

Peaceful Abiding: Equanimity Before Happiness

About twenty-five years ago I had the following conversation with my former Zen teacher.

Student: “Roshi (respected teacher), in our practice, I miss the dynamic, exuberant quality that I see in characters like Zorba the Greek”.

Roshi: “Our school emphasizes a quiet realization”.

Student: “But Roshi, there is something so wonderful about expressing joyous delight and growing happiness”.

Roshi: “You can learn to experience great delight in a quieter way”.

Student: “But, but, but.....”

I deeply appreciate the experience of joy. When I am in Presence and undistracted, the color of the sunlight on the grass each morning, the smell of the air, the taste of good coffee, the smile on a friend's face can bring great delight. Relishing the simple gifts of life, what I call the “shower of blessings” is central to my life. Still, there is something significant in Roshi's emphasis on quiet realization that has taken years to ripen within me. I see that the inner attitude of “peaceful abiding”, resting in ‘what is’ rather than clinging to personal preferences allows a profound deepening into life.

Grasping Happiness

When we strive after happiness we will experience more and more wanting. This leads to dissatisfaction, a sense of ‘never enough’. There is a kind of “experiential materialism” where we want to acquire happy moments. To value happiness above all else creates a kind of grasping and a devaluing of many of our experiences as human beings.

Gautama Buddha emphasized **equanimity** more than happiness. One could even say, equanimity or peaceful abiding in ‘what is’ is the back door to genuine happiness.

Beyond liking or disliking, equanimity emphasizes present moment awareness. This is NOT bland neutrality. It includes welcoming a full range of emotional experience. It encourages the bodily felt joy that arises in many moments of deeply connecting to Life. **Equanimity or peaceful abiding means “non-fighting” with reality.**

Non-fighting is NOT passive acceptance. It has bite to it, biting into the moment, like biting into an apple. There is a sense of welcoming the moment even when not ‘liking it’. Being friendly with our circumstances is the ground for effective action. Equanimity implies a warm-hearted objectivity. From this realism comes effective action. If someone is physically or verbally attacking you, seeing clearly will create the most advantageous response.

Comfort Within Discomfort

Recently, The Embodied Life School organized an all-day meditation for planetary peace, one of four that occurs each year. When sitting for many hours uncomfortable bodily sensations will arise, challenging thoughts and feelings might appear. The great opportunity is to be “comfortable within discomfort” or to find a way of being friendly with our conditions. Sitting this way is a microcosm of our whole life. Often the discomforts will pass away on their own if one does not fight with them. Sometimes it is skillful to change position or move one’s attention, slowly with awareness. From this ground of deep acceptance, intelligent actions can arise. This is learning to live. This is equanimity. How can we cultivate a non-violent relationship to our conditions as we take care of Life?

Every day we will have moments that challenge us. Either something we want does not happen or something we do not want, happens. Someone disappoints us, we fail in our own eyes. **How do we start from where we are, with ‘what is’, as the undisputed ground of our life?**

Not Fighting, Fighting: Reactivity and Peaceful Abiding

Deep acceptance is the root of peaceful abiding. While this statement is true, it can also seem too idealistic and incomplete. When life is challenging we often fight against our circumstances. We have a big, sometimes healthy, “NO”. The fact that we have desires and preferences is not the problem. These will always be here. Sometimes these big “NO’s” lead us toward positive life choices. The real question is how do we live with our reactivity. This requires great care.

“Not fighting, fighting” means to include the reactive voices and sensations in our field of awareness. Rather than judging ourselves for hating the back pain or for being angry with the person who stole our purse, we find space inside for the painful states that arise. **Allowing the anger without perpetuating it** requires high levels of awareness. When we can not immediately embrace ‘what is’ we open our attention to this fighting of reality. Welcoming and taking care of these inner voices and contractions will lead us back to friendliness with the present moment. Also, notice carefully if equanimity becomes another ideal that creates self-judgment.

Cultivating equanimity or peaceful abiding in the moment is the key to living our lives. Quite different from resignation, this means stepping into our reality. How?

Grounding in your body is a great ally. Bringing your presence to bodily sensations is very helpful.

Once we have our bodily-felt experience, we can open to our feeling states, be they desirable or undesirable. Painful moments can be met with care. We can invite moments of positive energy to permeate our whole body. Fully embracing the small gifts that appear each day, each moment, will encourage this peaceful abiding.

Kindness toward your own limitations and those of others will pave the way back home.

Our inner needs and the needs of others can all be acknowledged from the spaciousness of equanimity. This skill is a lifetime practice. Working toward equanimity rather than happiness is a good hint for skillfully embracing our lives.

Imaginary Dialogue:

*Student: After all these years, I now see how important it is to put equanimity in the foreground.
Thank you.*

Roshi: And don't forget to fully enjoy and celebrate the Living Moment!