

10. Equanimity

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Imagine you're watering your vegetables with hose sprayer, but there's a kink in the hose. The water flow splutters and spurts unevenly, maybe diminishing to an ineffective trickle. But you notice the kink, and straighten it out. What happens to the water? Now it flows in a gentle and consistent shower from the hose attachment.

Imagine you are trying to move a piece of heavy furniture across a carpet. As you push, the feet on the far end dig into the soft pile and the furniture jams. The harder you push, the more it jams, maybe even damaging the furniture or the carpet. Then you remember that you have furniture sliders. You put these smooth disks under each foot of the piece of furniture. Now there is nothing to catch on the carpet, and you are able to easily slide the heavy item to the far side of the room without a hitch.

Think of a smooth-running engine. I once had a nice little car. It had a few miles on it, so I rebuilt the engine, bored out the cylinders, replaced the gaskets. It ran like a sewing machine. It sounded nice. It felt nice. I sold the car to a young man who called me several months later to complain. He had neglected to check the oil as I'd instructed. (It was an old car, so it did burn through some oil). He let the oil get low and the engine heated up and started running rough. He didn't heed the temperature warning light, and eventually the engine ran dry, seized altogether, and the car was ruined. He called me to complain, but the fault lay in his lack of maintenance. He never added oil to the engine. It is the engine oil that keeps an engine running smoothly, without friction and without excessive heat.

The oil in the engine is like equanimity. The furniture sliders are like equanimity. The hose that does not have a kink is a hose with equanimity.

In my experience, equanimity is one of the most profound elements of freedom (contentment, fulfillment, happiness), but it is very difficult to talk about. Every word that is used to describe it is incomplete, sometimes even misleading. It isn't a thing one gets, or a state one achieves, so much as a lack of something. Equanimity is a lack of blockages, a lack of friction. Equanimity is what happens when internal experiences arise, dance their dance, and pass in their own time, without anything interfering with their natural life cycle.

Here are some of the words that have been used to describe equanimity: acceptance, non-judgement, detachment, dispassion, allowing, composure, neutral attention, non-reactivity, mental balance, imperturbability. To my mind, these all describe the consequences of equanimity. When equanimity is present, any of those things I just listed might describe the experience. Acceptance occurs when equanimity is present. Non-judgment occurs when equanimity is present. Non-reactivity occurs when equanimity is present. Though, having said that equanimity is a lack of something that impedes arisings from living their full lives, I should say that “non-reactivity occurs when reactivity is not present.” See? It’s sort of hard to talk about. A full and consistent flow of water occurs when there is not a kink in the hose. A heavy object can be moved with ease when the grabbing action of the carpet is not present. A motor runs like a symphony when excessive heat and friction are not present.

I guess you could say that equanimity is life unhindered.

How does this relate to real life? To understand equanimity, we need to understand what hinders the free flowing of our actual personal sensory experience. It’s not too hard to think of specific examples. What would impede the flow of, say, an unpleasant memory? Suppression, maybe? What might prevent the flow of a pleasant experience coming to an end? Hanging on to it? Trying to put off it’s conclusion? Or embarrassment or shame? Identification, perhaps? In what other ways do we obstruct the free flow of arising and passing? Any ideas?

It appears that equanimity results when we refrain from interfering. In this sense, you could describe it as *non-interference*, or *allowing*. We may be able to refrain from interfering if we don’t have an aversion or desire for the event that makes us want to change what’s happening. In this sense, equanimity is *non-judgmental*. We might find that we have neither aversion nor desire if we don’t identify with or get too attached something. In this sense, we could be talking about *detachment* or *dispassion*. If you want to look at it as an activity on our part, choosing to not interfere could be seen as putting oil in our psycho-spiritual engine. Choosing (as much as we are able) to let go of something we have been hanging on to could be analogous to unkinking the hose. Deciding to face an unpleasant situation without resisting it could be described as putting sliders under the furniture. These analogies are not perfect, though, as equanimity is not something we *add* (like oil) or *use* (like the sliders). It is the resulting ease and unimpeded flow of activity that results when what interferes ceases to be present.

That sounds pretty good, but how can we foster this experience of equanimity? As with the other Most Excellent Practices, equanimity can be developed both through intentional action and from noticing spontaneous evolution.

We can “create” equanimity inasmuch as we can choose to refrain from interfering with the flow of experience. We’ll call this “surface equanimity” because it applies to the surface of consciousness, that is, what we are able to be consciously aware of. Whenever we become aware that we have internal resistance to an experience, or that we are trying to suppress something, or that we are unwilling to let go of an emotion or a pleasant sensation (for example), we can make a choice to release that resistance, or refrain from suppression. We may not be able to let go completely, but if we can unkink the hose even just a little bit, then the water (and our experience) can flow a little more freely. But beware: if we become frustrated that we are not able to unkink the hose completely, then we are putting a new kink in it in a different place. Our intentional attempts to be equanimous must be gentle and themselves unhindered. Kindness and equanimity go hand in hand. I will describe some specific techniques for creating surface equanimity in a moment.

Equanimity also arises spontaneously. Perhaps you’re pushing on that piece of furniture and it’s sticking on the carpet, and you push and push and suddenly something gives, and the furniture slides easily for a distance. This can happen in the flow of internal experience, too. You’re suffering from physical pain, unable to reduce it with whatever remedies you’ve tried. You are becoming fearful and frustrated and don’t know what to do. Then, suddenly it hits you: *it’s OK*. It’s not a conceptual understanding or a conscious decision. It’s something that just happened spontaneously. For a little while, it’s all OK. It still hurts, but it’s just not as big a problem. This ease may last for a long time or just for a few moments, but it is clear while it is happening, if you happen to notice. Has anyone experienced anything like that? Or perhaps with an emotional discomfort?

That spontaneous equanimity shows up when the kinks start getting worked out of your deeper sensory circuits. All those times you’ve been frustrated or bored during a meditation period, thinking nothing was happening, something significant *was* happening. Beneath your level of conscious awareness, kinks were being worked out all over your being. Then, when you aren’t expecting it because you aren’t *trying*, a kink close enough to the surface straightens out, and you are able to notice experience flowing unhindered. This is “deep equanimity” because it involves the nervous system itself not interfering with itself. It is working below our conscious awareness.

When this happens, the most important thing to do is to notice it and appreciate it. Pay attention to the feeling of spontaneous equanimity, and your deeper circuits will feel it too. The message will seep down that this is worth doing, and your deeper mind will keep working on the kinks that remain.

So these are the two prongs of cultivating equanimity:

1. Consciously choose to stop impeding the flow of experience.
2. Notice when equanimity spontaneously arises.

Let's look at some specific techniques we can use to intentionally cultivate equanimity.

A good place to start is to create surface equanimity in the body. This exercise is easy to understand and to do, and it will soak into the whole body of your experience, opening the way for equanimity in your mind and emotions. All you do is settle into a comfortable meditation posture and pay attention to body sensations. You can do this with a body scan, or free-floating attention, or feeling your whole body at once: whatever works best for you. It is possible that you do not notice any areas of tension. Your entire body is perfectly relaxed for the duration of the meditation period. If this is the case, then simply pay attention to the pleasant sensation of being totally relaxed. Simply noticing and enjoying this pleasurable state will teach your mind/body to do it more often.

If, like most people, you notice that some parts of your body are physically tense, then simply relax each area of tension as much as you are able. If you can intentionally relax muscles, then notice and enjoy the feeling of the muscles relaxing. Then go to the next area of tension and do the same. If you are aware of tension, but are not able to consciously release it, then notice that you cannot release the tension, and allow that tension to remain. Make it as welcome in your body as is relaxation. Then go on to the next area of tension. It is very possible that after releasing an area of tension, as soon as you move on to the next location in your body, the previous area will immediately become tense again. That's normal, and perfectly OK. Just keep making the rounds of the areas of tension in your body, enjoying any relaxation you can create, and allowing any remaining tension to be as tense as it needs to be for as long as it needs to be.

Creating equanimity in your mind is a second technique that may naturally arise as a result of relaxing your body. It may be that as you become more generally relaxed, you start to notice other sensations that had been hidden by the tension. Whether these sensations are pleasant or unpleasant doesn't matter. You have unkinked the hose just a little bit and now are able to see the flow of other sensations that were being blocked. This in itself is an indication of deeper equanimity, because some

experience which had been blocked is now able to flow. If you can notice and allow these new sensations to arise and pass without fighting or hanging on to them, then you are strengthening the surface equanimity in your mind.

If you do not become more generally relaxed, but feel like you are constantly having to re-relax the same muscles, that's great, too. That is a perfect opportunity to practice surface equanimity in your mind, by not judging the tension but rather making it welcome. Over and over again, relaxing tension, like a mother stroking a child's hair to help her sleep. Over time, equanimity grows, either on the surface or deep inside, or both, and eventually you will begin to see it within your range of awareness.

You can intentionally create equanimity in your mind at any time, even when you aren't formally meditating. Notice whenever you are reacting to something with resistance, grasping, anger, longing, and so on. Teach yourself to be aware of your reactions. When you notice such a reaction, attempt to intentionally release those reactions that clog up the flow of the experience. This is a life-long learning process, and being patient with yourself while you learn is part of the training. Having equanimity with your lack of equanimity is a powerful thing to work with.

In my 11 years of meditation practice, equanimity has shown itself to be a key to my ability to live freely. It seems like the end result of every kind of meditation. Maybe that's why is the tenth and final of the Most Excellent Practices. Or maybe not. I don't know the scholarly explanations for that. What I do know is that this list of practices isn't meant to be chronological, in that we aren't meant to master number one before moving on to number two. We are working on all of them all the time. They all work together, intermingling, dissolving distinctions between one action and the next. This whole journey is both very simple and very complex. We've just spent nearly a year looking in depth at these Ten Most Excellent Practices for Enduring the Flood and Reaching the Other Shore. I think they can also be summed up this simply: Pay attention, and be kind.