

Dharma Talk

How many of you were here last week? I think we experienced a historic moment. Rick linked the five aggregates with the neural substrates of consciousness. No one else on the planet is teaching this this. You can download the talk on Rick's website:

[www.rickhanson.net/media/audio/talks/Buddhistwisdom/date](http://www.rickhanson.net/media/audio/talks/Buddhistwisdom/date)

Rick talked about the Buddha's encounter with the four heavenly messengers – old age, disease, death, and a monk embodying the possibility of dealing with those three skillfully, with equanimity, on the path to enlightenment – in the context of his framework that we are all hardwired to avoid harms, approach rewards and attach to others, roughly corresponding to the reptilian, mammalian and human parts of the brain, except that all three are anchored in the mammalian brain, actually.

I just read Paul Gilbert's book *The Compassionate Mind* over last weekend. He described three very similar systems in the brain: the threat-self-protection system – we avoid harm or danger through fight-flight-freeze-appease; the incentive-resource seeking system – we approach rewards through the drive for pleasure, accomplishment, status in the eyes of others; and a soothe-contentment system where we use the love and affection of others (attachment) to come to inner peace, ease, contentment, all hardwired into the mammalian brain, the limbic system in the lower brain.

We use the conscious, intentional processing of our higher brain, the wise effort of our practices of wisdom and compassion, to regulate, to balance and work skillfully with those three systems. We work with alarm about harm and danger and what could tip into aversion by calming ourselves down, breathing deeply, hand on the heart, realizing that in this moment, usually we are already safe. We approach rewards, which could tip into grasping, with awareness and gratitude for what we already have; we are already full in this moment. We work with the need for attachment – relationships that comfort and bring contentment or sometimes the pain of heartache, by knowing we are already loved.

Rick then mentioned the five aggregates – form (or materiality) feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), perception (the labels and categories we place on our experience) mental contents (all feelings, thoughts, beliefs where we focus so much of our attention) and consciousness itself. All of those aggregates are objects of our awareness, even consciousness can be an object of awareness.

He shared his understanding of the neural substrates of consciousness, how the brain creates our experience of our experience – that the medial network, the midline structures of the brain, are very, very busy processing our experience, conscious and unconscious, constructing our views, our identities, all of our coping strategies, our personalities, our sense of self, that coalesce briefly as eddies in the stream of consciousness and then fall away.

All of that as a platform for his hierarchy of five tiers of consciousness:

1. Mindfulness: we pause, we focus our attention, step back, and become a witness to our experience, reflect on our experience, which allows us to see that we subjectively are not our objective experience. We can dis-identify with the experience of the moment as who we are and know that we are more than this experience, or any experience.
2. With enough mindfulness and compassion, we see that all experience, and all forms of experience are impermanent, the truth that everything passes away (except the Unconditioned) we and everything in existence are waves on the surface of the vast ocean that is all of existence.
3. Awareness and compassion are what allow us to hold all the comings and goings of existence with equanimity; we see that awareness is like the sky that can hold the storm clouds moving through and we begin to identify ourselves as that awareness, vast spacious awareness untroubled by whatever is happening within it. The Buddha called that awareness untarnishable and a reliable true refuge.
4. Then Rick went on to say that even a subjective sense of that awareness and being that awareness can dissolve into a sense of the sacred, the allness of existence. That we and everything are not just part of the ocean, we are the ocean. This is a bliss state or a state of rapture where the phenomenological experience is I am one with everything or as Sri Nisargadatta teaches, I Am That.
5. The final state is touching into an experience of the Unconditioned, sometimes called the is-ness or such-ness or deathless; a state of consciousness that is never born and never dies. It IS. Experiencing the Unconditioned would be arriving into enlightenment.

We can experience all five of these levels of consciousness through our mindfulness and concentration or heart practices. Next week I will talk more about the states of allness and the Unconditioned, experiences of non-duality, for they are attainable and they are truly useful in informing how we live our lives as ordinary human beings, as householders in everyday life.

Tonight I want to ground all of that in how we do live our everyday lives, how we practice as householders seeking wisdom, ease, happiness, enlightenment in the midst of threat or aversion, rewards or grasping, love or heartache. So I'm aiming for the middle of Rick's trajectory, the awareness of all experiences that is larger than any of those experiences, holding them with wisdom and compassion, not pushing them away or being hijacked by them. And we cultivate that awareness through equanimity.

Equanimity is 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. Equanimity means engaging with experience but not reacting to our reactions to our experience. Equanimity is the state of consciousness, the awareness that can hold all that comes and goes, that arises and passes away. So equanimity has this sense of a mind (and heart) that remains undisturbed, even in the face of life's turmoil and difficulties. Suffering comes from reaction to experience. If aware, compassionate, responsive, pain does not have to lead to

suffering. Equanimity is what comes from mindfulness and compassion, two wings of dharma, and embodies the depth of truth of this tradition.

Equanimity is on every list of Buddhist wisdom. It's one of the ten paramitas or perfections. It's one of the seven factors of enlightenment; it's one of the four brahma viharas or heavenly abodes.

It is taught specifically as the wise effort that allows us to cope with the eight winds of change. Traditionally, success and failure, gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Any duality, hope and disappointment, generosity and envy, courage and fear, pride and shame, love and hate, strength and vulnerability, respect and contempt.

As we become aware of our experience, as we experience that all experience is transient, it will change, equanimity is what allows us to cope with that characteristic of existence. So while we're practicing with tools that will lead to consciousness of allness and the unconditioned, we know that the real gift of practice is being able to hold all experience skillfully, as my friend Andy Dreitcer says, too hold it all seriously, and take it all lightly.

I was honestly relieved years ago when I read Jack Kornfield's book, *After the Ecstasy the Laundry*. Jack suggested that equanimity may be more of the goal of a wise spiritual practice than enlightenment. He gives many examples of monks and nuns, teachers and dedicated practitioners, who reached states of enlightenment and still had to come home and deal with the laundry, with jobs, with partners and children, with traumas left over from childhood or a car accident or combat or a diagnosis.

I'll tell you three stories:

I remember so well the experience of my friend Rose, who began practicing at Spirit Rock when I did 15 years ago. Rose became very adept at concentration practice. She would tell me that on retreat, she would notice perhaps one thought per hour. When she got a diagnosis of breast cancer, that all fell apart, temporarily. Everything had to be dealt with, and she found that equanimity was more useful than rapture.

Ram Dass tells his story, that after 30 years of spiritual practice and teaching spiritual practice, when he had his stroke, the pain was so great it overpowered all of his practices until he remembered to call on the love of his guru. The attachment system could calm down his threat system.

My experience on retreat: I was in line in the dining hall and, because I was on retreat, practicing mindfully, when I noticed that they had run out of broccoli for lunch, I also noticed that I was getting into a very spiritually incorrect snit about that. So I could notice my reactivity, and let it go and come back into equanimity. Later that afternoon I was doing the sitting meditation period out in the courtyard overlooking the rolling, grassy hills with the forest beyond, and my attention was caught by a ginkgo leaf blowing gently in the breeze. For whatever reason, my awareness expanded all the way to that sense of oneness, or allness, and I sat there in rapture for a good 20 or 30 minutes.

But then my larger awareness came back on line. The broccoli snit was a negative experience, the ginkgo leaf was a positive, even joyful experience, but the point of practice was to notice that these were both experiences that were coming and going, impermanent, and that the point of practice was to not be seduced by either one as the final reality. The point of practice was to remain in the awareness that could be equanimous about all of it.

I'll share with you three examples of putting equanimity into practice and then teach you a way to do the practice.

I had breakfast the other day with my friend Richard Miller, who teaches a practice that helps cultivate equanimity called yoga nidra. I commented to him that when we're going through a time of change and transition, as often happens for people at the turn of a new year, it's helpful to remember an analogy from rock climbing: you keep three points steady on the rock (two hands and one foot or two feet and one hand) while you move the fourth point – one hand or one foot. I asked Richard what his three points were, expecting some external manifestation like work or health or marriage or creative focus, but he answered: awareness, equanimity and joy. Orienting his entire way of being toward awareness, and equanimity, and joy. Which I thought was pretty enlightened.

Another example from Bev Stevens: a member of our sangha, who e-mailed me this earlier this month and who has given me permission to share this with you tonight.

Linda, I was at Lake Tahoe from Christmas Day until New Year's Eve with my southern California family. What a joy! There was enough snow to last a lifetime.

On New Year's day, my 78th birthday, I had a stroke. It affected my speech center. I had rather an enjoyable hospital visit as I stayed in the moment and became friends with the doctors, radiologists and nurses...custodians and patients. I was never afraid. I was always safe and comfortable. I had MRIs, CAT scans and other imaging for two days.

Now I am at home being totally spoiled by friends and family. My San Francisco daughter, Margie, has been with me day and night. (my Guardian Angel...well, actually both of my daughters are my angels)

I have a heart monitor that records my every pitter and patter. I will be wearing the monitor for a month. I will probably take blood thinning medication for the rest of my life. My speech has returned quite remarkably except for a few blips. i.e.: Lake Taco instead of Lake Tahoe which is a source of everyone's delight!

This is the second stroke that I have had...and we have decided that I must be part "cat", as I have had many lives.

I am grateful for them all! I will be back in the game as soon as I find my balance and get accustomed to the monitor, meds, and a slower pace. It will be soon!

With a warm and happy heart  
Bev Stevens

Compassion allows us to stay in equanimity and equanimity allows us to stay in awareness, anywhere on Rick's five layers of awareness.

My story; I'm very aware of coping with the eight winds of change lately; there has been success and there has been failure; there has been gain, there has been loss; there has been praise, there has been blame. I've been cultivating the practice of equanimity, so that I can ride these waves on the ocean with compassion and awareness and skill. So a few weeks ago, a training I had been scheduled to teach and really looking forward to was cancelled because of low enrollment, and I felt the pain of that immediately, and the disappointment, and the wobbliness, is it me? Are there other factors that contributed? What the 10,000 causes upstream that led to this moment?

I know I have something to offer, I know I'm not the only person who has experienced this, that week in fact Rick and other teachers I have a great deal of respect for were cancelling or thinking of cancelling events because of low enrollment. I'm experiencing the eight winds of change, I can do that. I've done it before, I can do it now. I can be a grown up, I can use my practices. I can see myself as someone who in fact can practice equanimity.

So I had my feelings, I called my friends, I did my reality checks, I put everything in a larger perspective, and the next morning I woke up with such a sense of gratitude, love, and joy, I noticed that I was saying to myself: Is there something wrong with me that I'm not experiencing more pain over this? When we can hold the pain with compassion, equanimity, and awareness, we don't have to create any more suffering. There's no denial or overwhelm, there's openness and skill.

So how do we do this? How do we cultivate the equanimity that will allow us to cope with the ups and downs and upside downs of our lives.

Equanimity – this paramita, this factor of enlightenment, this heavenly abode, has a somatic base. There is a baseline of equilibrium in body when we're not disturbed, when we're not zoned out to avoid being disturbed. Our brain is relaxed and calm, engaged and alert. (Instructions for sitting practice, find a posture that is relaxed and calm, yet engaged and alert.)

The threat system can cause our nervous systems to rev up into fight-flight-freeze, too much activation of the sympathetic nervous system. Too much activation of the parasympathetic can also cause us to shut down, collapse. (Positive SNS –activation energy for play and exploration, creativity, productivity, wise engagement with world, fuels drive for rewards. Positive PNS – meditation, daydream, nap on beach or after making love, we come to through love and affection, connection and ease.)

How to come to equanimity - this baseline of calm, yet conscious seeing clearly and being connected to resources.

I would suggest a model of practicing equanimity similar to the model taught by Kristin Neff for practicing self-compassion, I taught that here over the holidays.

1. We notice with mindfulness what is happening, and name it, oh this is suffering, this is reactivity. We can usually feel that reactivity in our bodies. And without going into story about the reactivity, just noticing and naming, oh, I'm upset, I'm worried, I'm pissed. Feeling the reactivity and holding it with awareness, with compassion.
2. Knowing in our wisdom and compassion, that it is possible to come to equanimity, it is possible to be with this experience with awareness and compassion. This moment of suffering is not the only time I've experienced this, I'm not the only person on the planet who experiences this, this is not the only moment I've experienced today, I wasn't experiencing this ten minutes ago, I may not be experiencing this tomorrow, or later today, or 20 minutes from now. I can be aware, hold this, hold it with compassion and caring, and can stay in or return to my equanimous awareness that will allow me to know what to do, how to respond skillfully.
3. Becoming aware, in my mind and in my body, oh, yes, now that my higher brain is on line again, now that I'm managing my threat system and can begin to see clearly again what's going on, I can calmly patiently, skillfully decide what would be most useful in this moment, what would be most soothing and comforting so that I can regain my equilibrium and deal.

I can offer a small, small example of equanimity practice to come back into my right mind and be able to cope. To keep calm and carry on, as the British would say. Two days ago I spent more than an hour on the phone with various AT&T folks to create an account where I could pay a new phone bill online. As time went on, I noticed I was becoming impatient and reactive, losing my equanimity. I somehow managed to remember that I could practice self-compassion in the middle of these moments to come back to baseline.

As soon as I put my hand on my heart and said, "Ouch! This hurts!", my brain was primed to add the "Oh sweetheart! I'm so sorry you're upset." Which, as research shows, activates the soothing and contentment system in the caregiving part of the brain.

I noticed in that moment the shift to feeling cared about, and as I felt that shift in my brain, I noticed that I was calming down in my body. An astonished "This works!" allowed me to come back into calm and clarity, complete the call successfully, with friendliness toward the beleaguered customer service reps.

We'll do an exercise now, where you'll take two minutes each to share with your partner a moment where you noticed the reactivity revving up in your body, you remembered you could hold that moment in awareness, with compassion. You could notice a shift in your body energy again as your higher brain came back online and you could calmly, patiently, look at the situation and decide how to respond. If such a moment doesn't come easily to mind, find a moment where such an equanimity practice would have been a good idea, would have been helpful.

De-brief. Questions.

Closing meditation: From Tara Brach: May all beings heal and awaken into the love and awareness that holds and honors the fullness of being.