

On Compassion, Equanimity and Impermanence by Shinzen Young

Share People's Pain, Not Their Suffering

Just as insight has many facets, so also with service. I would like to talk about just one aspect -- compassion.

Compassion is practiced in two ways: subtly and overtly. You can subtly serve any person with whom you interact by allowing their pain and pain to resonate deeply within you, and experiencing it completely so that it does not turn into suffering within you. This is the healthy alternative to both callous indifference and enervating enmeshment.

This subtle service is a natural extension of the self-liberation process. You purified your own pain by willingly experiencing it with mindfulness and equanimity. Now, in daily interaction, you open yourself up to other people's pain. But you apply mindfulness and equanimity to it as it resonates within you. By experiencing another person's pain in this liberated way, you are subtly, subliminally helping them to do the same. People want to have you around, but they cannot say exactly why. The reason is that your body is constantly preaching a wordless sermon to everybody you interact with, even casually. It's deeply fulfilling to share (com) the pain (passion), but not share the suffering.

Subtle is significant, but we must also serve in a more overt, tangible way. The form that this overt service takes depends on our personal interests and abilities and on the norms of the culture in which we live. For some, it's expressed in how they raise their families. For others, it will take the form of social action or helping professions. Some may express it through the use of special powers, such as the ability to heal. For many, overt service takes the form of teaching and supporting people's spiritual practice.

- From "Meditation: Escaping into Life" an interview with Shinzen Young

Equanimity: A Radical Permission to Feel

Equanimity is a fundamental skill for self-exploration and emotional intelligence. It is a deep and subtle concept frequently misunderstood and easily confused with suppression of feeling, apathy or inexpressiveness.

Equanimity comes from the Latin word *aequus* meaning balanced, and *animus* meaning spirit or internal state. As an initial step in understanding this concept, let's consider for a moment its opposite: what happens when a person loses internal balance.

In the physical world we say a person has lost balance if they fall to one side or another. In the same way a person loses internal balance if they fall into one or the other of the

following contrasting reactions:

Suppression –A state of thought/feeling arises and we attempt to cope with it by stuffing it down, denying it, tightening around it, etc.

Identification –A state of thought/feeling arises and we fixate it, hold onto it inappropriately, not letting it arise, spread and pass with its natural rhythm.

Between suppression on one side and identification on the other lies a third possibility, the balanced state of non-self-interference...equanimity. [...]

Equanimity belies the adage that you cannot “have your cake and eat it too.”When you apply equanimity to unpleasant sensations, they flow more readily and as a result cause less suffering. When you apply equanimity to pleasant sensations, they also flow more readily and as a result deliver deeper fulfillment. The same skill positively affects both sides of the sensation picture. Hence the following equation:

Psycho-spiritual Purification = (Pain x Equanimity) + (Pleasure x Equanimity).

Furthermore, when feelings are experienced with equanimity, they assure their proper function as motivators and directors of behavior as opposed to driving and distorting behavior. Thus equanimity plays a critical role in changing negative behaviors such as substance and alcohol abuse, compulsive eating, anger, violence, and so forth.

Equanimity involves non-interference with the natural flow of subjective sensation. Apathy implies indifference to the controllable outcome of objective events. Thus, although seemingly similar, equanimity and apathy are actually opposites. Equanimity frees up internal energy for responding to external situations. By definition, equanimity involves radical permission to feel and as such is the opposite of suppression. As far as external expression of feeling is concerned, internal equanimity gives one the freedom to externally express or not, depending on what is appropriate to the situation.

-- From ‘What Is Equanimity’;

Three Stages of Perceiving Impermanence

Impermanence is just appreciating the normal changing-ness of each experience at deeper levels of poignancy. One way to think about this is in terms of three aspects of impermanence: the trivial, the harsh, and the blissful.

At first, impermanence may present itself in a kind of trivial way. For example, you are meditating, and you start feeling an itch. You get preoccupied with it for a while. Then something distracts you, and when you come back, the itch is gone. You didn’t actually feel it go, you are just aware that something previously present is now absent. Your attention was broken, but you still noticed that something changed. This level of understanding impermanence is based on a lack of continuous concentration. A deeper appreciation of impermanence comes about through continuous concentration.

As your concentration skills grow, and you are able to focus on things more continuously without being distracted, you begin to appreciate how things continuously change. But continuous change does not necessarily imply smooth change. At this stage, your

experience of change may be abrupt, jagged, perhaps even harsh. For example, you are watching a pain in your leg, and you notice that it is pounding, twisting, stabbing, shooting, crushing, or exploding. Now, these are very abrupt and uncomfortable modes of movement, but they are movement nonetheless. They are ways in which the pain sensation is changing. It seems like somebody has stuck a knife in your leg and is twisting it to the right, to the left, jabbing it in, pulling it out. It is harsh, it is abrupt, it is jagged, but it represents a continuous contact with changing-ness. This doesn't happen only with painful experiences. The same can happen with intense pleasure.

Eventually, your concentration and equanimity skills mature to the point where your experience of change is not only continuous, but smooth as well. A softening takes place. The impermanence becomes fluid, soothing, bubbly, more like an effortless breathing in and out. This is because your focus is like a high-resolution monitor or a high-definition TV screen, and you are able to perceive subtler movements with clarity. To make a techie metaphor, it's as if you have increased the sampling rate or bandwidth of your change detector. You can't force this to happen, but as you are paying attention and developing an acceptance of the harsher kinds of impermanence, they break up into gentler kinds of impermanence—stately undulations, effervescence, effortless spread, and collapse. When this happens, the impermanence starts to comfort you, it becomes like a massage.

At this point, we are on the edge of an important transition, because now we can yield to the flow and let it "meditate us." The perception "I am meditating" fades into the background and is replaced by the perception that "impermanence is meditating me."

-excerpted from 'The Science of Enlightenment'

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