

I. The problem of empathy and the case for equanimity

That Wednesday, the day after Trump was elected, I went downstairs and got my son's big, heavy lump of fossilized dinosaur poop and brought it into my office. I needed to put what was coming into perspective. It seemed to me that this man's destructive urges could bring about climate and social disasters. It was clear that we are perishable. Our way of life, our democracy, is held together by our mutual agreement to be mostly law abiding. It appeared in jeopardy. The disparity in income, leaves countless homeless and without health care, and would only get worse. I did not even imagine there would be families torn apart and put in cages at the border. I did not think about how the dismantling of competent government functioning would make facing a pandemic without a plan would affect all of us. We seem to be facing a great culling. This is very hard to know.

I was not surprised when I was asked to talk about equanimity in today's dharma talk. The times call for equanimity. We need to be equipped with the capacity for balance of mind. Thank you for this suggestion.

Take what you need from this talk, and let the rest go. Continue your practice of just listening. We will assume you will hear that which is useful to you. And just let the rest go.

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We are taught that equanimity is the answer to all situations arising from social contact.

We are asked to notice what are the dominant influences of our minds. Where are you dwelling?

What do we need to nurture in order to lead wholesome lives?
What do we need to abandon?

How can we stand being fully awake in the face of infinite suffering?

It seems like we are living through an object lesson for the larger universe on the destructive power of greed and hate and fear. The suffering we are witnessing is almost impossible to take in all at once.

We can be mesmerized by the enormity of misery, of suffering, becoming fixated in a narrow focus, as if that is all there is. It takes effort to remember what else is also true, in order to cultivate equanimity.

Quoting Bhikkhu Bodi:

“By breaking down the walls of self-concern it allows us to experience with a particularly inward intimacy, the desire all beings cherish is to be free from harm and to find an inviolable happiness and security. Nevertheless, to the extent that this flowing of empathy is not a mere emotional effusion but is accompanied by a facility for accurate observation, it can easily turn into a chute plunging us down from our new-found freedom into a chasm of anguish and despair.

For when, with eyes unhindered by emotively tinged blinkers, we turn to contemplate the wide expanse of the world, we find ourselves gazing into a mass of suffering that is vertiginous in its volume and ghastly in its intensity. The guarantor of our complacency is the dumb thoughtless glee with which we acquiesce in our daily ration of sensual excitation and ego-enhancing kudos. Let us raise our heads a little higher and cast our eyes about, and we behold a world steeped in pain where the ills inherent in the normal life-cycle are compounded still more by the harshness of nature, the grim irony of accident, and the cruelty of human beings.

Genuine equanimity, which is far from callous indifference, sustains us in our journey through the rapids of *samsara*. Bestowing upon us courage and endurance, it enables us to meet the fluctuations of fortune without being shaken by them, and to look into the face of the world’s sufferings without being shattered by them.”

Bhikkhu Bodhi, Vipassana Fellowship, Remedy for Despair”

If you succumb to despair you cannot hold up the lamp of the good. This requires harnessing certain stubbornness.

“... the kind of equanimity required has to be based on vigilant presence of mind, and not on indifferent dullness. It has to be the result of hard, deliberate training, not the causal outcome of a passing mood. But equanimity would not deserve its name if it had to be produced by exertion again and again. In such a case it surely be weakened and finally defeated by the vicissitudes of life. True equanimity, however, should be able to meet all these severe tests and to regenerate its strength from sources within. It will possess this power of resistance and self-renewal only if it is rooted in insight.” (Karma and no self)

Nyanaponika Thera, “The Four Sublime States”

Equanimity, in its pristine form, is stable, pure consciousness awakened, without partiality, clinging, or aversion. We can think of it as a prism. The white of undefined experience enters one side of the prism, and comes out the other side, broken down into colors and dispersed. The prism itself holds nothing. But do not get discouraged by this ideal image. The tradition knows that it takes right effort to come to understand this pristine quality. We cultivate patience with the naturally occurring process.

Right now, where we live, with our current understanding, we are given images of the qualities of the earth to enable our development. We can become grounded like a lightening rod is grounded, firmly planted. The qualities of the earth give us our metaphor for stabilization during highly charged times..

Buddha taught his son, Rahula:

“Rahula, develop meditation that is like the earth; for when you develop meditation that is like the earth, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as people throw clean things and dirty thing, excrement, urine, spittle, pus, and blood on the earth, and the earth is not repelled, humiliated, and disgusted because of that, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like the earth; for when you develop mediation that is like the earth, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain.”

Majjhima-nikaya, the middle length discourses of the Buddha, p.529, paragraph13

We need to cultivate equanimity within the fullness of life. Clearly seeing, feeling, knowing, grounded.

And we are not in this alone. I have coopted the meaning of the newly popular term “deep state” to encompass all the people who are working toward the welfare of all beings. We need to remember we are in this together.

Indifference or apathy can seem like such a refuge, and we can mistake it for equanimity.

We want to avoid seeking “emptiness’ in all the wrong places.

We need to do the hard work of discovering equanimity here. Now. With patience.

Defining equanimity

I often talk about meditation as a process. First we learn to step out of the stream of consciousness so we can watch it flow by. We gain a perspective on the endless stream, rather than being mindlessly carried downstream by the particulars of the moment. Then consciousness shifts on its own, and we find our selves standing in the stream, steady and awake, and fully feeling, rather than being at once removed. These two positions represent two different words for equanimity.

The first perspective is from the bank of the stream.

Upekkha—

We step back, lean against that metaphoric tree on the bank of the stream, and this position keeps us from falling downstream, into the darkness or whatever else we witness. We can “look over” it without being caught by what we see. This gives rise to a great sense of peace.

Equanimity arises from the power of observation, the ability to see without being swept away. It leads to spaciousness from seeing the bigger picture, to seeing it with patience and understanding. Equanimity becomes an ethical quality. It shows no partiality.

Tatramajjhattata—

The other view is from within the stream. There is no remove. Feeling is fully present. Stability and impartiality are fully present. Being in the middle requires being balanced, remembering implicitly that all is temporary. This balance comes from inner strength. The strong presence of inner calm, well-being, confidence, vitality, or integrity can keep us upright, like a ballast keeps a ship upright in strong winds. As inner strength develops, equanimity follows. We can use our commitment to what is wholesome to find the strength. Our stubbornness is harnessed.

We can stand in the middle of great suffering, the darkness, and not succumb to depression or anxiety, and not find our selves pulled into an emotional abyss. It is clear, and strong, and non-clinging. We are becoming more like the prism.

This capacity of steadfastness is cultivated through our practice of just sitting here, being with what is.

Equanimity becomes protection from the eight “worldly winds” which can sweep us away: praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. We are impartial.

How balance is lost, and how we become reactivity triggered becomes more apparent. When obstacles are understood and removed, then the resulting equanimity can be the foundation for caring presence, flexibility and diligence. And this work is taking place as we just sit here, attending to what is happening within us now.

The friends of equanimity--the sublime abodes

Equanimity does not stand alone. It appears on a few of those Buddhist lists. It must be supported to be developed.

Today we are going to consider the four sublime abodes, of which equanimity is the fourth. The other three are: loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. Equanimity needs each of these.

Each of these can become like homes to us, places of dwelling, which are cultivated as qualities of being.

They can become the mind's constant dwelling-places. Our mind can become thoroughly saturated by them, when we are standing, walking, sitting, lying down, at all times.

Each of these can become boundless, because in their perfection and in their true nature, they are not narrowed by any limitation. All beings are included by their regard. When we begin meditating, it is an effort of will to avoid any kind or degree of partiality. With sustained practice it becomes effortless and is supported by the other three divine abodes.

"These four attitudes are said to be excellent or sublime because they are the right or ideal way of conduct toward living beings. They provide, in fact, the answer to all situations arising from social contact. They are the great removers of tension, the great peace-makers in social conflict, and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. They level social barriers, build harmonious communities, awaken slumbering magnanimity long forgotten, revive joy and hope long abandoned, and promote human brotherhood against the forces of egotism"

Nyanponika Thera article, "The Four Sublime States," p. 2

"Persistent meditative practice will have two crowning effects: first, it will make these four qualities sink deep into the heart so that they become spontaneous attitudes not easily overthrown; second, it will bring out and secure their boundless extension, the unfolding of their all-embracing range.

Nyanponika Thera article, "The Four Sublime States," p. 3

These need to be developed in practical conduct, and appropriate direction of thought and simple, methodical meditation practice.

Quoting Buddha:

"[Develop] the sublime states by repeated reflection on their qualities, and the benefits they bestow and the dangers of their opposites. What a person considers and reflects upon for a long time, to that his mind with bend and incline."

Nyanponika Thera article, "The Four Sublime States," p. 4

The cultivation of equanimity requires the other 3 sublime states. They are also referred to as sublime emotions. We must not trample loving kindness, sympathetic joy, or compassion.

If we are subsumed by misery, how do we let the other states also be true?
The killjoy is always a possibility.

I remember clearly being on a retreat about six months after my brother and his wife were killed in an auto accident. I was just sitting there, doing nothing, and I felt hope, akin to joy, arise. I wanted to squash it for being naïve. I went and

talked to my teacher. He lovingly replied, “Thank goodness hope springs eternal”. Even in dark times, it is always there in potential. Give it room to emerge.

The sublime states are part of the human repertoire. We must not trample them, but respect them. We can encourage and remember them when we forget they are part of the whole and necessary for a wholesome existence. Especially in dark times.

Equanimity and the other sublime abidings are not describing something solid and fixed. They are actually more dynamic than inert. Equanimity is part of living. Equanimity creates stability by always seeking balance or grounding. It requires effort to allow it to take root within us. We must value it, nurture it, and give it the right support. We must make this right effort until we become completely saturated by equanimity and it becomes our natural resting place in its full realization.

For us, equanimity is a practice. Equanimity needs the other 3 sublime abidings, or we become depleted.

And it takes energy and courage to cultivate and sustain equanimity

What do we do to cultivate equanimity?

We need courage. We need capacity to face directly what is actually here, now. It takes courage to be open to all the feelings that arise within us and among us.

We learn to allow the feelings to arise and be held by loving awareness, rooted in equanimity.

We need to take breaks from sorrow and anxiety.

We can choose wise engagement, in alignment with which is wholesome. I read that a wise and caring person would still do what’s most aligned with their heart’s deepest values even knowing that the world were ending and nothing they do would make a difference. Is that our commitment?

This commitment requires recruiting our zeal for the good of all.

So what supports equanimity?

We are taught that we need to do some field work to prepare the ground to nurture the seeds of the sublime emotions, so they can take root in us.

We must commit to our precepts, that which allows virtue and integrity to become a natural unfolding. When we follow precepts, we can live well. And we can very clearly fall short in fairly predictable ways. Blame and shame will not swallow us up if we bring kindness to the project, and we continue learning and refining.

We develop faith in the process of unfolding dharma. This gives us conviction, confidence, assurance

We cultivate a well-developed mind, a well-equipped mind, a mature mind. This practice cultivates calm, concentration and mindfulness. When we are calm and clear, we are much less likely to be blown around by worldly winds of praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. We cling to none of these. There is no fixed self to condemn or elevate.

With steady practice, we can develop a sense of well-being, an internal refuge in simply being here, We become capable of satisfaction in this moment.

Wisdom develops naturally, and we learn to take everything less personally. We become aware when equanimity is absent. We work on allowing accepting awareness to be present to whatever is happening, without the mind or heart contracting or resisting. Also, we bring an understanding that people are responsible for their own decisions about how to respond from moment to moment, which helps us to find equanimity in the face of other people's suffering. We can wish the best for them, but we avoid being buffeted by a false sense of responsibility for their well-being.

Freedom is developed as we let go of our reactive tendencies

With insight we know the transience of all things. Even the dinosaurs. Even us.

We make use of the zeal for the good to give us the energy we need.

And, of course, we cultivate the other three sublime emotions to create stability and balance, and importantly, to ward off depletion

Loving-kindness in its most complete form is *beauty*. It is described as a grandmother's love for the baby. It nourishes and holds softly. Loving-kindness is a solvent, dissolving ill-will. It promotes welfare, prefers welfare, and removes annoyance. It sees loveliness in all air breathers. When loving-kindness fails it can become selfish affection. Equanimity, with its impartiality, guards against that.

Compassion in its complete form is *boundless space*. It has been likened to a grandmother loving a grandchild who is ill. It causes good people's hearts to be moved when there is suffering, without trying to bear other peoples' suffering. It is non-cruel. It succeeds when cruelty subsides. Compassion fails when it produces sorrow. Compassion needs the remove and strength of equanimity.

Sympathetic joy (gladness) in its fullest is *boundless consciousness*. This is like a grandmother reveling in the joy of youth. Sympathetic joy is capable of being gladdening by others' success. It functions to ward off envy. It can

eliminate aversion and boredom. It fails when just produces merriment, and excludes the other sublime qualities.

Equanimity in its fullest realization is *no-thing-ness*. It brings to mind a grandchild busy in his own affairs, and the grandmother has no worries about him. She abandons wanting anything to be other than what it is. There is acceptance. Equanimity promotes neutrality toward beings, and all are regarded equally. Equanimity knows that everyone is responsible for their response to their situation, even if they did not cause the situation. Equanimity makes resentment and greed and need for approval subside. It fails when it produces the equanimity of unknowing—indifferent ignorance, dullness, or apathy. Then equanimity needs to be supported by factors that sustain it—the other three divine abidings. They are interdependent in their cultivation.

Unbounded love guards compassion from turning into partiality

Compassion prevents love and joy from forgetting about suffering, and turning into states of self-satisfied complacency, within a jealously guarded petty happiness.

Compassion stirs love to widen its sphere and urges sympathetic joy to search for fresh nourishment. This makes it possible for them both to become boundless states.

Compassion guards equanimity from falling into cold indifference.

Sympathetic joy keeps compassion from becoming overwhelmed. It keeps compassion away from melancholic brooding without purpose, and protects it from futile sentimentality that merely weakens and consumes the strength of the mind and heart

Sympathetic joy gives to equanimity the mild serenity that softens its stern appearance.

Equanimity is even-mindedness; it gives to love an even, unchanging firmness and loyalty, patience,

Equanimity gives compassion fearless courage and enables it to face the awesome abyss of misery and despair, which confronts compassion again and again.

One moment of equanimity causes a succeeding moment of equanimity to arise. Once equanimity is activated, it will be the cause for equanimity to continue and deepen. It can bring one to deeper levels of practice. It is the underlying nature which lies just behind the insight into the arising passing away of phenomena. Step by step, equanimity is strengthened.

Thank you.

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