

Equanimity

Spirit Rock Meditation Center

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This morning I want to explore equanimity – the capacity to recover our equilibrium in the midst of chaos or confusion. Equanimity is a profound presence of mind: the ability to see without being caught by what we see; a calm presence that is aware, open, engaged but not swayed or caught by any phenomena, any experience of the moment. How we can stand steady in the face of catastrophe, personal or global; how we can remain calm and engaged when the flak hits the fan. So equanimity has this sense of a mind (and heart) that remains undisturbed, even in the face of life’s turmoil and difficulties.

In our tradition, equanimity is said to be the practice that can hold us steady in the face of the eight worldly winds: praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. Christina Feldman, senior Buddhist meditation teacher, describes equanimity as “the willingness to be equally near all things. Equanimity holds us steady in the face of any duality – hope and disappointment, generosity and envy, respect and contempt. We can be present for any experience without turning it into something concrete to grasp onto, or something that drops off the radar, neglected or forgotten. Equanimity can hold our experiences of no-thing-ness and our experiences of inter-connectedness in a balance, without reifying either one, without forgetting the other.

In our tradition, equanimity is considered one of the four Brahma Viharass. The Brahma Viharas—the four “sublime attitudes”—are considered the Buddha’s primary teachings to cultivate the states of mind that harmonize our human nature with our essential True Nature. The Brahma Viharas are both states of mind and heart that are the direct experience of our true Buddha Nature, and a series of pragmatic practices that help us express these “four immeasurable” directly in our daily lives.

Loving kindness or goodwill (metta): practices of warm-hearted well-wishing for deep happiness and well-being, directed toward ourselves or others, even when that’s difficult. A steady loving kindness practice helps us to meet every moment of experience, and every other being in our lives, with more openness and friendliness.

Compassion (karuna): practices of empathy and care when we encounter sorrow and struggle, our own or that of others. A steady compassion practice helps us to face the suffering inherent in life and act wisely to alleviate it, without closing down our hearts or running away.

Sympathetic joy (mudita): practices that cultivate true happiness, ease, contentment, independent of external conditions, and lead us to rejoice in the joy, happiness, and well-being of others. A steady practice of joy is one of the seven factors leading to enlightenment. Equanimity being another.

Equanimity (upekha): practices that bring balance and clear seeing to the mind when facing life's turmoils and difficulties, our own or those of others; a steady practice of equanimity helps us stay on an even keel throughout all of life's experiences; seen as essential to the full realization of loving kindness, compassion, and joy. The steady container that holds the practices of the other three Brahma Viharas. As a Brahma Vihara, equanimity is considered both a path of practice to the heavenly abodes, and the state of abiding in them. The true nature of our being.

In our tradition, equanimity is also considered one of seven factors of enlightenment, along with: mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration. Even though these seven factors are not necessarily considered a sequential path, mindfulness first, investigation second, etc. It is significant that equanimity is the last of the list, again supporting the cultivation of the other six, perhaps the last step before enlightenment.

Gil Fronsdal, one of Spirit Rock's senior teachers, describes equanimity this way. "Equanimity is the ground for wisdom and freedom and the protector of compassion and love. While some may think of equanimity as dry neutrality or cool aloofness, mature equanimity produces a radiance and warmth of being. The Buddha described a mind filled with equanimity as "abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will." When well-developed, such inner calm gives rise to a great sense of peace."

Three examples of equanimity:

From the Zen tradition: A master monk is meditating in a temple with other monks. Suddenly a fierce bandit storms into the temple, threatening to kill everybody. The other monks flee but the master monk remains, calmly meditating. Enraged, the bandit shouts, "Don't you understand? I could run you through with my sword and not bat an eye!" The monk calmly replies, "Don't you understand? I could be run through by your sword and not bat an eye."

A high bar for equanimity indeed, and it takes years of practice to arrive there.

A more contemporary example; some of you may remember this story from the recent years of strife in Eastern Europe. Vedran Smailovic is a modern day example of steadiness in the midst of chaos. Vedran Smailovic was the principal cellist the Sarajevo Opera Company when the civil strife broke out in Bosnia. His response to the conflict and ensuing chaos was to put on his formal concert attire, walk out of his apartment into the midst of the battle raging around him, and play his cello, every afternoon for an hour. He would place a little camp stool in the middle of the bomb craters and play a concert to the abandoned streets, while bombs dropped and bullets flew all around him. Day after day he made his own personal and courageous stand for human dignity, for civilization, for compassion and for peace. Miraculously, he was never harmed. The news wires picked up the story of this extraordinary man, sitting in his white tie and tails on a camp stool in the center of a raging, hellish war zone – playing his cello to the empty air.

And the third example: Rudyard Kipling's poem If. Kipling won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907; he wrote If three years later. I do wonder how his practice of dealing with the 8 winds of change influenced the writing of the poem. Kipling was born and raised in British colonial

India and returned there many times in his adult life. I also wonder how the spiritual sensibilities of the country also influenced the writing of the poem. Please forgive the gender bias at the end.

IF

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with wornout tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings - nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run -
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man my son!

- Rudyard Kipling

I hope these three examples convey that equanimity is not about indifference or aloofness. It takes incredible presence of mind and integrity of practice to develop a mature equanimity.

How do we develop these qualities of even-tempered-ness, even tranquility in the face of life's disruptive unwanted changes and its miraculous blessings, too? Especially if you grew up in a family, in a culture, as I did, where either people rushed to fix a problem right away so it wouldn't disturb anyone too much, or they quickly "moved on" so the emotional upheaval wouldn't disturb anyone too much, or they collapsed in a resigned helplessness and the disturbance became the new normal. How to cultivate the equanimity that is essential to coping in householder life?

1. We continue to practice presence, mindfulness, awareness, of course. The first teaching, this is Pema Chodron's languaging, is to catch ourselves when we feel any attraction or any aversion about anything before it hardens in grasping or negativity. We use our mindfulness practice for that, to notice the first arising of any reaction, liking or disliking, wanting or not wanting, letting go of any reactivity to any of our reactions. We do need to be able to step back from whatever is happening at the moment and reflect on it – to be aware without being caught or hijacked so that we can see clearly what is happening without distortion. We can respond mindfully and yet not react mindlessly. When we are reactive - which happens how many countless times a day - we are temporarily not in the divine abode of equanimity. We use our mindfulness practice to notice that reactivity and wake up again and return to awareness and acceptance of what is happening, coming home to our equanimity, so that we are, as Phil Moffett teaches: affected, but not infected.

2. We cultivate equanimity through the wise view of seeing clearly the emptiness and impermanence of all experience. We can care, and care deeply, about being present to life, being fully engaged in our lives, and still rest our being in that truth of the ever-changing flow of existence. Whatever is happening now wasn't happening ten minutes ago or three days ago. This state of being or state of consciousness will evolve to something different ten minutes from now, and trusting that seeing of the ever-changing nature of experience. We practice a mindful and compassionate acceptance of the experience of the moment as is, not grasping, not avoiding, not denying; accepting the experience and the reality that the experience is changing.

3. We take responsibility for our own karma, for the consequences of our own behaviors, for the results of our choices and actions. We cultivate equanimity by cleaning up our act, by cultivating virtue and integrity in all our behaviors and interactions, experience equanimity of blamelessness.

4. But not other people's karma. We cultivate equanimity by understanding that each of us, every person, is responsible for our own decisions that lead to happiness or led to suffering. One of the phrases used in equanimity practice that I have found so helpful: your happiness or unhappiness is the result of your actions, not my wishes for you. Each of us is responsible for our own practices to end suffering, our own wise effort. We care, and care deeply; we can reflect and remind and guide; we can be one of the 10,000 causes upstream in someone's choices. We can be responsive: may you meet the ups and downs of your life with calmness, peacefulness, resilience. But we're not responsible.

5. I also like what I learned from Gil Fronsdal: in Buddhism, it is considered appropriate and helpful to cultivate the well-being that supports our equanimity. When we pro-actively cultivate the step in the 8-fold path of Wise Effort – cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome, we actually create the causes and conditions that make it easier to be equanimous.

Questions?

Now we'll do a few exercises to practice cultivating equanimity. Because everything can be a cue to practice equanimity. Everything.

1. Equanimity is a learned capacity and it is something we can learn from others as we attempt to practice it ourselves. In order to learn equanimity ourselves, we need to be in a system where someone is equanimous; someone is holding it together when the system is rocked. Because that one person's equanimity can reverberate throughout the system and calm everyone else down. (A real jump start to our practice if we learned equanimity in our family system growing up; essential to learn in other systems later on if not.)

I learned how this reverberating through the system works first hand when I began seeing clients in graduate school, earning hours toward becoming a licensed psychotherapist. My emerging equanimity was being tested every day by the chaos and confusion of my clients' lives. Never more so than one afternoon when a client called in to say that her teenage daughter had committed suicide the night before.

Nothing – in my training or my life experience up to that point – had equipped me to know how to stay equanimous in that moment. I managed to find a time to see her that night, but I was in a state of shock, not calm presence, certainly not yet the stalwart, skillful clinician my client needed to help her through such bewildering, devastating loss and grief.

I managed to tell my supervisor at the clinic what had happened. With two teenaged daughters at home herself, she wobbled a bit, too. She went to see the clinic director who, a bit more removed and a lot more experienced, was rock solid in knowing how to handle the situation. She was able to steady my supervisor and suggest many things to do that would be helpful to me and my client. Re-equilibrated herself, my supervisor could be quite clear and quite empathic about what I needed to do to support my client. I felt her steadiness myself, re-grouped into my own steadiness, and then was actually able to be quite helpful to my client that night.

Exercise #1: discuss “go to” people in groups of four, who have helped you re-settle your molecules and recover your equanimity

Discussion

2. Equanimity around emotions. We are hardwired to feel our own emotions, and we are hardwired to resonate, attune to, empathize with the emotions of other people. Emotions are signals, sometimes from our body, sometimes from our mid-brain, sometimes from our higher brain: “Something important is happening. Pay attention!” And so when we do pay attention,

we notice, we focus, and we bring mindful awareness and a compassionate acceptance to what is happening in this moment. Then we can be non-reactive to our reactions. When we can simply be with and be accepting of our emotions, they will change on their own, naturally. The average emotion lasts eight seconds if we don't grip it or feed it. Emotions give us moment by moment practice in equanimity: being with, without reacting, without losing our cool. So – an emotion, a reaction, arises. We evoke a mindful pause. We notice, experience, hold, reflect, take responsibility for our emotions, manage them, process them, respond to them wisely and skillfully.

EXERCISE #2: HAND ON THE HEART

Sit comfortably in your chair. Allow your eyes to gently close. Focus your awareness on your breathing, gently in and out. When that's steady, place your own hand on your own heart, feeling the warmth of the touch of your hand on your heart. Breathe gently and deeply into your heart center. Breathe into your heart center any sense of goodness, safety, trust, acceptance, ease, you can muster. Breathe in a sense of ease, safety, of calm and peace into your heart center. You may elaborate this as you wish. Breathing in a sense of contentment, well-being, a sense of acceptance, of delight, a sense of kindness for yourself, gratitude for others. Slowly gently breathing in qualities of self care into your heart.

Once that's steady, call to mind a moment of being with someone who loves you unconditionally, someone you feel completely safe with. This may be a moment with your beloved partner or a beloved child, or parent, though the dynamics of those relationships can sometimes be complicated and the emotions mixed, so you may choose a moment of being with a dear friend, a trusted teacher, a close colleague or neighbor, a moment when you felt seen and accepted, loved and cherished. It may be your therapist, your grandmother, a third grade teacher. This person could be a spiritual figure like Jesus or the Dalai Lama. Could be a beloved pet. Pets are great, actually.

As you remember feeling safe and loved with this person or pet, see if you can feel the feelings and sensations that come up with that memory in your body. Really savor this feeling of warmth, safety, trust, love in your body. When that feeling is steady, let go of the image and simply bathe in the feeling for 30 seconds.

Discussion

Exercise #3: Equanimity as the fourth Brahma Vihara

We do this exercise entirely in silence. Turn to your partner. Simply gaze into your partner's eyes, allowing your self to see in them the nobility of their true nature. Their innate goodness and radiance of their being, and silently wish them well, sending them expressions of loving kindness: may you know the deepest happiness, may you have ease of mind and heart, and let yourself know that your partner is sending you expressions of loving kindness as well. Taking in that kindness.

Then allow your awareness to shift. Imagine what human sorrows your partner might have experienced in their journey, what losses, what griefs, what pain of the human condition. Silently begin to send them expressions of compassion: May your sorrows be held in loving awareness, may your sorrow ease, may you feel my care for your suffering. And let yourself know that your partner is sending you compassion for your sorrow and suffering as well. Let yourself take in that care and compassion.

Then allow your awareness to shift. Imagine what human joys your partner may have experienced in their journey. What accomplishments and competencies they might have achieved. What blessings of abundance and love they might have experienced on their journey. And silently begin to send them expressions of sympathetic joy, happiness for their happiness. May you fully delight in your delight; may you feel your joy deeply. And allow yourself to know your partner is sending you expressions of joy in your joy as well. Let yourself take in the sweetness of their joy in your joy.

Then allow your awareness to shift again to expressing wishes for calm abiding to your partner, wishes for equanimity: Whatever happens on your journey, may you perceive and respond to it with a calm ease of mind and heart. May you have deep inner peace. And allow yourself to know your partner is sending you expressions of the wish for equanimity, for calm abiding for you as well. Let yourself take in the calming energy of their well-wishing.

Allow your awareness to shift one more time to simply being in your own being, noticing whatever is going on for you right now. Awareness of your inner experience, and awareness of your awareness.

Discussion

Closing Meditation

May I trust the unfolding of life. May I trust the peace of mind that comes when I can be not reactive. May I be present and open and caring without being thrown by what I'm opening to. May I find steadiness of mind and heart as you endeavor to keep your heart open to whatever is happening – and respond wisely.