

How to See a Rainbow: The Sublime State of Equanimity

By Peter B. Williams

Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,
A cool breeze in summer, snow in winter—
If your mind is not clouded by unnecessary things,
This is the best season of your life.
--Wu Men

I saw the Dalai Lama speak for the first time when I was a college student in the Northeast in 1981. I wasn't even interested in Buddhism in those days, and I don't remember much about the talk except for an indelible image he painted for us. He had us imagine sitting with two men on either side of us. On your right arm is a man with a pleasant face and voice, who is kind and understanding. He is massaging your forearm in a way that makes you feel deeply cared for. On the left arm is a man with unwashed, matted hair, bad breath, and who reeks of sweat and dirt. He is looking at you in a menacing way and is scratching at your forearm with a nail. His Holiness said that the human heart is capable of developing enough equanimity to be able to care equally for both men. —Yeah, right, was my thought at the time.

Change is the Only Constant

But 27 years of living since that talk has driven home the lesson that equanimity – even in far smaller doses than the Dalai Lama described – is essential to happiness. Why? Because the impermanence of life is relentless. Everything – from the weather to our moods to our relations at work to our friendships – changes so quickly. We have no idea what is coming next. Someone can tell you how much they love your enthusiasm and energy in one moment and in the next someone else can tell you that you angered them the other night at a dinner party. Shakespeare, in a famous passage, comments on the impermanence of all things:

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
-- *The Tempest*

Tragic events can happen without notice. Do you remember where you were when you heard the news about planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers? More than likely you were involved in some mundane task – making breakfast, dropping the kids off at school, punching the clock at work. On that morning, Lisa and I were on a vacation from our busy lives in Vermont and were heading for a five-day backpacking trip in Gros Morne National Park, a rocky, wind-blasted hump of mountains and fjords on the northwest coast of Newfoundland. A ranger at the drivethrough

registration booth greeted us with the two national park requisites – park ranger cheer and a hat with a brim as straight and large as a 33 LP record. After some pleasantries, we told her we were from the U. S. Her face whitened and she whispered, —Have you heard what happened to the towers? It was 11 a.m. New York time. We rushed to a pay phone at the back of a liquor store and made frantic calls to our families. In a moment, the lives of so many other people were turned from ordinary to tragic, from routine to desperately grieving.

Be Ready for Anything

The Buddha called the relentless ups and downs of life the vicissitudes, and codified them in four pairs: pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and ill-repute. No matter how competent we are as employees, parents, romantic partners, friends and community members, we will face the turbulence of these outcomes. How can we deal with such a predicament? U Pandita, a senior Buddhist monk from Burma, and one of Joseph Goldstein's main teachers, likes to exhort his students, —Be ready for anything. This is not just a teaching for a select few spiritual warriors. It is a reality instruction for every one of us, preventative medicine for dealing with the chaos of our lives.

But does he mean by this that we should imagine every possible outcome and scurry about like squirrels? No. He means to practice remaining at ease in the face of the vicissitudes. Equanimity is a state of accepting the alternation of pleasure and pain, being able to stay connected and non-reactive as life does its dance. Do you know how to see a rainbow? You must stand with the sun behind you and the rain in front of you. If you move towards the sun, you'll lose the elusive rainbow and if you move towards the clouds you'll also lose it. The trick is to stand in just the right spot between the two. This is how we must relate with the vicissitudes. If we can accept life as it comes to us we will see the rainbow of our deeper nature – a happiness and peace that does not depend on things going right in our lives. The actress Helen Mirren, who did such a lovely job playing Queen Elizabeth in *The Queen*, seems to understand this teaching. Here is what she told Reuters a few weeks before winning the Oscar for best actress: "Win or lose, the bubble bursts and you're back to the nitty gritty of working. I'm honestly at my happiest in a cold rehearsal room with my polystyrene cup of tea." Even winning an Oscar is a kind of mirage. What truly sustains us is how we relate to our lives moment-to-moment.

Buddha was not a Stone Statue

The Dalai Lama's description of feeling the same way for the pleasant man stroking one of our arms while Mr. Bad Breath scratches the other is setting the equanimity bar pretty high. A person as developed as the head of Tibetan Buddhism might be able to treat two such disparate beings equally. You and I, however, are probably a bit more attached to pleasure and pain. The point is not to try and be perfectly equanimous, to not have preferences or reactions. This is emulating Buddha the stone statue. Until you are fully enlightened you will have preferences. The point is to be mindful of whatever is happening in the now. Mindfulness will develop

equanimity for you. Paradoxically, while mindfulness is the very essence of nonreactivity, we are usually bringing it to bear on some form of reactivity. You notice irritability, which is a reaction, and you react to it by hating it. However, become mindful of the hating and you have just manifested equanimity. You cut the reactivity to that mind state. If you are mindful of and interested in your experience of the moment – be it joy or compassion or irritation or anxiety – you are being equanimous.

What's Done is Done; It Is What it Is; Que Sera, Sera

The key to developing equanimity is to recognize and accept what you cannot control. Most of us accept the fact that weather changes. We might not like it when it does, but we don't struggle with it for too long. Can we recognize that our lives and our minds are the same way? We tend not to choose our reactions to experiences. We just wake and notice that we are having a reaction. To recognize that we do not order up a state of anxiety when we remember that we have an uncomfortable meeting the next day is to reduce our suffering. We can be mindful of the anxiety as an experience in the present moment, and recognize that we have no idea if the story associated with it is true. We cannot control the arising of anxiety, but we can control how we relate to it. This is the beginning of equanimity.

Equanimity teaches us to leave the past behind and the future ahead. You will be much more peaceful if you can truly live out the adage, —What's done is done. You can't change the fact that you did not get a part in that musical you auditioned for. You did your best, and the rest was not up to you. Of course, you need to plan to the extent that it is necessary, but most of us engage in relentless planning, as if we really had some control over the future. The more we can leave the future ahead of us, the more we can put our energy into the only thing we can control – how we respond to the moment we just awoke to. This can all be neatly summarized with, —What's done is done. It is what it is. Que sera, sera.

A Chinese poem Sharon Salzberg uses in her book, *Lovingkindness*, encapsulates the deep restfulness of letting things be as they are:

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A cool breeze in summer, snow in winter—
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This is the best season of your life.
--Wu Men

How to Cultivate Equanimity

Mindfulness

As I said above, mindfulness directly cultivates equanimity. Mindfulness, in fact, IS equanimity, because if you truly pay attention to experience, you are automatically in a balanced relationship to it. Mindfulness cuts reactivity to pleasure and pain, the two main currents that muddy our mental waters. Dharma teacher Sylvia Boorstein highlights this lesson in the following pith instructions:

If you pay attention for just five minutes, you know some very fundamental dharma: things change, nothing stays comfortable, sensations come and go quite impersonally, according to conditions, but not because of anything that you do or think you do. Changes come and go quite by themselves. In the first five minutes of paying attention, you learn that pleasant sensations lead to the desire that these sensations will stay and that unpleasant sensations lead to the hope that they will go away. And both the attraction and the aversion amount to tension in the mind. Both are uncomfortable. So in the first minutes, you get a big lesson about suffering: wanting things to be other than they are. Such a tremendous amount of truth to be learned just by closing your eyes and paying attention to bodily sensations (Tricycle's Daily Dharma: July 19, 2007).

Space Awareness

Another way to cultivate equanimity is to be aware of physical space. We generally focus on objects and not the space they occur in. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche dramatized this bias in a class he taught at Naropa. He drew a picture of black, curved Vs on a large piece of paper and asked his students what he had drawn. —Birds, his students said. —No, he replied, —It is a picture of the sky with birds in it. Becoming aware of space helps the mind find its own spaciousness and ease. In some Tibetan Buddhist traditions, sky gazing is a central practice. In this practice, one sits outside and gazes into the sky, taking the volume of space as one's meditation object. This can help one's mind relax and open. One can also do this indoors. In a room, instead of focusing on objects, notice the space defined by the enclosure. One can take this same approach in a conversation. One can notice the person one is talking with in the one's full field of vision, noticing the space in the room while participating in the conversation. In all these examples, cutting the visual fixation on a single object and opening up the visual field can cut mental fixation as well.

Buddhist Serenity Prayer

The Tibetan Buddhist counterpart of the serenity prayer is a saying that goes something like this: —If you have a problem and you can do something about it, then no problem. If you have a problem and you can't do something about it, then also no problem! This keeps things so simple. You change what you can and you accept what you cannot. This saying applied on a daily basis is a great way to develop equanimity. The third part of the serenity prayer, the wisdom to distinguish between what can and cannot be changed, can come from mindfulness. For example, Suzuki Roshi said that the best way to manage your children is to watch them. The more you watch, the more you can see what they are really doing. Then appropriate action becomes obvious. At a recent dinner with my extended family, we sat my two nephews at a separate table. After a few minutes they began acting out. I turned my attention to them and took in their frenetic energy. As I sat with this, it became clear that they needed attention. It seemed they were hurt that they had been suddenly excluded from the adult milieu. The situation was resolved when we found a way to seat all of us together.

Equanimity Practice

This practice cultivates equanimity in relation to other beings. Equanimity practice is the fourth of the brahma vihara, or divine abode, practices. In fact, equanimity is the foundation of the other three practices - lovingkindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. Equanimity allows us to wish all beings well, recognizing that cultivating this wish in our hearts connects us deeply to others, even while our wishes do not directly bring about happiness for people. Equanimity allows us to open to the suffering of others, recognizing that while we can care for a person who is suffering, we can't make the pain go away. Equanimity allows us to feel happy for the happiness of others, recognizing that their good fortune does not diminish us.

Equanimity practice is greatly helped by the understanding that all beings are heirs of their past actions. The law of karma is very complex and mysterious and it is best not to try and figure it out too much. For the purposes of this practice we can keep the definition of karma quite simple: The mind is a product of its own habits. A person's current mind state is a result of previous ones. If you are in the habit of seeing the good in people, you will more easily see the good in them in the future. If you practice mind states of fear, judgment, and condemnation, these mind states are more likely in the future. The difficulty lands in a mind that is habituated to responding in certain ways. If you are used to being mindful, then you might approach difficulty with interest, seeing it as a challenge, rather than a problem, seeing it as an opportunity for growth. If you are used to reacting with outrage at the slightest provocation, you will see a new difficulty as just another proof that life is unfair and burdensome.

A particularly sticky aspect of karma, but one which is very helpful for cultivating equanimity, is the concept of reincarnation. To truly understand people's life situations, said the Buddha, you must recognize that actions in past lives can bear fruit in subsequent lives. This can help explain the otherwise inexplicable suffering some beings face. The Buddha himself died of food poisoning because of a karmic action he had committed in a previous life. Although he was fully enlightened and was making no new negative karma for himself, he could not prevent past karma from bearing fruit. A child born into a broken family is another example. It may not look like they are heirs of their own actions, but of the actions of their parents. But the Buddha said that karma from past lives dictates the family situations a child gets born into. A person who has caused harm in a past life is more likely to be born into a difficult family than someone with a string of virtuous lives.

This may sound controversial to you. It takes time for Westerners to get used to such teachings on karma. One could misinterpret karma as a reason to blame others — That person deserves to suffer because of all their bad actions in the past. This is not staying connected. If you stay connected, understanding karma leads you to feel compassion for those in difficult circumstances. Your thoughts might be more like, —They are suffering the consequences of their past actions and it is quite out of their control. Isn't it sad that this suffering is so unavoidable. I hope they can deal with it in a clear and compassionate way so they are planting seeds of happiness for the future. If all of this sounds too incomprehensible, just stay with the simpler teaching above —

people's happiness, for the most part, depends on their mental habits.

The equanimity practice can bring up mind states that need to be recognized and let go of. The opposite of equanimity is reactivity, either grabbing onto something or someone, or pushing them away. A mind state that is more easily confused with equanimity is its near enemy, indifference. Equanimity is a mind state in which one stays very connected to the being one is relating to. Indifference, on the other hand, is a disconnect: You don't feel upset or happy about a person's situation because you are not really taking it in. Be on the lookout for indifference in the practice and come back to concentrating on your equanimity phrase and your subject.

Start the practice by being with your breath. After a few minutes, start the equanimity practice by extending one of the phrases below to a being in the neutral category. The teachings say this is the easiest being to feel equanimity towards. The purpose of the practice is to develop a connected balance in our hearts towards the happiness of ourselves and others. One uses a single phrase that somehow captures the fact that although we can care very deeply about people, we are not able to bring about their basic happiness. This must come from them.

The classical phrase is:

You are the heir of your karma. Your happiness depends on your actions,
Not upon my wishes.

If this sounds too much like a lecture, or too disconnected, try one of these:

I wish you well, but I can't control the unfolding of your karma.
May you be at ease with the ups and downs of your life.

Keep repeating one of these phrases, or make up your own, as you hold an image or felt sense of the neutral being in your heart. If you get caught in storylines about the person or other distractions, note —thinking, and come back to the meaning of the phrase and the subject. Keep a lookout for equanimity. If the mind state arises, you can include it as a third concentration object. What is the mood in the mind of this state of connected balance? Are there body sensations associated with it? End the practice by returning to your breath for a few minutes.

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