

Anne C. Klein

Week 1, *Embodied Love: Core Tibetan Trainings for an Unbounded Heart*

August 4th, 2014

“Equanimity”

Hello, everyone. Here we are now, preparing to reflect on, meditate on, and actually cultivate the Four Boundless States. These are a very central, very beautiful practice. They have the power to actually turn light onto various things that disturb our lives. And they also have the power to open us to that capacity within ourselves to be free of that. So, in this way, when we are talking about the Four Boundless States, which, by the way, are present in virtually all the Buddhist traditions—and probably even outside the Buddhist traditions in India, around or before the time of the Buddha.

This cultivation of the Four Boundless States can be understood in the context of the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. It can be understood in the context of the teaching of the Five Buddha Wisdoms. So, in that way, the Four Noble Truths were taught—they were the very first teaching that Buddha taught. The elaboration of Five Wisdoms, which begins in Mahayana, India, and really is part of the crowning great paths of Tibet, the highest possible practices of those traditions, whether it's Dzogchen, or Mahamudra, or Path and Fruit, or Highest Yoga Tantra. These are the paths that really talk about the Five Buddha Wisdoms. In discussing the Four Boundless States, we are working with ourselves, as we are right now, and using these practices, actually, as bridges to something that is present within us, always, but we don't have much contact with it.

In this way, we can say that we have two faces; everyone has two faces. Two faces: the face of our lives, of limitation, pain, disappointment, hurt—everything that we might lump under the category of what is unsatisfactory. That is part of our experience as human beings; we can't deny that. And our practice of the Four Boundless States is not a way to deny those things, but actually a way to experience them such that they can become portals to our other face.

Our other face is a face of clarity, ease, simplicity, open sky-ness. All the other things that we experience are like weather, but they're not what we are. But we identify with them very, very, very powerfully. We identify with them so powerfully that we feel that if they should tend to dissolve in any way, then we would die. And that makes practice quite challenging. So heads up! This is a practice that sails to the other shore, which really is not another shore at all, but actually the nature that is our own wisdom ocean that is always here.

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But, in the process, we encounter things that we have perhaps spent much of our lives not seeing. And by not seeing them, we have continued to be plagued by them, so that hasn't been skilful for us. The Four Boundless States are, famously, equanimity, which we can also call sameness, or balance, or evenness. It's a state of grace in which we are not overwhelmed by dislike, or avaricious affection—glomming on, needing, grasping. We neither have that kind of excessively adoring, attached sort of reaction; nor do we have excessively distancing, hating, loathing, pushing-away reaction. So what's left? We might feel then, "Oh, we're just in some kind of bland and neutral state."

But equanimity, evenness, is not a bland and neutral state. So one of the challenges—the interesting explorations of this journey—is that we will want to experientially distinguish equanimity from indifference, dullness. We may find that we open to a state of evenness, openness, non-reactivity, freedom from judgment, and it feels kind of nice, and it feels fresh, for a moment or two. And then, it can shift very subtly, and before we know it, we're in some sort of dull neutral, rather opaque state. Something like the opaqueness of a sky, the nature of which is always clear and open, but it can fill with a light mist that is actually different from its natural expansive nature. So, we will be cultivating equanimity.

We'll actually spend a fair bit of time on equanimity today and part of our next session, as well; because part of what we want to do is learn how to apply a practice like this. That's actually a very significant part of the learning of these sessions: How to work with yourself, how to work with your two faces; not to become so overwhelmed by the down face, so to speak, that you forget that this other open expanse of oceanic sky is actually never sullied.

And how not to get overly idealistic about this expansive sky, wisdom nature, this Buddha nature, this stainless space of your real sky. Not to get so enamored of that that we think we have nothing to do with this other mucky stuff, these clouds, and whether they be wispy clouds or billowing clouds. We have two faces. And our practice needs to encompass both, to speak from one to the other. So this is, itself, a learning process. As much as we are learning about the Four Boundless States—equanimity, loving kindness, deep compassion, delight; these are the four—these are all actually intrinsic to the sky of wisdom. They are all actually flavors of wisdom that are always present.

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But there's no use thinking about them too much; we need to discover them. I mention them now only to set—very importantly—to set the frame of our work here. There is both the mud, there is both the clouds, and there is the sky. And these do not contradict each other. However, in our experience, we have yet, probably, to understand how following the trace of the clouds, how following the trace, for example, of our own, let's say, indifference or pride or judgment—all of which are related to equanimity, obstacles to equanimity—how this can reveal something much greater. So we need to know that as far as the logos of this teaching is concerned, the actual dynamic is that we uncover these boundless states within our being. And how do we do that? Well, we work with our body, sensing into our embodied state. The body is a source of tremendous information, and we will take some care in how we place the body. That care that we take in placing our body in meditation is an auguring of the careful attention that we continue to direct to our body as we practice, because it's there that we get the first clues of how we're actually reacting to the material.

We use our emotional senses; the body is often a great help in moving from the energetic or somatic cues that arise for us to open a door to what we're actually feeling. Very important. And always, we use attention to focus on whatever is occurring. So we're going to do a guided meditation. But before doing that, let me say one or two other things about equanimity, evenness, balance. Let's say your walk into a room, and there are some people, right away, that you know. This is a room full of people—you know there are some that you want to talk to and some that you don't. You just know that. Is that true to your experience? So what is occurring? There's some judgment occurring. And that judgment is that this will be fun or pleasing; this will not. And that very easily segues to, "These people are pleasing, and these are not. And then, there are these other people whose names I don't know, and I don't really know what they are, and I'm really quite dull in the face of considering them."

So how does that judgment feel in your body? That's something we'll be asking. Where is that judgment coming from? It's related to a kind of pride, a sense that, "I am such and such, and I deserve such and such. It is appropriate for me to associate with these people, and not with these other people, because of certain qualities I have, because of certain preferences I have, because of who I am." And all of this is, of course, not a print-out that you're saying to yourself in so many words, but there's a little tug in your stomach, a little tightness in your shoulder, a little erectness in your neck, a little turning away, as someone who you have designated judged not the one you want to speak with comes toward

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you. What does that feel like? Are you relaxed? Are you tense? Are you anticipating with pleasure? With dread? Whatever it is you're doing, it is a reaction, it is a reaction. A reaction is not a response. A reaction comes out of the serendipity of circumstance, and we have no control, which is why reactivity is so pernicious and a cause of suffering for us.

Equanimity, then, has the possibility to dissolve pride, and the work, the heavy work, the really rather tiring, repetitive business of judge, judge, judge, judge, judge. And of course if you are in a place of judgment, a place we all know, it doesn't just operate with respect to other people; it operates with respect to yourself—maybe the most painful of all. So we're going to get to see that, as we explore equanimity. We're going to look at the way in which equanimity is different, as I mentioned, from indifference, different from dullness—and, in this way, shine a light on the way in which equanimity is also a balm against not only pride, but also against a sort of obscuration.

And, in this way, equanimity is a portal to two different kinds of wisdom. It's a portal to a profound experience of saneness. It's a portal to a profound experience of everything just being included, nothing to push away. Everything is one, unbounded whole. Now, I'm not saying this is going to occur in your first or second meditation session on equanimity; I'm painting the wide horizon of this practice.

So, how do we begin? There are four main steps for this, and each of our Four Boundless States. And we begin, always, by setting our body as a vessel for attention that is both clear and relaxed. A lot of what we learn in practice is we learn to be at ease in the face of whatever is occurring. That's a big learning, a big, big learning. So, many of you know how to sit. What's important about sitting is not whether you sit on a chair or a cushion, but that you really allow yourself to be held and supported by your seat. So that means relaxing the bottom of your body a bit. Sometimes we find that we're holding ourselves up by tightening our buttock muscles, bottom-of-body muscles, as if you needed to tighten there to hold yourself up, but you don't; you can let go, and let yourself be held. And that is the very, very beginning of embodying a kind of trust that's actually very important throughout practice. Just to trust you are held.

You can consider for a moment that you are supported in a very deep way. Wherever you are seated right now, you are seated directly above the center of the

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Earth. Yeah, it's true. And thus, there is actually support coming to you from there. So with all that deep support, sit; be held. This is meaningful, because the body very naturally is a bridge that translates physical ease of support, physical sense of support to a sense of emotional, psychological trust. And that is a very significant type of relaxation for us.

So we sit like that. We have a sense of an upward flow, from the bottom of our spine through the belly, heart, throat, crown, the apex of space. We are in alignment from the center of the Earth to the center of our belly, to our solar plexus, heart, throat, crown. There's actually an avenue there, an alignment there that also supports you. More support, more relaxation. More relaxation, more clarity. Clarity and relaxation together support both trust and insight. You don't have to say those words to yourself every time, but just sit. So we sit in this way, and we turn our attention, we let our attention gently rest on our breath. The breath, like all of the body, is always in the present moment. So, turning our attention to our breath in this way brings us into the present moment, which means that in this moment, we are free from worries about the past, swimming toward the future. We're just right here, sitting, supported, and this is exactly where we need to be for our practice. It's exactly where we need to be for our lives. So this, itself, is a very significant practice.

Now, when you do this at home, really, you should take up this practice. It's good to spend 10, 15, really, maybe even 20 minutes just like that, just observing your breath. We'll just do it for a minute here. But remember: this is very important to set up presence of your own attention.

And when you feel fairly settled—you've been doing this for a while already—you can let one breath, one inhalation, carry your attention all the way down to the center of your belly, and just sit there for some minutes. Especially in the context of cultivating equanimity. Equanimity has a connection with deep settling earth elements, if you're familiar with elemental practices. And the place in the body where we connect to that kind of deep, even settling is the center of the belly Tibetans call the "do", or the traditions call the "hara," or the "dantian," or the "kath"—a very deep place in the body. So we let our attention sit there, maybe for 10 minutes, 15 minutes, as part of your setting up of attention, that 20-minute period, ideally, 15-minute period, 10-minute, at least. And how do we connect with equanimity? First of all, what do you already know about equanimity?

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If you had the experience of being present in the presence of someone who just observes you without interfering, maybe, as a child. You're just playing and you're quite content, and you feel safe. Mother, an older cousin, or brother; maybe even your dog is there. Or maybe you're outside in nature, and the trees perform this function of just being a presence that is equanimous toward you, and so you feel quite free. They are not putting out some kind of reactivity that you have to respond to; you can be with your own thoughts, your own feelings.

As you remember such a scene from your experience, what do you feel? Do you feel, "Oh, they were just sitting there. I need more excitement; I don't want someone just to sit and observe. I didn't really do it right when they were present with me. They didn't fully satisfy what I wanted." Or maybe you feel, "This is really lovely, and I never have to have a conversation with anybody ever again, and just be present and even."

So whatever your reaction is, take some note of it. Maybe you're already beginning to have a reaction against equanimity. That's good. If we don't live our lives in full equanimity from morning until night—and who of us does—that means there's something in us that resists it, that feels that, "No, if I can't go out in the world and say, 'This is good, this is bad. I like you, I don't like you,' life would be very dull." You might feel that. But the problem is: we feel that our judgments are truth. We feel not that, "I feel quite uncomfortable when So-and-So doesn't look at me when I walk in the room." Usually, we leap over that observation, and go to, "So-and-so is quite unfriendly." You have no idea what is going on with So-and-So. Their reaction may have nothing to do with you. The thing is, what we're starting to see is that we see others through the lens of our own experience, our own reactivity. Geshe Rabten whom I studied with many, many years ago in Dharamasala, would say, "Why do we like some people and not others? Well, because some people make us feel good, and others don't," and we tend not to question that kind of judgment. But now, we want to recognize that it is just that: it is just a judgment.

So, take a moment to consider someone who is disliked by you. They don't make you feel good. What do you dislike about them? And ask yourself, "What is it? Is it their appearance, their way of talking, their mood, what they wear?" until you can feel your own reaction, feel into that reaction, and identify this as your reaction of judgment—a reaction that is actually obscuring the open sky of your equanimity. And do it carefully, do it many times, is your assignment until the next time, next week, or whenever you watch the next segment.

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Get some familiarity, watch yourself. What happens? Watch yourself between sessions, too, as you walk around. How often are you judging? And when you are judging, what is your feeling? What is your real feeling? We're not talking about ideas; definitely not interested in ideas about judging your judging: "Oh, this is not good. I shouldn't." Not interesting at all; we want to go directly to the experience. You've judged: "I hate this person. I hate the way they talk. I can't stand the way they eat, the shoes they wear." Don't judge your dislike; just look at it, identify it. It's part of a pattern. It's part of a pattern that probably involves some kind of injury to your pride. Maybe it does. Don't analyze it; just look into it.

So these are the first two steps, then. The first step is getting in touch with what you know about the feel of equanimity. And the second step is being able to observe your own reaction to that. In the next segment, we'll look at the next two steps, and complete our discussion of equanimity. In the meantime, we always close with an aspiration that our practice be a benefit to ourselves, so that we can be a benefit to others, so that all beings can benefit from our practice. So have a good week of practice. Feel free to keep notes. Begin with taking some time to cultivate attention, using your breath for the center of your belly. Then, touch into what you know about the feel of equanimity. Then, touch into your reactions to people to whom you do not feel equanimous. Just notice what that feels like, without any judgment. And in the end, dedicate. And we'll continue. Okay.