

Cultivating Boundless Equanimity

By Scott Tusa

Hi, my name is Scott Tusa. Welcome to Meditation Month 2024 and our series on opening your heart. In this series, we're going to be exploring four practices known as the four boundless states. In the Buddhist traditions, they also go by other names. Some of you may know them as the four immeasurables, or some as the *brahma-viharas*. Nonetheless, these are four practices that we can work with, in order to not only open our hearts more fully to ourselves and others, but also to start to train in *being* openness.

It's this second aspect that's encapsulated in the word boundless, as boundless implies an attitude to how we hold ourselves in the world, as well as how we interact in interconnection with others. But it also recognizes a sense of peace and freedom that we can access through these practices through actually learning to be boundless.

The first of the four boundless states is boundless equanimity. And there is a style in some of the Tibetan Buddhist lineages where we actually place boundless equanimity first when we're approaching it as a practice where typically boundless equanimity would be last in the series of the four. And there's a good reason for this, because without approaching equanimity first, there's a risk or danger that the other three boundless states—boundless loving kindness, boundless compassion, and boundless joyfulness—can actually become biased. So boundless equanimity is probably one of the most important ones because then the way we cultivate openness and love, openness and compassion, and openness and joyfulness gets affected by how we practice equanimity.

In this session, we're going to both learn about boundless equanimity and then do a short practice. We can approach boundless equanimity both as a practice toward our own thoughts and emotions as well as towards others. Today, we're going to be exploring it a little bit more toward others. But I just wanted to mention that because it really can apply to both. So as I said, boundless equanimity is quite important, because if we don't apply boundless equanimity, toward our practice of lovingkindness and compassion, there's a high risk that we're going to be biased towards different kinds of beings—preferencing those we care more about, those who we are more connected to, and ignoring and sometimes, you know, practicing the opposite of love, toward those we dislike or are indifferent towards. So there's three types of relationships we explore within boundless equanimity, as well as the other three boundless states. These types of relationships revolve around number one, those we're close to, those we have a deeper connection toward. Number two, those we dislike those we find difficult to get along with, or we have difficult relationships with. And number three, those we're either indifferent toward, or more neutral toward. And this includes most people, because most people in the world we don't know or we don't have a strong connection to. Now, just right away, before we get into some more detail, I want to point out, there's nothing wrong with you or me for holding these biases. These are natural human responses. But from a Buddhist path perspective, they're something that we can transform, and we can transform it because right now, it's limiting us. So part of what's

connected to this term *boundlessness* is practicing and transforming ourselves. So we become more unlimited in our relationships. So if we really reflect what it feels like to have a closed heart, it means we're cutting off some kind of connection to ourselves or another. And of course, we're all going to have difficulties with ourselves or another. This is a natural part of life. But these approaches, the four boundless states on the Buddhist path, offer us another way. They offer us another approach, another way to work in the world. So I just want to say right away that there's nothing wrong with us for having these habit patterns. But there's good news, they can be changed, they can be transformed, right?

There are many ways to approach why it's important to cultivate boundless equanimity. But one I find really helpful is just starting to notice that it's actually painful when we're non-equanimous, right? So when I'm having an emotion that I dislike, it's painful, because usually I'm resisting that emotion or I don't want to be with that emotion. So there's pain in that resistance. And the same in a certain kind of relationship or situation where I'm disliking a person's action or I'm disliking the situation I'm in—it's too cold, it's too hot, whatever it is—and this also forms a sense of pain. So the way I sum this up is that essentially, bias is a form of pain. It's a form of suffering. It's a form of dissatisfaction. In the Buddhist traditions, we would call it a form of *dukkha*. So this is why it's important to open up our biases. This is why it's important to practice equanimity on a daily basis if we can, or to at least try it to see if this can affect us in a helpful way.

Based on this, let's go ahead and do a practice of boundless equanimity. Please find a space where you can settle. And as you relax into a posture of meditation, the main thing is to keep the back upright, yet relaxed. So if you're sitting in a chair, this might mean sitting up a little straighter with the feet flat on the floor. And if you're sitting on the floor, cross legged just means allowing the posture to be upright yet relaxed, not too tight, not too loose, feel free to close your eyes. For this practice, if you'd like you could also allow them to be half open or fully open. To start, we're going to go ahead and connect to body and breath. So find a place in the body that you feel grounded in the feet on the floor, or the hands on your knees, or legs. The quality of the breath, filling the abdomen, on the inhalation, relaxing on the exhalation. Or just breathing into your feet as they're grounded to the floor below you and Earth below you. Just allow a connection to our breath and body to take place for a few moments. There's no right or wrong here. There's just allowing our attention and awareness to come into the present moment for you, the breath, and allowing the breath and body to be an anchor to this moment.

So when we practice the four boundless states, we practice them as a combination of imagination. Using visual images is helpful or constructive thoughts. And then we also involve feelings that get evoked. But among all these, the thread is mindful awareness. So there's a mindful awareness that we're cultivating with the body and breath now that we also apply to the practice of cultivating, in this case, boundless equanimity. So just try your best. I'm going to give some options if you're new to meditation, or if you're more intermediate or advanced. And feel free to choose your own adventure here, feel free to choose what you need. To start, we're going to imagine three different kinds of relationships. And it's OK whoever you want to choose. If you're new to this practice, I recommend when it comes to the difficult person, not choosing

the most difficult person in your life right now, maybe someone you had a minor problem with. If you're more experienced in this practice, feel free to choose whoever you want. So we're going to start by imagining a close one. This can be someone in your life—it could even be a pet—that it's easy to develop warmth toward. It's easy to feel connected to. It's easy to both feel care for them as well as to receive care from them. Just take a moment to reflect on that person, invite them into the room with you here. It could be as a visual image, as a presence, or as a memory. So if you're not so good at visualizing, you just feel that they're in the room here. That's fine.

Now straight ahead in the middle, you're going to imagine a difficult person. And as I said, I recommend not choosing the most difficult person in your life right now, maybe someone you had a minor argument with or some dislike toward. Maybe it was someone in traffic who cut you off, or who, you know, gave you what maybe you thought was a stern look, or a nasty look, just something that you can work with. And you imagine them in the space in front of you, and you invite them there. What I find really helpful here is really even asking the person's permission, really inviting them saying, hey, I really want to work with this, you know, and so, yes, this is uncomfortable. But there's a point to this. If we never work with discomfort, we can never transform. So you work with an discomfort, that's relatable right now. Just take a moment to visualize them, feel them in the room. It's also OK that your dislike arises. That's fine. That's information for the practice, right?

Great. So now to our right, we're going to imagine someone we have more indifference toward, or neutrality. Now, of course, we have to know this person, so they're not a complete stranger. I often choose people that I run into in stores, like someone who's working a cash register, or maybe a neighbor of mine, someone that I can imagine, either visualizing them or just feeling their presence around me. But I just don't have too much closeness or distance from them. So I know indifference is a strong word, but it really just means neutrality like this sense that, you know, we don't have too much caught up in our relationship with this person. So just take a moment to invite them into the room.

Great, so now we have these three different kinds of relationships, someone we're close to, someone we dislike, or a difficult person. And we also have someone we have more indifference toward, or neutrality to. So according to the four boundless states and the practice of equanimity, these really make up the three different kinds of relationships that we can have in our life, right? And this is something you can reflect on more, you don't have to believe what I'm saying, necessarily, but just see if that applies to your life after the practice. But for now, we're going to work with our relationship to these three. So reflecting on the close one, this is a little easier, because we can see pretty naturally, that of course, they want happiness, of course, they want to feel at ease, they want to feel peace. They also want to avoid pain, they don't want to feel uncomfortable, right? They don't want to experience painful situations, emotions or experiences. So already, we might have a sense that this person or this close one or pet that we're imagining, is really worthy of love. Worthy in the sense that, you know, there's nothing they need to do specifically to be worthy, just their being is worthy of happiness, of being free from suffering and its causes. Reflect on that for a moment. And if you can, start to tune into a feeling that arises. If a feeling of closeness arises, great, be with that feeling. Apply mindful

awareness to that feeling to just rest with that. Resting means being aware of, sustaining in a gentle way.

Great, so now we're going to move on to the person we dislike in front of us. Now, right away, when we turn our attention to them, we might feel this dislike, or we might feel a difficulty or we might feel discomfort in our thoughts or body. See if you can be with that, meaning, see if you can just acknowledge and accept that that's happening. It's nothing wrong with you for that. It's just your reaction, right? And now we're going to open up that reaction. We're going to shift into a different kind of response towards this person by imagining that this person is also worthy, and why are they worthy? Because we can imagine them just as we would or close one as another person in the world who wants to be happy. He wants to be free of suffering and its causes. So I want you to start reflecting on this in your own way. What does that mean? Maybe, you know, the difficult person a little bit more. And you can see that, you know, what did they do with their actions? They're trying to find happiness. Maybe they're not successful at that with all of their actions, but that's what they're trying to do. Or maybe some of their actions are to avoid a certain kind of pain point, or difficulty. And so just by their actions, it's showing what they seek. And just because we dislike them, or have difficulty with them, it doesn't mean they're not worthy of happiness. It doesn't mean they're not worthy of love. So I want you to reflect on this. And I know this is challenging, so just try your best. This is all about transforming our reaction into an echo enormous response. Just noticing, you know, really, what's the difference between the close one and the difficult person, it's really just our opinion, it's our sense of ourselves and them, our ideas. But of course, the difficult person also has people in their life that they're close to, that they love, who love them. So just because we don't have that relationship with them, doesn't mean they're not worthy of love. So I just want you to reflect on that for a moment. And if the feeling starts to shift, great, let it shift. Again, apply mindful awareness to just resting or sustaining that gently. And if it doesn't shift, that's also fine. This is a practice. So it takes time. We don't need to look for immediate conclusions necessarily. The practice is still worthwhile, even if not that much shifts.

Great, so now let's work with the third kind of relationship. And this is the person we imagine that we're more indifferent toward, or have more neutrality toward. And again, just noticing the quality of that relationship, we might not have a lot of feelings either way. And this is indifference. This is neutrality. But it's not a kind of neutrality that's a helpful one here. What we're looking for is to shift neutrality into equanimity. Equanimity has more to do with how these three kinds of relationships relate to us, right? Because we can see some of them are vastly different, and the kinds of thoughts and emotions that arise for us. So how do we allow more equanimity to arise toward each of these individuals? So the person we're indifferent toward, I want you to imagine them in their life. And I know this is not always easy, because we might not know them so well. But, of course, they have people in their life who care for them, who they care for, just as we reflected on with the close one, and the difficult person. The person we have more indifference or neutrality toward also wants to be happy, also wants to be free from dissatisfaction, stress, different kinds of pain. or suffering. And why is our close one more important than them? And of course, we can see what's coming up. Now, it's because most

likely, our close one does something for us, right? So this is why it's challenging, because we have self interest invested in these relationships. But from the side of the other people, they all want the same thing. We're just trying to allow, again, a more equanimous approach to each that each is deeply worthy of love, deeply worthy of happiness, and also deeply worthy of being free from suffering and its causes. This goes into the other boundless states, but we start to reflect on them a little bit here, as we form more of an equanimous attitude. So just reflect on that for a moment. And if you're feeling toward this indifferent person starts to shift and you start to feel more close to them, you can drop the reflection and just be with the feeling of that. Just sustain that gently with mindful awareness.

OK, so now I want you to take in the quality of each of these people in front of you, whether you're visualizing them or more feeling them in the room, or just reflecting or thinking about them. Just notice, now, the shift that took place. And again, sometimes these shifts are very small and incremental. That's fine. We're not looking for some big experience here. For me, I actually trust when things are a little bit more incremental. They don't have to be these big grand experiences. But of course, if you're having a big grin experience, that's fine, too. Whatever is happening is OK, because it means you're practicing. Even if you came up against a lot of difficulty here, that's also OK. That's why this is a practice just letting go of the conclusion needing to be a certain thing. But noticing now, what's shifted in your reaction versus your response

How's our relationship to openness right now? And if you're noticing a deeper relationship to openness, rest with the openness for a few moments. Another way to think of this is maybe a little more spaciousness opened up in between you and the other people here that you've invited to this practice, so just be with the spaciousness.

We could also begin to come back to the breath and body connecting breath to abdomen or feet on Earth. Breathing into the feet, breathing out into the earth or breathing into the abdomen, letting the abdomen relax.

If you'd like to continue this practice, feel free to do so. But when you're ready, feel free to open your eyes. Let the gaze rest in the space in front of you for a few moments.

Thanks so much for your practice. I hope you can join us for our next session, where we're going to be working with boundless loving kindness. I look forward to practicing with you.

This transcript has been edited for clarity.