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*practicing with equanimity, holding the unbounded view, how to navigate uncertainty*

**Student 1** [00:03:08] So I have actually a two-part question. They both relate to equanimity and how to practice with equanimity. One is about contentment and the suffering of other people. My own benefit, I don't know if that's, I mean, my own genuine benefit, I think I've had some challenges in that regard. But being mindful of my own benefit, sort of as that is understood in general terms, I have not had much trouble with that. It's the *genuine* benefit... caring for the benefit of others, I want to do that. I have a lot of intention in that regard. But being content with the suffering of others has been recently overwhelmingly me, members of my family... and since the election, members of the entire human race. [black humor chuckles] I just been suffering over the suffering of other people. So I wanted to ask a question about equanimity and practicing with the suffering of other people and not being overwhelmed.

[00:04:20] The second part comes out of the mind training study group. And this is almost exactly the same question I asked Ringu Tulku when he was here. But I guess I need to ask it again. In mind training study group, we often talk about illness. You said illness earlier in your conversation... that that's an assumption. I may be mis-stating that. But while we're here in the study group, it sounds to me like we often are talking about the ways that we behave... our illness, the way we're manifesting that illness. And sometimes it can seem like it's just a litany of sicknesses, actually. Because we're talking about the way *with* our minds, we're causing suffering for ourselves and others. And then it comes back to Pema Chodron's conversation about the need to be compassionate with yourself. So I'm looking for some advice or instruction on working with equanimity. And having the *urgency* in your practice... without beating yourself up about that. So those are the twofold questions. Suffering of others, how to work with that? How to be content with that? Haven't found out how to do that.

**LMC** [00:05:58] Good questions. If we have a good conversation, it might be helpful to start with a question. When we talk about equanimity, let's ask the question, what role does *judgment* have to do with equanimity? ... You're not snoring, so I'll figure you're awake.

**Student 1** [00:07:14] Well, yes is not enough.

**LMC** [00:07:22] What role does it play? [various speakers off mic] A massive roll.

**Student 2** [00:07:32] Interruptive.

**LMC** [00:07:32] What does that mean? What role?

**Student 3** [00:07:35] Pervasive?

**LMC** [00:07:36] Just big role, you know, it's not good. Say... what role. [laughs]

**Student 4** [00:07:47] Extensive. I find for me, if I drop judgment, my equanimity can really... I can find it, in a place. Seems really pervasive. Like if I can drop judgments...

**LMC** [00:08:02] If you can drop it, then what?

**Student 4** [00:08:03] Then equanimity is much more attainable. It seems almost... one and the same.

**LMC** [00:08:14] Judgment and equanimity?

**Student 4** [00:08:15] Lack of judgment. Discernment.

**LMC** [00:08:25] A corpse probably doesn't have judgment or equanimity, you know, so maybe not *quite* the same.

**Student 5** [00:08:35] It's related to attachment and aversion, right?

**LMC** [00:08:38] Attachment and aversion. Judgment, equanimity, of course, especially in relation to equanimity, attachment and aversion are kind of the *act* of judgment. Right? It's a kind of, in some cases we might say, it's an unskillful kind of discrimination. Not helpful.

**Student 6** [00:09:04] Judgment feels like in the automatic state. Like the automatic response of our mind. Without... the thing [snaps fingers] that just happens, the judgment. And somehow being able to view that that's happening. That judgment is happening would be the first thing I would have to do before I would even be able to come near anything like equanimity, I guess.

**Student 1** [00:09:44] Can I say that, you know, when people are suffering, I actually don't *want* to not notice that. I don't know that I want to have equanimity. You know, I don't! I don't know that when people are abjectly suffering, I don't want that to not touch me. I don't want to back away from that. I don't want to go at arm's length from it. But I guess my profound inspiration to myself just now is that I'm exactly doing that! You know, I'm pushing it away... because I don't want it.

**LMC** [00:10:22] What's the it?

**Student 1** [00:10:22] The suffering.

**Student 2** [00:10:27] What's the difference between pain and suffering?

**LMC** [00:10:31] That's a good question.

**Student 2** [00:10:32] If you are feeling a family member's pain, are you feeling their pain or are you suffering from that? To me, that's where a separation or [garbled].

**Student 1** [00:10:50] Yeah, I'm definitely feeling their pain. You bet. Definitely.

**LMC** [00:10:58] So do you think that equanimity somehow disconnects you from the suffering of others? That's what it's sounding like. ... Fix it. [laughter]

**Student 2** [00:11:22] When I'm watching, like if my knee's killing me. I could suffer or I could say there's pain in my knee. And I can watch that pain and be with it. And that's why I guess I'm simplistically responding.

**LMC** [00:11:38] Well, it's interesting that common teaching on the Four Immeasurables is that without equanimity, you cannot experience compassion and loving kindness. So, I think the

equanimity here... there's a misunderstanding if we think that it's a way to avoid the experience. Because basically what we've said then is there's no way out here. We can neither have the equanimity, nor can we have Four Immeasurables. Like, it doesn't work. Four Immeasurables is a prerequisite to loving kindness, compassion and that elusive one we haven't talked about yet, joy. So far it doesn't sound like something we deserve joy. [laughter] We're going to have to look at that too.

[00:12:50] Why would it be taught that in order to *manifest*... compassion and joy and loving kindness, one would need equanimity? What's the rule?

**Student 7** [00:13:11] The way that I think I understand it, it's like when I go see people in their homes, I don't get to pick who I go see, especially now in the role I have now. I obey. I open my assignments and they're mostly people I've never seen before. And in every political stripe or wealth or poverty. And if I don't let my opinions and stuff just drop at the door as much as I can, I can't really be helpful for them because I'm putting my *stuff* on them. So I don't say I do it perfectly. But that's been a big, helpful lesson for me to... I mean, I don't completely understand the Four Immeasurables. That would be a reasonable thing to say. But it's helped me work with them more when I think this is... I have to be this like neutral in the sense that I'm just present for you. What do you need?

**Student 8** [00:14:53] I am so resonating with you because I was going to say something similar. My nephew, who is just diagnosed with stage four esophageal cancer, is 30 years old. And then the world under Trump. And those two are... it is really... it almost like, it's almost like I feel, you know, like contentment is like almost this weird betrayal. If I'm not suffering in some way *with* them, then I'm not doing enough. So there's this weird, which I know makes *no* sense, but it's sort of like my sympathetic suffering, sympathetic joy is...

**LMC** [00:15:43] sympathetic suffering. [laughter]

[00:16:12] You know, it's interesting that it's often the case, when you read the stories of great bodhisattvas and saints, a piece of it that's often included in the story is that the *compassion* of that bodhisattva for others, is not focused on their suffering. It's focused on the *cause* of the suffering. So the suffering is just an experience. The attachment to being free of it. The aversion for having it. All of the projections and things around it. Not only from the person who is suffering, but from the people who know that person who put their projections on it too. All of those projections are a kind of massive judgment, of course. And the judgment itself, I think everyone here would say, one of the most *uncomfortable* things in this life is to be judged. For someone to judge you, if you know they're judging you, that's a very difficult situation.

[00:17:34] And I think that it's also *often* true, even when the judgment is positive... but in a more subtle way. We can think like, 'oh, I really like it, you know, they like me and they say that.' But actually, you often know internally that's incorrect. The positive judgment and the negative judgment, are like, actually that's not *my* experience of who I am. And so we have a certain sense, even when it's kind of pleasant, then it just inspires us to attachment. And when it's negative, when we're pushed in the direction of aversion. And the attachment and the aversion are actually the root of the suffering. So when we want to free people of the outer appearance of suffering, that's a nice thing to hold. But it does not remove the root cause. Even when you can remove it.

[00:18:42] So it's worthy of contemplating that instruction, I think. That the primary *focus* for compassion really needs to be... on the cause of suffering. And the example that I like is... you wake up one morning and you have an abscess tooth and you're in a *lot* of pain. And you call the emergency dentist place and you get an appointment. You get the appointment. Suddenly you're *happy* to have an appointment to go see the dentist who is going to cause you pain. But it's because you know that that pain is followed by its alleviation. So even you're sitting in the chair and they're doing things to you that hurt. But you *understand* the relationship between all of that and being free of that pain. So it's not just the discomfort that is the suffering. In fact, one might say, I think more accurately, the discomfort has almost nothing to do with the suffering itself. This is something to ponder. I think most people would find that *completely* ridiculous, but it's totally my experience. In my own mind, in my own body, the things that caused me to suffer the most are the things that most people would say are the source of happiness.

**Student 9** [00:24:50] It seems that the boundless view, what is missing and the lack of equanimity because we just see this small piece. I wish you could speak to that. All this stuff going on with the current leadership of our country. And yet, having a boundless view, in *some* ways, we can see the selfishness and kind of reflected... and questions about what, you know, we don't know the end story of anything. And having that seems to open a more equanimous heart, equanimous mind, because I don't, we *don't* know. This is just a short time.

**LMC** [00:26:03] Yeah, I think you're... cracking the door open a little bit into the space where it's possible to explore the bigger thing, which is what we don't know. Usually when we give rise to compassion, it's about something we know. Like, I know this person is hurting or this is happening. We know something. And so the compassion is directed on what we know. And often, I think again, from a spiritual perspective, it's misdirected. So from an ordinary, everyday kindness, which is certainly, in a way, you got to say that's a prerequisite to the deeper things. If you can't even be kind to yourself, for example, really, it's not likely that you're going to be effective with somebody else. So the unbounded perspective which [she] is raising is really another step.

[00:27:22] And it's difficult to hold this, but from our perspective as Buddhists... and maybe others too, but from our perspective as Buddhists, we don't actually have access to the causes and conditions that bring about a certain kind of suffering. So if I eat half a gallon of ice cream this afternoon and then I'm sick for three days, I know exactly why I'm sick for three days. But *why* I did that in the *first* place is not actually accessible to me. [laughter] When did that start? And when I meet somebody on the street and I feel kindly towards them or I feel afraid of them, whatever it is, I don't have access to why that's there. Why do I have that experience?

[00:28:25] And that's really a place to focus our own kind of reflexive compassion on ourselves. That we actually don't see these things. And if we look at it really closely and ponder it, I think we have to come to the conclusion, it's almost certain that we don't understand the causes and conditions at *all* between events that may have been seeded... a very long time ago, not in this life, not even in countable previous lives. We just have no way of knowing. So one could ask the question, reasonably, so why are we talking about that? [laughter] I think it's a very important question.

[00:29:23] I say that out of my own personal experience. I have had a strong habit of asking the questions, when I receive a Dharma instruction or a new practice or something, I find myself asking the question, why are you doing that? Is there something to be gained by that? What is that? What's the effect? What do I get from it? What do other people get from it? If I can't

answer that question satisfactorily for myself, I abandon it. And I've abandoned some of the most precious teachings because I couldn't. So later they come around again. And when they come around again, the nice thing is, is that... if you've *pondered* it and looked at what was there before, sometimes the door is open. And when they come around again, you have an aha! That's what it is. But I can't encourage somebody to do something when there is no sense of connection and understanding as to why they would do it.

[00:30:29] There's a reason to hold the unbounded view, even though *none* of us understand it. [laughs] It's like, how are you going to reckon with some... action, that we would call karma, from some previous life that may have occurred millennia ago or more? There's no way to reckon with that. What do I do with that? But it's interesting to just hold that view! That *all* of the things that occur to me, the stream of my experience, which is flowing, I *think* I have some sense of what's *in* that stream. But actually, if I step back from it, I have no idea. And the contemplation of it, which is really saying in this case, a meditation... on that stream of experience, completely changes when you give up thinking that you know what's causing it. Now, you're in a totally different place with it.

[00:31:35] There are many, kind of profound teachings around that thing. But the first thing is... is that we never know what the outcome of anything is going to be. Even, usually, in the next five minutes, let alone... So this comes to the place of... first of all, we see suffering. So we can talk a lot about the political thing. But actually, it's not particularly unique. It's only just kind of interesting from another perspective. But like all things, all you got to do is project out, let's just say... a century. Many of us are not so far away from living a century. [laughter] And when you look back over like 50 years, if you look and see, like, the pieces in there, there are very few pieces that you can really definitely connect up. I did this and that happened. I did this. Then you move on. You don't connect it. And mostly we can't see those connections. In fact, I think if you look closely, you would say, you can never see it. Because there's never an end point.

[00:32:58] I can have a discussion with somebody because we're having a difficult interpersonal relationship of some kind. So we can sit down and talk about it and feel like, well, that was good. That was a good meeting. But the next day, then I'm thinking, I'm not so sure about what they said. [laughter] And so, you know, and then that uncertainty plays into more things. And pretty soon you're like a long ways away from where you were before. And then you're back at the table talking about like, what can we do about this? There's no end to it. Just like there's no beginning. So if you can hold that view... that not that there *is*... really no beginning and no end. The important thing is, is that I can't see it!

[00:33:46] So how do I act skillfully? You see somebody who's suffering. You want to do something. It's an interesting gambit to start from the perspective, I have no idea why this is here. Whether this is ultimately good for this person or bad for this, I just have no idea. So from the perspective of utterly not knowing... now, what are you going to do? There are things to do, for sure. There are situations where you *will do* something. But when you do that from the perspective of, I don't actually know... that this is helpful or not helpful, it changes things. Changes things a lot. And when someone says, I don't want your help. That's like, if you're in the space of I don't know, that's the obvious thing for somebody to say. 'I don't want your help' As opposed to, 'it's offensive to tell me that, you know, I mean, I drove all the way across town. [laughter] How about a little appreciation.' 'Nurse, would you get this guy out of here.'

[00:35:10] There's a kind of a funny Tibetan's story about a situation where a farmer had this great horse came to him. And that horse was valuable because, you know, it was a workhorse,

and all. And also, a horse that you could ride. And so everybody thought ,wow fantastic, what amazing, good fortune, amazing good fortune. And then his son later on falls off the horse and breaks his leg. Everybody says, oh, what terrible fortune. And then the army comes by to conscript all the young men, and they don't take him because his leg's broken. So then it's like, well, such great good fortune, you know? So there's always the judgments, just kind of like roll with it all the time, as *if* we actually saw something. And actually, all we're seeing is our own projections. And identifying it as the truth of something outside.

[00:36:13] So equanimity plays a *huge* role in weaving these things together so that we have a sense of... I see something, but I don't *actually* know, where did it come from? where is it going? I want to fix something, but how do you fix it when you don't know what will actually bring about something positive as opposed to negative or neutral? You *will* still act. But I would propose... that in the realm of the question of what is skillful and what is unskillful, you're far more likely to do something skillful... if it comes from the place of I don't actually know that this is the best thing to do. You still do something. And it may, in the short run or the long run, result in something really good or not. But even when it doesn't result in something really good, we still don't know what *will* result from *that* point forward.

[00:37:20] So this is a huge piece, I think from my own perspective, a huge piece in the Dharma, of... how do you navigate the uncertainty? How do you do that? ... I think that we can do that more easily when we look at ourselves and come to the place of, I have lots of projections and ideas, but I can see that I don't actually have *access* to what my various actions lead to. And now you're going to have to do something in *that* context. And that's very uncomfortable. We're used to carrying around this kind of... certainty. I won't put all of the four-letter words on it that conveniently describe it. But it is a certainty which is, probably as often as not, a cause of just more suffering. And it's a piece of our path.

That *is* a piece of it. [00:38:29] The unbounded view takes us into a realm of uncertainty. And you can't just do nothing. You will do something because you *do* feel for others. So you will do something. ... It's very hard to do something that feels very important and you actually have not a good idea of where that's going to lead. And then, in that space, to decide what it is that is going to happen. So... one of the things that we say about great realization and insight is that when you encounter a difficult situation... well, let's just put it in the realm of the Buddha or someone who's enlightened, there is no pondering what to do. There is no pondering what to do. Now, most of us could say, yeah, I never think about it. I just react. [laughter] I must be enlightened.

[00:39:33] But it's also not a reaction. It's really... it could be a reaction. Like, your child runs into the traffic in the street, you don't ponder it. You just do something. That also is a reaction. One could say, well, you know, reactions are helpful sometimes. But generally speaking, what's difficult is that we don't know and we *are* going to do something, or not. We might decide not to. We don't know that somebody's suffering is actually helpful. I don't know how many have this experience, but sometimes if I get sick, and I'm really bedridden, there's a certain *joy* about it. Because you don't have to apologize to anybody for not showing up. [laughter] It's an opportunity to enjoy ill health.

[00:40:40] And yet, while you're *attempting* to enjoy ill health, people are trying to *fix* you. Take this. Take this. If you take all the things that people give, you *will* be sick. So that's there, too. And then you offend people. Sometimes you just take what people give you. They are trying to be helpful. And so you take, instead of saying, get out of here.

**Student 10** [00:41:19] I was really struck by the teaching this morning about equanimity within yourself and what's coming up internally. And it made me think of an experience I had like two weeks ago or a week ago or something where I had... was very close to a panic attack that lasted all day long. Just overwhelming anxiety. I was very aware of how much I had this aversion. I don't want this. I don't want this feeling. I don't want this feeling. How can I get rid of this feeling? You know, then and then I'm like trying to use all my like Buddhist tools, you know. I'm going to breathe. I'm going to] say prayer, do all this stuff, right, loving kindness to myself. And I ended calling somebody and it was helpful. I was thinking about, like, how to help people, you know. Like, I really didn't want him to do anything. I didn't want him to tell me what to do. I didn't want him to fix it. I just wanted him to be in that space with me. And that was really helpful.

[00:42:30] And also, I think the main thing that helped at that point was I just held this idea of impermanence in my mind. Finally, I was just like, okay. Like, I mean, I didn't feel better. But it was like I have this anxiety. It may just last all day, *but* it's not going to last forever. And I just like, I just tried to be kind to myself around it. And something about the impermanence thing helped a little bit, I think. And sure enough, you know, like the next day I woke up feeling better. But I still have this sense of like, 'oh, God, I hope that never comes back!' And so sitting in the meditation today... I could see, like how useful that is to do it in formal practice, so that it might be a more natural response to those feelings. Instead of reacting or trying to get rid of stuff.

**LMC** [00:43:29] Yeah. And then of course you have the alternative... to engage in the mind training practice... of here I have an experience which I loathe. And how many people are having exactly this experience right in this very moment? So that in itself then opens a kind of a sphere up into some other space. I mean, when you're talking half a dozen billion people, you can pretty much feel confident that there's at least hundreds, if not hundreds of thousands or millions of people who are having this exact experience right now. And then from the mind training perspective, we make this wish... which is actually an heroic wish, that I might take on all of that suffering and *experience* it. And by so experiencing it, free them of it. Now, this is actually compassion for one's self. [ringing sound] So is the bell. [laughter]

[00:45:01] We'll dedicate the merit. Someday we'll have to talk about what that is.

**sangha** [00:45:10] *dedicating the merit*