindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. The reason they are called “immeasurable” is because our mental and emotional capacity to develop any of these emotions is immeasurable and boundless. For example, if after you listen to this talk today and you decide to practice a little bit of equanimity every day (say for five minutes), after one year, you will have developed some sense of equanimity.

Say you practice for 10 years: you will have developed even more equanimity. Say you begin to practice for 10, 15 minutes a day, even an hour a day, your capacity to develop these positive emotions will increase. There is no knowing how much of these emotions we can build

up within our being. That is one reason they're called immeasurable: because the capacity of our mind and heart is immeasurable.

They are also called immeasurable because the objects of this practice are other sentient beings, all beings in the universe, and they are beyond being counted. If we think about all people on the planet, if we think about all animals on the planet such as mammals, fish, birds—those might be countable. But if we start to think of insects and the teeny, tiny life forms in the bottom of the ocean, such as krill, we begin to see that they might be difficult to count, difficult to measure. Using a boundless object for our practice helps us to develop and cultivate this boundless quality in our own heart, in our being, in our own mind. That is one of the main views in the Mahayana practice.

I happen to be a Tibetan Buddhist, ordained as a nun, but to practice you don't need to be ordained. You don't really even need to be a Buddhist to practice these four immeasurables, and that's why I love this practice. The Mahayana practice has a very open, very spacious, very boundless base that we can build in order to then develop all of our positive qualities.

We will begin with equanimity. Equanimity is the capacity that we all have to remain unperturbed, [to maintain] our peace of mind, our patience, our mindfulness (which we're all so happily trying to develop these days), no matter what comes our way.

[One way to do this is to develop] a sense of equanimity with ourselves, with our own experience, with what we feel, what we think, what we picture in our minds. No matter what comes to us, may we have this sense of equanimity.

Another [way] is to have equanimity towards other beings, especially people. Whether people treat us nicely with kindness and love and are generous towards us, or whether they don't, we try to practice remaining in a state of equanimity. We try to maintain a state of equanimity in our experience of what happens to us in life, meaning with our health, our jobs, the weather, or the political state of where we happen to live. All these things unfold and develop around us, and we might or might not have a whole lot of control over them. We strive to develop some equanimity when changes appear in our life.

In more traditional Buddhist practice, we talk about the eight worldly dharmas. These are four pairs that describe the limit and the scope of our mundane life. They are called gain and loss, pleasure and discomfort, fame and infamy, and praise and blame. They describe four things

that all of us are hoping for in life, and the opposite four things that we are always afraid will also happen. We want to gain the good things in life, and we're afraid to lose them. We want to gain friends, respect, popularity, success, good health, and a long life. We're afraid to not get them, or when we do have them, to lose them.

We are always seeking comfort. We are always seeking to be surrounded by beautiful things, comfortable things, pleasant things, pretty things and people. We are afraid to live in poverty, in misery, in discomfort, and [we are afraid of] losing acquired possessions and comforts and people in our lives. Also, we are always hoping to be respected by others, to have a good name, to be a little famous in a [positive] way, to be liked by everybody. I think that's what Facebook and [social media in general] are about. They reflect that. We are afraid when people start to not like us and disrespect us and call us bad names or embarrass us in front of others. We are always hoping to be praised and told how wonderful we are, and we are always hoping to hear good news about ourselves and others. We're afraid to hear the bad news.

If we look at our lives, we might see that these eight worldly dharmas take up a lot of our time, our resources, our concern, and our energies. They are based on hope for good things and fear of bad things, so the four immeasurables can help us. The principle of equanimity can help especially. Not only equanimity towards the negatives—like not getting too depressed when these come up—but equanimity towards the positives, which will help us to slow down. When we slow down, we are able to see things much more clearly and much more realistically. All of us are after something we can believe in, something that we can trust, something that we can hold on to. I think sometimes, even if we might not like hearing the truth all the time, we definitely appreciate it, and the practice of equanimity helps us all to do that.

The basis of equanimity can cover fear of the unknown and fear of bad things happening to us or those around us. It will help us to overcome [those fears]. It is also my belief that dharma practice and spiritual practice need our attention. We need to listen and we need to read and become familiar with the teachings and what they are about.

After we've done a little bit of that, then we need to practice, to actually take a moment every day (it doesn't have to be a long time) to do a formal sit. It could be on a cushion, it could be on a chair, it could be off the edge of your bed. It really depends on what makes you physically comfortable and allows you to relax your body and mind.

Once we have a little experience, [our practice] begins to seep into our mind and into our heart. It starts to become part of who we are. That is what is called meditation, familiarizing ourselves in a serious manner with any sort of spiritual practice—listening, thinking, and then meditating.

Now I'll guide you through a few minutes of how to practice, how to focus, how to think about how we could all develop a little equanimity towards these things that I was just talking about.

To practice, since you're probably reading this on your phone or your computer, you can [pause the video] and find a comfortable position. You can bring over a chair or sit on your seat if you have a comfortable seat at home that you like to sit in where you feel safe and at ease. Once you have found that, then you can turn your device back on.

Now you find yourself in comfortable position. The posture is important because it holds your mind. The posture is like your house, and your mind is like you living in that house. If your house is clean and stable and comfortable and safe, then you, inside of that house, will have a better chance at doing whatever you need to do effectively. The most important aspect of the posture, if you'd like to start now, is to sit up nice and straight, which means your spine is nice and erect, with your legs and feet relaxed, and your hands and arms and shoulders also relaxed.

For beginners, it's nice to practice with your eyes closed because it removes all the physical objects around you that might cause you to start thinking about the outside, about your home, about where you are, which will distract you and pull you away from your practice. If you're practicing here with me right now and you close your eyes, and you start to get a little sleepy or you start to daydream too much, or you start to enter your own emotional state too much, then open your eyes and come back to where you are. Make yourself very present, and then continue the practice.

After you have a good posture, then begin to feel your breathing. Don't change your breathing at all, let your breath be smooth and soft, easy and natural, not forced, and begin to sense the movement of your breath wherever you feel it in your body. It could be in your abdomen, it could be in your chest, or you could even feel the flow of the breath in your nostrils. The purpose of sensing the breath is that it quiets down your mind and it relaxes your body. You can do that for a little bit, and once you feel that you're more settled and clear in your mind (not

so distracted or sleepy), then you can begin by wishing for equanimity for yourself and for all sentient beings.

You can use very clear, very pithy thoughts, aphorisms, and aspirations. For example, you can say to yourself, either out loud if you'd like, or in your mind (make sure you can hear your own words): "May I have equanimity, may I have the ability to remain stable and patient and peaceful, come what may."

The more formal way of doing this is repeating [this statement] three times to yourself. Through repetition, the experience will deepen. You can turn off your device and try this for a few times, for a few minutes. You will notice a shift in your body sensations, in your breathing, or in your own emotional or mental state.

At one point or another (it might not happen your first time), you will feel a shift in the quality of your experience. This signifies that you've shifted from your usual every day externally focused approach to your life to a more internal place where you've touched on a place that is a little bit more quiet and a little bit more stable.

You can also use phrases such as, "Come what may, may I remain at peace." It's nice to begin with ourselves because that way we have a chance to develop that feeling more easily. Then, you can move on to wishing it for people that you know. "May my friends, may my family be able to experience equanimity in their lives."

You probably know people who are struggling right now and going through challenges with their health, with their jobs, with their relationships. They might be very unstable. You [probably] have an immediate person somewhere near you that you can use and wish equanimity for. At any moment, we can practice this immeasurable of equanimity. Once you've practiced it with somebody that you know, then you can practice it with people that you see as acquaintances. These could be your neighbors, people in your neighborhood, your grocery stores, your coffee shops, people at work that you know but you're not too friendly with.

From there, you can expand it to other people that you know exist in the world, but you don't know [at all]—people in your city, in your country, on the entire planet, in the entire universe. The more that you gradually expand your mind to include an immeasurable number of beings, the more at peace you will be because you will have stopped thinking about just your teeny self. The opening up and expansion of our mind and heart is what gives us a sense of

equanimity, tranquility, and proper perspective. I encourage you to stop for a moment and give yourself five minutes to practice, no more if you're a beginner. If you're more experienced, give yourself 10, 15, 20 minutes to practice boundless equanimity.

The result of practicing equanimity is that our likes and dislikes begin to get reduced a little bit. We like people because they've been nice to us. If people we don't like were to show up right now in this room, our peace of mind would be disturbed in an instant. Based on these likes and dislikes, we develop what are called friends and what we are called enemies. Enemies are just people, in this case, that disturb our peace of mind. Based on that, we develop emotions of attachment and aversion.

The beings that are not our friends or enemies are beings that we don't know and we don't care about. We are unaware of them. Based on those three categories, we develop a fear that things or people will hurt us, and will come into our sphere [somehow]. We are always hoping and hoping and hoping for the best, for good things to come our way.

Equanimity can move us beyond a limited and dualistic approach to life based on our likes and dislikes. It can result in peace and not only the absence of conflict, but real, deep equanimity that is profoundly unshakable. Not because we are rigid like a rock, but because we can go with the flow at any moment. Come what may in any situation, we can feel free of those very likes and dislikes. That freedom is what gives us that peace of mind and that equanimity.

In your practice, don't expect immediate results. If you do have an immediate result, don't expect it to last a very long time. You might go out again, and before you know it, you're just pissed off at things and at people. If that happens, don't worry. The only way that these practices can take deep root within us, like I said before, is to do them consistently and repeatedly and evenly throughout our day, throughout our week, throughout our month our years.

I really encourage you to try this, and to not get discouraged, to not beat yourself up if you fail. In my practice, I fail a lot, almost every time I try. Then I remember, beings are boundless, so my source, my objects of practice are boundless. Aren't I lucky that there are numberless beings?

Before I know it, another object of practice will come my way, and I might have success at practicing. You will see after maybe a year or a few years that the quality of your mind, your

relationships, and your life will begin to take on a sense of fearlessness and a sense of tranquility. What that really means is happiness at any moment.

That's it for this week's session on equanimity. Next time, we will discuss lovingkindness. I hope you've enjoyed this, I know I have, and I look forward to sharing more with you next time. Thank you so much.