

Vanessa Zusei Goddard

*The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion*

Week Four: “Riding the Waves of Life with Equanimity”

May 23, 2020



Hello, I'm Zusei Goddard. Welcome to this last segment of "The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion." This last talk takes up the ground of the four immeasurables: the practice of equanimity, *upekkha*, or *upeksha*. Equanimity is usually understood as a balance of mind. It is a state of mind that is free of desire or aversion; greed or hatred.

I want to stress, however, that equanimity is *not* distant. It's not uncaring. It's not even a state in which we are always emotionally even, which I think sometimes we might take it to be. I feel equanimity is the ability to ride the waves of your mind—to ride the waves of your *being*—with more ease. It's that peace comes not from the absence of conflict, but with our ability to work with conflict, inner or outer, more skillfully. Equanimity is the opposite of indifference. The near enemy of equanimity is agitation, but the far enemy is indifference, which I think is very telling. So this is saying that there is deep caring and deep feeling in equanimity, and also an underlying stability that comes from understanding what it is that we rely on. So that's something that I wanted to look at in more detail.

What do we refuge in? As Buddhists, we say we take refuge in the three treasures of the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. But what does that really mean, and how does that relate to the practice of the four immeasurables? The phrase for equanimity is, “May I (or you) be filled with peace, free of aversion and greed (or free of greed and hatred).” As I said, there are slightly different translations. In Japanese, the term which means “to take refuge” encompasses two meanings: both “to rely upon,” and also “to unreservedly or wholeheartedly throw oneself into.” The image that my first teacher used to illustrate this was that of a child standing at the top of a dresser and leaping into space with the trust that their parents would catch them. I remember we had a dog like that when I was growing up, a dachshund named Igor. He would climb on my mother's bed, and we would step a few feet away with our arms outstretched, and he would just leap into the air—all four paws in the air, his ears are flying up—and he just *knew* with every

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fiber of his being that we would catch him. Or maybe he just had a little brain! But it is that very feeling, that very trust, that faith, let's call it, that there *is* something that catches you.

Of course, the question is what. The question is, “In Buddhism, if God doesn't catch you, and the teacher doesn't really catch you, then what catches you?” The answer, of course, is *you*. You catch yourself and because that is difficult, because we sometimes miss, we catch each other. That is why we have the three treasures of Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Relying on the three treasures, we catch ourselves.

Traditionally, the three treasures are spoken of in different ways in terms of the “abiding,” the “unified,” the “manifested” three treasures. But here I wanted to bring it a little closer, I want to highlight the fact that those three treasures are already us, that those qualities of lovingkindness and compassion and joy and equanimity are us. That this is true of the four immeasurables and the three treasures as well.

Normally we think of taking refuge as shelter, as protection; protection from the elements, or from what is what may be harmful to us. But the interesting aspect of that translation of the Japanese word of “throwing oneself into” is that that's the opposite. You completely put yourself out there, and it is in *that* that you find protection. This is not normally how we think of refuge. It implies openness and vulnerability that comes from that trust and that faith in trusting ourselves to this ground, which is completely reliable, although it is not solid in the way that we think. We see how the three treasures and the four immeasurables are that ground, which is not different from us.

There's a Gaelic saying that pilgrims offer to one another: “Made the ground rise up to meet your feet.” That's how the three treasures operate. That's how the four immeasurables operate. The foot is no different from the ground, which is no different from the one walking it. So at those

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moments when we find ourselves at the edge of a cliff, when we may have to make a bigger commitment; or at the edge of our meditation practice, just at that moment before we truly let go of the self and we find ourselves petrified with our toes curled over the edge of that cliff, and we can't quite take that step. Although we know the path before us because we've been there, we've walked before, we know it is no longer satisfying and we still can't quite take that step. It is sometimes out of desperation, sometimes out of that trust that we don't even know we have, that we take that step and we realize we're standing on firm ground.

So from this perspective, Buddha is our awakened nature. It is the very truth of our wholeness and perfection. It is standing and never failing to cover that ground upon which we stand. As master Dogen said, “Dharma as the second of the three treasures is the all-pervasiveness of that nature.” It is the immeasurability of that nature. So there is no on-off switch here, just this with the four immeasurables. There is no restricted zone, there's no off-limits zone. No place stands outside of that perfection. And at those moments when we don't feel it, when we're not able to act out of it, it is simply because we're not in contact with it, not because it is not true. Once again, the practice of cultivating these sublime and excellent qualities is a way to remind us that we do, in fact, possess that perfection. So if on one hand, it's like having this magnificent book and not being able to read it, the practice of cultivating these four immeasurables is teaching us how to read, and then further how to embody those words themselves.

Sangha, the third of the three treasures, is a relationship. So sangha isn't just a like-minded community. It is the virtue of harmony. It is the place in which the Buddha and the dharma live, if you will; it's always in relationship. Because on our meditation cushions, we might be the most loving, the most patient, the kindest people, that needs to come to life in our interactions, which is where all of us live our lives. Sangha is the place where we make space for others. It is where we embody these teachings in our lives. So through this practice of the four immeasurables, we remind ourselves that we're facing in the same direction if we're not facing one another, because

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both are true; what you want is what I want and we're trying to figure out how to do this together. And when we forget, when we become afraid, when we look out at the world that seems so confused and uncertain, we turn in again and turn back to ourselves, “May I be filled with happiness, and know the root of happiness. May you be free of suffering, and know the root of suffering. May all beings be filled with boundless joy at another's happiness and may they live in peace, free of greed and aversion.” This is how we remind ourselves. This is how we take refuge in Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

Let me end with these words of the painter Agnes Martin who said, “I'd like to talk about perfection, the perfection underlying life. When the mind is covered over with perfection [which is an interesting way of saying it; you could say when the mind is infused with perfection] it is immersed in perfection, and of course, not just the mind, but the heart, the spirit, and the body.” And then she says, “seeking awareness of perfection is called living the inner life.”

Of course, this is not perfectionism. The perfection she's referring to is wholeness, it is that all-encompassing manifestation of these qualities that are our very cells, our very bone, our very marrow. It is the liberation of the heart through which this science of compassion, this practice of heartfulness, this ethic of unity, of reciprocity, is manifested. And so, in the end, the four immeasurables are doing more than just helping us to make space for another in our minds. By cultivating unbounded love and kindness, limitless compassion, unconditional joy, and consistent equanimity, we come to see ourselves as we truly are: indivisible. Thank you.