



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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Peace of Mind:

The Limbic System, Equanimity, and Breaking the Chain of Suffering

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Daily life is full of emotions, from the pleasures of happiness and love to the pains of worry, frustration, sorrow, and anger.

While we may take them for granted, our feelings are actually an extraordinary evolutionary achievement, as remarkable in their own way as language and logic.

Animals have emotions, too, as Darwin observed in his book, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, in 1872. But consider the apparent emotions in a spectrum of animals, from – say – snakes and lizards, to squirrels, dogs, and monkeys, and then to human beings. There is a direct correlation between the complexity of social life of a species and the range and depth of the emotions of its members. Because our relationships are so layered, nuanced, enduring, and plain messy, humans have the greatest emotional range of any animal.

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at <http://www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin>.

Rick Hanson, PhD, edits the Bulletin. Michelle Keane is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson.

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In our species, emotions serve many functions. They arouse our interest and tell us what to pay attention to. They motivate approach strategies through pleasant feelings and motivate avoidance or attack strategies through unpleasant ones. They enable us to share states of mind with other members of our family, tribe, or nation – and to signal or detect important states of mind such as fear, disgust, anger, or erotic interest. They bond children and parents, lovers and friends.

Emotions join us in common cause with other people, whether it's chatting companionably while gathering nuts and berries on the African savannah 100,000 years ago or it's circling with spears around a woolly mammoth in Siberia 80,000 years later – or it's a stadium full of people today cheering a sports team to victory . . . or a nation grieving when a well-loved figure such as Ghandi or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. passes away.

More subtly, emotions make you known to *yourself*. Flowing through the field of awareness, your feelings reveal the meeting of thought and body, sensation and desire: deep, underlying movements of mental – and thus neural – activity.

The Machinery of Upset

(Emotional) life is great when we feel enthusiastic, contented, peaceful, happy, interested, loving, etc. But when we're upset, or aroused to go looking for trouble, life ain't so great.

To address this problem, let's turn to a strategy used widely in science (and

Buddhism, interestingly): analyze things into their fundamental elements, such as the quarks and other subatomic particles that form an atom – or the Five Aggregates in Buddhism of form, feeling tone (not emotions, but rather the “hedonic tone” of experience as pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant), perception (categorizing things, memory), “formations” (thoughts, emotions, images, desires, and all other remaining contents of mind), and awareness (I’m avoiding the common term, consciousness, because it’s saturated with philosophical or metaphysical connotations that are not part of my meaning here).

We’ll apply this deconstructive strategy – the Buddha was a kind of pre-modern post-modernist – to the machinery of getting upset. Here is a summary of the eight major “gears” of that machine – somewhat based on how they unfold in time, though they actually often happen in circular or simultaneous ways, intertwining with and co-determining each other. Next to the arrow, you can also see some of the main neural substrates of this “gearing.”



The main point of this close analysis, this deconstruction, is not intellectual understanding or theory, but increasing your own mindfulness into your experience, and creating more points of intervention within it to reduce the suffering you cause for yourself – and other people.

This will be more real for you if you first imagine a recent upset or two, and replay it in your mind in slow motion.

Appraisals

- What do we focus on, what do we pick out of the larger mosaic?
- What meaning do we give the event? How do we frame it?
- How significant do we make it? (Is it a 2 on the Ugh scale . . . Or a 10?)
- What are the discrepancies between our goals or expectations, and what is actually the case
- What intentions do we attribute to others?
- What are the embedded beliefs about other people? The world? The past? The future?
- In sum, what views are we attached to?

-> Prefrontal cortex (PFC) executive function and “theory of mind” (empathy for the thoughts of others) systems; anterior cingulate cortex (especially for discrepancies between goals and reality); language circuits in left temporal lobe (reversed for about half of left-handed people)

Self-Referencing

- Upsets arise within the perspective of “I.”
- What is the sense of “I” that is running at the time? Strong? Weak? Mistreated?
- Are you taking things personally?
- How does the sense of self change over the course of the upset (often intensifying)?

-> Circuits of “self” are distributed throughout the brain, with a particular density in the midline of cortex (overlapping the “default network”).

Vulnerabilities

- Challenges wear on vulnerabilities, which we all have (moderated by inner and outer resources).
- Physiological: Pain, fatigue, hunger, lack of sleep, biochemical imbalances, illness
- Temperamental: Anxious, rigid, angry, melancholic, spirited/ADHD
- Psychological: Personality, culture, effects of gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.



-> A vulnerability can be embodied or represented in many ways; for example, chronic experiences of moderate to high stress release so much cortisol that many hippocampal neurons are killed, impairing the functions of this brain region, such as putting things in context and inhibiting the amygdala alarm bell of the brain, which makes one ever more vulnerable to stress; consequently, a person becomes increasingly sensitized to upsets and reactive to them, in a vicious cycle.

Memory

- Stimuli are interpreted in terms of explicit, episodic memories of similar experiences.
- And in terms of implicit, emotional memories or other, unconscious associations. (Especially trauma)
- These explicit and implicit memories shade, distort, and amplify stimuli, packaging them with “spin” and sending them off to the rest of the brain.

-> Hippocampus interacting with long-term memory representations distributed throughout the cortex.

Aversion

- The feeling tone of “unpleasant” is in full swing at this point, though present in the previous “gears” listed above of survival reactivity.
- In primitive organisms - and thus the primitive circuits of our own brain - the unpleasant/ aversion circuit is more primary than the pleasant/approach circuit since aversion often calls for all the animal’s resources and approaching does not.
- Aversion can also be a temperamental tendency.
- How we manage the unpleasant hedonic tone is very important. For example, the Buddha paid much attention to aversion - such as to ill will - in his teachings, because it is so fundamental, and such a source of suffering.

-> The experience of unpleasantness centrally involves the amygdala and drops in dopamine levels associated with disappointments.

Bodily Activation

- The body energizes to respond; getting upset activates the stress machinery just like getting chased by a lion a million years ago.
- All this triggers blood to the large muscles (hit or run), dilates pupils (see better in darkness), cascades cortisol and adrenaline, increases heart rate, etc.

- These stress response systems activate quickly, but their effects fade away slowly.
- There is much collateral damage in the body and mind from chronically “going to war.”

-> Sympathetic nervous system (fight-or-flight); hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis

Negative Emotions

- Emotions are a fantastic evolutionary achievement for promoting grandchildren.
- Both the positive emotions that nurture, motivate, and help us to recover from stressful activations (such as the prosocial bonding emotions of caring, compassion, love, and happiness at the welfare of others), and the negative, fight-or-flight emotions such as fear, anger, sorrow, shame, and disgust.
- Emotions organize, mobilize the whole brain.
- They also shade our perceptions and thoughts in self-reinforcing ways.



The Dancer Becomes the Dance

© Bev Stevens, 2012

In the end, we are ready to begin.

The dancer becomes the dance.

Life plays itself through us just as music flows through the inspired and accomplished pianist.

We are free to give and giving enriches us.

Oh, yes, there are still dishes to be done, meetings to attend and tears to wipe away.

But now we live all of life that was given . . . not just a fragment.

-> The whole brain participates in emotional processing, though it is centrally grounded in the sub-cortical components of the limbic system, notably hippocampus, basal ganglia, amygdala, and tegmentum (which are necessary for the experience of emotions).

Loss of Executive Control

- The survival machine is designed to make you identify yourself with your body and your emotional reactions. That identification is highly motivating for keeping yourself alive!
- So, in an upset, there is typically a loss of “observing ego” detachment, and instead a kind of emotional hijacking - facilitated by neural circuits in which subcortically biased information gets fast-tracked throughout the brain, ahead of slower but more accurate frontal lobe interpretations.
- As myelination proceeds from the back of the cortex to its front, coming to maturity by the late teens or early twenties, prefrontal executive systems become more capable of grabbing the steering wheel and averting an emotional hijacking – though as all adults know, it is still all too easy to lose control!

-> Sub-cortical activations swamping prefrontal responses.

Emotional Hijacking

In light of this machinery of survival-based, emotional reactivity, let's look more

narrowly at what Daniel Goleman has called “emotional hijacking.”

The emotional circuits of your brain – which are relatively primitive from an evolutionary standpoint, originally developed when dinosaurs ruled the earth – exert great influence over the more modern layers of the brain in the cerebral cortex. They do this in large part by continually “packaging” incoming sensory information in two hugely influential ways:

- **Labeling** it with a subjective feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is primarily accomplished by the amygdala, in close concert with the hippocampus; this circuit is probably the specific structure of the brain responsible for the feeling aggregate in Buddhism (and one of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness).
- **Ordering** a fundamental *behavioral* response: approach, avoid, or ignore.

The amygdala-hippocampus duo keep answering the two questions an organism – you and I – continually faces in its environment: Is it OK or not? And what should I do?



Photo: [Christa Gallopoulos](#)

Meanwhile, the frontal lobes have also been receiving and processing sensory information. **But much of it went through the amygdala first**, especially if it was emotionally charged, including linked to past memories of threat or pain or trauma. Studies have shown that differences in amygdala activation probably account for much of the variation, among people, in emotional temperaments and reactions to negative information.

The amygdala sends its *interpretations* of stimuli - with its own “spin” added - throughout the brain, including to the frontal lobes. **In particular, it sends its signals directly to the brain stem without processing by the frontal lobes - to trigger autonomic (fight or flight) and behavioral responses.** And those patterns of activation in turn ripple back up to the frontal lobes, also affecting its interpretations of events and its plans for what to do.

It’s like there is a poorly controlled, emotionally reactive, not very bright,



paranoid, and trigger-happy lieutenant in the control room of a missile silo watching radar screens and judging what he sees. Headquarters is a hundred miles away, also seeing the same screens -- but (A) it gets its information after the lieutenant does, (B) the lieutenant's judgments affect what shows up on the screens at headquarters, and (C) his instructions to "launch" get to the missiles seconds before headquarters can signal "stand down!"

Suffering and More Suffering

The "spin" or "packaging" added by the amygdala and its partners may be great for survival -- "jump first, ask questions later" -- and probably why, in the order of the aggregates in Buddhism, the feeling aggregate comes before the perception aggregate: in evolution, it's more important to sense *whether* there's a threat than to know *what* it is.

But this primal circuitry is a major source of the "second dart" of life: the secondary cascade of uncomfortable emotions, action plans, views, etc. that follows the bare sensory data of the first dart



of elemental physical or emotional pain.

In other words, we are continually having reactions as result of being alive, and they have an inherent tone of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

The usual state is one in which we *react* to those reactions – by reaching after what's pleasant, *grasping* after it . . . or resisting or trying to get away from what's unpleasant, *averse* to it or wanting what's neutral to hurry up and turn into something pleasant!

These understandable reactions to our reactions have just one small problem:

They are a key link in the chain of suffering.

You can see for yourself: your reactions to the initial reaction of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral very, very often make you or others suffer. Pure and simple. No way around it. Like gravity.

And then those reactions to reactions . . . become the basis for more reactions which lead to suffering.

This is, of course, depressing.

Cutting the Chain of Suffering

But it's also incredibly hopeful.

The link between (A) our initial, primary reaction – of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral – and (C) suffering and harms to ourselves and others . . . is (B) our secondary reactions of grasping and aversion.

If we just block those reactions, then whoosh, we've snipped the chain. Nipped it in the bud! *And equanimity is the scissors.* It stops reactions developing to that initial, primary feeling tone. And that makes all the difference in the world.

In essence, calm is when you aren't having reactions, while equanimity is when you're not reacting to your reactions. (Indifference – let alone apathy – are near enemies of equanimity. Often there is anger – i.e., aversion – buried in indifference and apathy.)

In a state of equanimity, we haven't yet permanently broken the chain of suffering, since there are other factors at work generating suffering that still need to be addressed. And our relief from suffering is contingent, dependent, lasting only as long as our equanimity does, and thus not utterly reliable – in the “heartwood” sense of complete liberation and freedom.

Nonetheless, even a momentary relief from suffering is great. And in the space of clarity and non-disturbance

that equanimity provides,

we are also able to have

more insight into our

own minds – into the

factors that promote the

welfare of ourselves and

others, and those that do

not – and able to cultivate

wholesome qualities, such

as patience, investigation,

and compassion.

***The Wellspring Institute
for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom***

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/wellspring-institute>.

If you enjoy receiving the Wise Brain Bulletin each month, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Wellspring Institute. Simply visit WiseBrain.org and click on the Donate button. We thank you.

Changing the Machinery of Upset

So let's consider ways to cultivate more peace of mind – and even its consummation in profound equanimity – by working with the eight gears of the machine of suffering we explored above. (There are other methods, too, that are more specifically Buddhist, and you might like to explore the Access to Insight website for more information.)

This list is by no means exclusive: it just points to how many great tools are available these days for managing our emotional reactions.

Methods for Appraisals

- Staying mindful of the whole
- Being mindful of the meanings, the framings, we give things.
- Challenging the significance the mind gives something.



- Is it really an 8 on the 10-point Ugh scale? If it's really a 2, why is my anger an 8?
- Challenging the intentions we attribute to others; realize we are usually a bit player in their drama.
- What beliefs are implicit about others, world?
- Cognitive therapy methods for challenging inaccurate, negative beliefs

Methods for Self-Referencing

- Recognizing the suffering that comes from selfing
- Mindfulness of the sense of "I"
- What are the implicit representations of self: Strong? Weak? Mistreated?
- How much are we taking things personally? ("Negative grandiosity" . . .)
- How does getting upset intensify or shade self?
- Seeing the interconnectedness of things in the situation, including yourself
- Identifying legitimate rights and needs, and taking care of them

Methods for Vulnerabilities

- Frame of compassion for yourself and self-acceptance
- Honest self-appraisal of physiology/health, temperament, and psychology:
Weak spots? Hot buttons?
- Protecting vulnerabilities in situations: e.g., eating before talking about what upset you; asking people to slow down if you tend to be rigid; pushing through possible inhibitions in assertiveness due to culture, gender
- Shore up vulnerabilities over time: e.g., medical care, vitamins, 5-HTP, antidepressants; build up greater control over your attention; take in positive experiences that slowly fill the hole in your heart

Methods for Memory

- Be aware of the "pre-amp" turbo-charging of memory and sensitization.
- Increase positive emotional memories by "taking in the good."
- Shift emotional memories in positive directions over time by recalling old

painful experiences while simultaneously bringing positive thoughts and feelings prominently to mind.

- Other methods for trauma (e.g., EMDR)

Methods for Aversion

- Understand the central place in psychology and in spiritual growth of working with aversion; use that to motivate yourself to not act aversively.
- Meditate on the Second Foundation of Mindfulness (feeling)
- Focus on neutral feeling tones
- Dwell on the conditioned, compounded, and impermanent nature of the unpleasant
- Compassion for people who are aversive to you
- See “[21 Ways to Turn Ill Will into Good Will](#)” in the Articles section of www.WiseBrain.org.



Photo: [Christa Gallopoulos](#)

Methods for Bodily Activation

- Understanding the mechanical, animal nature of activation
- Regarding stressful activation as an affliction (health consequences of chronic stress)
- Lots of methods for stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system to down-regulate the SNS
- Getting in the habit of rapidly activating a damping cascade when the body activates
- Regarding bodily activation as just another compounded, “meaningless,” and impermanent phenomenon

Methods for Negative Emotions

- Mindfulness of how thoughts shape emotions . . . and emotions shape thoughts.
- Lots of practices for letting go of negative emotions (e.g., visualizing them leaving the body through valves in the tips of the fingers and the toes)
- Cultivation of rapture and joy – and the dopaminergic neurological benefits of those states, including for steadying the mind

Methods for Loss of Executive Control

- Slow down; buy yourself time.
- Cultivate steadiness of mind
- Describe your experiences in words (noting)
- Actively enlist internal resources, e.g., sense of others who love you, recollection of what happened the last time you lost your temper
- Enlist external resources, e.g., call a friend, do therapy, go to a meditation group
- Stay embodied, which helps dampen runaway emotional-visual reactions

A Meditation on Equanimity

If you like, you might explore the meditation just below. You could read it slowly,

entering a meditative frame of mind . . . or record your own voice reading it and then listen . . . or ask someone else to read it to you.

Here we go:

Starting by getting comfortable, perhaps focusing on your breath for a few minutes.

Forming an intention for this meditation, perhaps in words, perhaps simply a feeling . . . Relaxing . . . Feeling as safe as you can . . . Finding, evoking happiness . .

. Sensing that the benefits of this meditation are sinking into you . . .

Being mindful of the changing sense of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in your experience.

Perhaps a lot of pleasant and neutral right now.

Whatever is present, be aware of your reactions to it.

See if you can sustain a sense of equanimity toward whatever qualities your experience has.



Impartial, accepting, and at peace with it if it is pleasant.

Impartial, accepting, and at peace with it if it is unpleasant.

Impartial, accepting, and at peace with it if it is neutral.

The mind remaining steady, quiet, and collected . . .

Seeing that any pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral tones come and go, caused by preceding conditions.

They are interdependent with the world and constantly changing.

And thus not fit to be depended on as a basis for happiness.

Feeling tones coming and going . . . without an owner. Without a self needed.

In the pleasant, there is merely the pleasant.

In the unpleasant, there is merely the unpleasant.

In the neutral, there is merely the neutral.

No owner of the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Nothing to identify with.

Just states flowing through awareness. Mingled with breathing and happiness.

Finding a sense of freedom in the non-reactivity.

A joy, perhaps, in the freedom. In this equanimity.

Impartial to whatever arises. A kind of ease with it. A kind of relaxed indifference.

Not preferring anything else. A sense of fullness already, of being alright as it all is. A profound acceptance of whatever arises. Allowing it to come and go without grasping or aversion.

Abiding as equanimity. Breath after breath after breath. At ease. Settling into deeper and deeper layers of equanimity. Whatever is present is alright.

A vast and thoroughgoing equanimity.

Where there is no disturbance. No struggle with what is the case. No struggles at all. Even the subtlest ones.

Resting in equanimity. Like a Buddha.

Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, having the nature of wasting, vanishing, fading, and ceasing.



The painful feeling and the neutral feeling, too, are impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, having the nature of wasting vanishing, fading and ceasing.

When a well-taught person perceives this, he or she becomes dispassionate toward pleasant feelings, dispassionate toward painful feelings and dispassionate toward neutral feelings.

Being dispassionate, his or her lust fades away, and with the fading away of lust, he or she is liberated.

When liberated, there comes to him or her the knowledge that he or she is liberated. He or she now knows, “Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived, done is what was to be done, there is no more of this to come.”

The Buddha, Majjhima Nikaya 146

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Rick Hanson, Ph.D., is a neuropsychologist and author of [*Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom*](#) (in 22 languages) and [*Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time*](#) (in 8 languages). Founder of the [Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom](#) and Affiliate of the [Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley](#), he’s been an invited speaker at Oxford, Stanford, and Harvard, and taught in meditation centers worldwide. His work has been featured on the BBC, NPR, FoxBusiness, Consumer Reports Health, U.S. News and World Report, and O Magazine and he has several [audio programs](#) with Sounds True. His weekly e-newsletter – [Just One Thing](#) – has over 40,000 subscribers, and also appears on Huffington Post, Psychology Today, and other major websites.

For more information, please see his full profile at www.RickHanson.net.



Compassion and Joy *from Christian and Buddhist Perspectives*

A Benefit Workshop for the Wellspring Institute **Sunday, January 13, 2013**

Andrew Dreitcer, Ph.D. Associate Professor at Claremont School of Theology, and James Baraz, co-founder of [Spirit Rock Meditation Center](#) and author of [Awakening Joy](#), will co-lead a four hour workshop to benefit the [Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom](#) on Sunday, January 13, 2013.

Hosted by [Rick Hanson, Ph.D.](#), the workshop will include presentations, discussion, and internal experiential practices. Topics include: opening the heart without getting drained; how happiness and other positive emotions increase resilience, health, and love; connecting personal spirituality with worldly action; and how these perspectives and practices involve the brain.

The Wellspring Institute publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin, offers all the great resources at [WiseBrain.org](#), and hosts the Skillful Means wiki (methods for psychological and spiritual growth). Registration is \$50.

It's happening on Sunday, January 13, 2013 from 9:30 am – 1:30 pm in San Rafael, CA at the Marin Showcase Theatre, 10 Avenue of the Flags, San Rafael, CA 94903. For more information, go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/compassion-and-joy-workshop>.

Find Stillness

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Editor's note: This short piece first appeared in the free [Just One Thing e-newsletter](#).

It is so relevant to the essay above on Equanimity that we thought you might enjoy it here as well.

Why

Things keep changing. The clock ticks, the day unfolds, trees grow, leaves turn brown, hair turns gray, children grow up and leave home, attention skitters from this to that, the cookie is delicious but then it's all gone, you're mad about something for awhile and then get over it, consciousness streams on and on and on.

Many changes are certainly good. Most people are glad to put middle school behind them. I'm still happy about shifting thirty years ago from single to married. Painkillers, flush toilets, and the Internet seem like pretty good ideas. It's lovely to watch grass waving in the wind or a river passing. Fundamentally, if there were no change, nothing could happen, reality would be frozen forever. I once asked my friend Tom what he thought God was and he said "possibility."

On the other hand, many changes are uncomfortable, even awful. The body gets creaky, and worse. We lose those we love and eventually lose life itself. Families drift apart, companies fail, dictators tighten their grip, nations go to war. The planet warms at human hands, as each day we pour nearly a billion tons of carbon

into the atmosphere. Countless species go extinct. As William Yeats wrote:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”

And change itself is often – maybe innately – stressful. When you really open to the fact always in front of our noses that each moment of now decays and disappears in the instant it arises – it can feel rather alarming. Life and time sweep us along. As soon as something pleasant occurs in the mind’s flow we reach for it but whoosh it passes away right through our fingers leaving disappointment behind. Inherently, anything that changes is not a reliable basis for enduring contentment and fulfillment.

Yet it is also true that some things remain always the same. In their stillness you can find a refuge, an island in the stream of changes, a place to stand for perspective and wisdom about



Photo: [Christa Gallopoulos](#)

events and your reactions to them, a respite from the race, quiet amidst the noise. Perhaps even find a sense of something transcendental, outside the frame of passing phenomena.

The Practice

Stillness, a sense of the unchanging, is all around, and at different levels. Look for it, explore its effects on you, and let it sink in.

For example, it's not the ultimate stillness, but there is that lovely feeling when the house is quiet and you're sitting in peace, the dishes are done and the kids are fine (or the equivalent), and you can really let down and let go. In your character, you have enduring strengths and virtues and values; situations change, but your good intentions persist. In relationships, love abides – even for people who drive you crazy!

More subtly, there is the moment at the very top of a tossed ball's trajectory when it's neither rising nor falling, the pause before the first stroke of the brush, that space between exhalation and inhalation, the silence in which sounds occur, or the discernible gap between thoughts when your mind is quiet.

In your mind there is always an underlying calm and well-being that contains emotional reactions, like a riverbed that is still even as the flood rushes over it (if you're not aware of this, truly, with practice you can find and stabilize a sense of it). There is also the unchanging field of awareness, itself never altered by the thoughts passing through it.

More abstractly, $2+2=4$ forever; the area of a circle will always be pi times the radius squared; etc. The fact that something has occurred will never change. The people who have loved you will always have loved you; they will always have found

you lovable. Whatever is fundamentally true – including, ironically, the truth of impermanence – has an unchanging stillness at its heart. Things change, but the *nature* of things – emergent, interdependent, transient – does not.

Moving toward ultimate matters, and where language fails, you may have a sense of something unchangingly transcendental, divine. Or, perhaps related, an intuition of that which is unconditioned always just prior to the emergence of conditioned phenomena.

Wherever you find it, enjoy stillness and let it feed you. It's a relief from the noise and bustle, a source of clarity and peace. Give yourself the space, the permission, to be still – at least in your mind – amidst those who are busy. To use a traditional saying:

*May that which is still
be that in which your mind delights.*



Skillful Means

The [Skillful Means](#) wiki, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Equanimity Meditation

Purpose / Effects

The cause of much of our upset and emotional instability is clinging and neediness around people we like, and aversion and negativity towards people we don't like. We also have an unhealthy indifference to strangers, who may need our help, or at least our good will.

This equanimity meditation helps us to examine our feelings towards people, and correct them where they are mistaken. This leads to a more balanced, wholesome, and helpful viewpoint. It also cuts off a lot of emotional turmoil at its root.

Method

Summary

Meditate on three people (a loved one, an enemy, and a neutral person), examining

and correcting your feelings toward them.

Long Version

1. Sit in a comfortable meditation posture. Follow your breath until you feel centered and grounded.
2. Bring to mind the images of three people: someone you like, someone you dislike, and someone towards whom you feel indifferent. Keep these three people in mind throughout the meditation.
3. Focus on the friend, and look into all the reasons you like this person. Try to see if any of the reasons are about things this person does for you, or ways they uplift your ego. Ask yourself if these are really the correct reasons to like someone. Then do the same thing with the person you dislike, instead asking about the reasons you dislike them. Finally, do this for the person you are indifferent towards, asking about the reasons for your indifference. In all cases, notice where



your ego is involved in the judgment of the other person's worth.

4. Next, ask yourself whether you consider each of these relationships as permanent. Would you still like your friend if they did something terrible to you? What if the person you dislike really did something nice for you? What if the stranger became close to you? Think about all the relationships in the past in which your feelings about the person have dramatically changed.

5. Now, visualize the person you like doing something you dislike or that is unacceptable to you. Would you still be their friend? Remember that many people have changed from friends to enemies in the past. There are people who you used to like, toward whom you now feel enmity. Think about how there is no special reason to feel good about a person who is only temporarily your friend.

6. Next, visualize your enemy doing something very kind for you. They might visit you in the hospital, or help you to fix your home. When you imagine this, can you feel positive emotions toward this person? Can you remember times in the past when an enemy became a friend? Is it necessary to feel that your strong dislike for this person will last forever? Isn't it possible that they could someday become your friend?

7. Now visualize the stranger. How would you feel about them if they did something very kind for you? Isn't it the case that all your current friends were at one point total strangers? Isn't it possible that a stranger could become your best friend? It has happened before.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

8. Think carefully about how everyone deserves equal regard as human beings. You must discriminate and make decisions based on your knowledge of a person's character, but you do not have to hold strong feelings or judgments towards them. It is very likely that your emotions around a person will change many times, so why hold onto these emotions so rigidly?

History

In Buddhism, equanimity means a very deep, even profound, state of mental balance and stability. It is considered one of the seven factors of enlightenment, and a hallmark of the third and fourth jhanas, which are deep states of meditative absorption.

This is a traditional meditation from Mahayana Buddhism. Its goal is to arouse “Bodhicitta” or the mind of enlightenment. There are other equanimity meditations from other Buddhist lineages (e.g., Theravada), as well as from other contemplative traditions.

The version presented here is adapted from the book [*How to Meditate: A Practical Guide*](#).

Caution

It can be upsetting to bring an “enemy” to mind.

Notes

When working with the mental image of an enemy, be careful not to get lost in negative thoughts and feelings. If you find that you can't handle working with a specific person without getting very worked up, switch to someone less upsetting.

See Also

[What Is Meditation?](#)

[Meditation Posture](#)

External Links

The full Equanimity Meditation from [*How to Meditate: A Practical Guide.*](#)

Emotional Awareness Meditation

Purpose / Effects

This meditation brings about a great deal of equanimity with emotions. They will not seem to affect us as deeply or adversely.

Many people have trouble contacting their emotions directly. Even if we feel that we know what emotion we are having, that does not necessarily mean that we are contacting it directly.

To contact an emotion directly means to feel it in the body. This is the opposite of



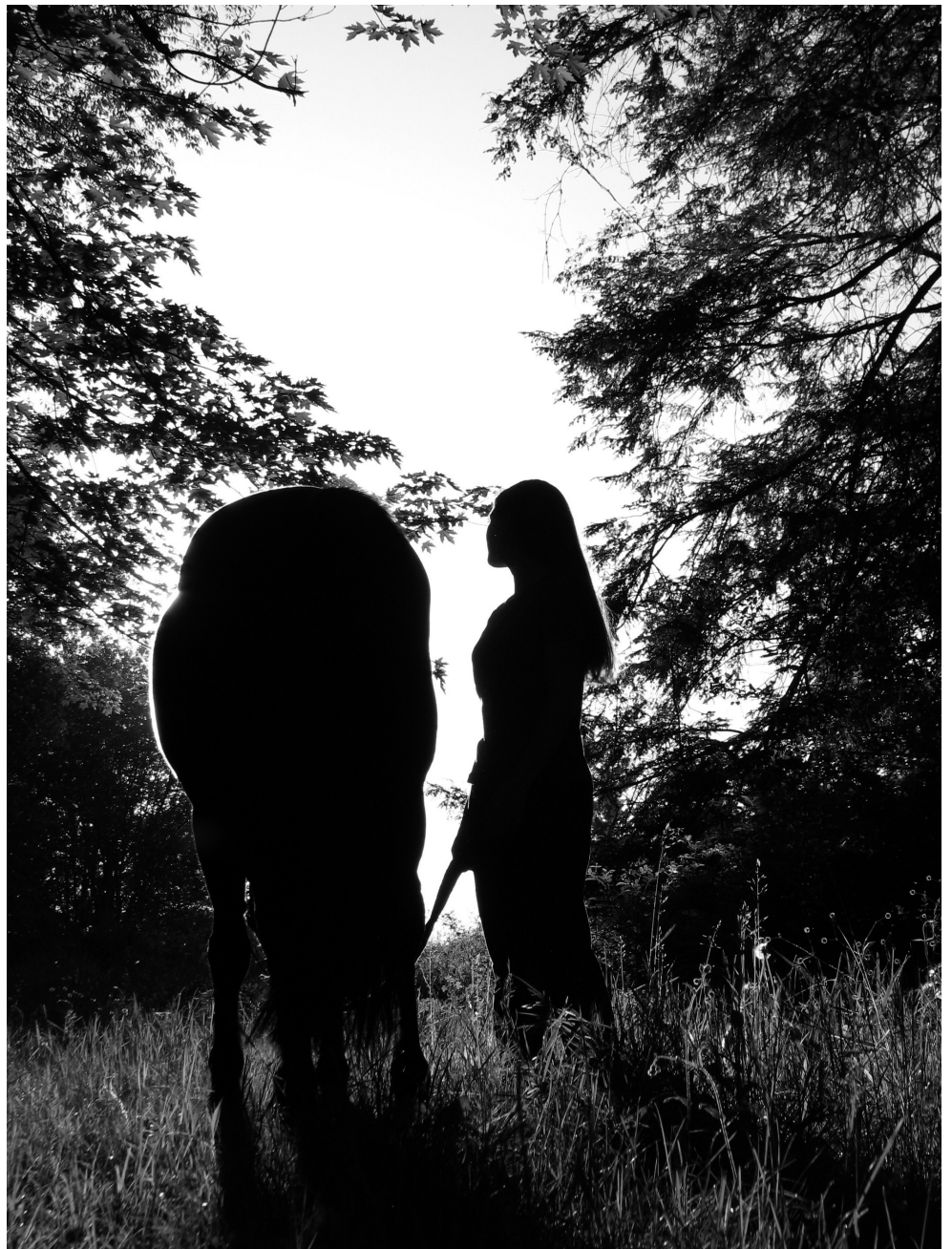
most people's experience, which is to related ideas about the emotion.

Here is an example. A person asks you how you are feeling. You respond by saying, "I am angry, because..." You then go on to tell the person all the reasons you are angry.

In this example, only the first three words, "I am angry" have anything to do with contacting emotion. All the rest of the explanation is about concepts.

A fuller example of contacting emotions directly, that is somatically, would be to say, "I am angry. I can feel a sort of gripping tension in my belly that is uncomfortable. The tense area feels kind of twisted and sharp. Parts of it are throbbing. It also feels like it is radiating heat outwards."

Notice that the cause of the anger is irrelevant.



The practice here is to feel the physical expression of the anger as completely as possible.

Extended practice of this meditation will bring about “skill at feeling,” that is, a tremendous amount of clarity in the emotional world. Emotional intelligence.

It will also help emotions to process and release much more quickly and completely, because we are not holding on to ideas about the emotions. The body processes emotion quickly, naturally, and fully.

Method

Summary

Feel the physical expression of an emotion as completely as possible.

Long Version

1. Settle into a comfortable meditation posture.
2. Breathing normally, bring your attention to your emotions. Notice if you are feeling any emotions, no matter how faintly. It is not necessary to know precisely which emotion you are having, or why you are having it. Just knowing that you are feeling something emotional is enough. Guessing is OK.
3. Once you detect an emotion, see if you can find its expression in your body. Maybe there is a feeling of tension, gripping, tightening, burning, twisting, throbbing, pressure, lightness, openness, etc.
4. If you like, you can mentally make the label “feel” when you detect a body sensation of emotion. Other labels are possible (“emotion” for example).
5. Each time you detect an emotional body sensation, try to actually feel the sensation in your body, as completely as possible. Feel it through and through.

6. Completely let go of any ideas you have about the emotion, or self-talk you might have about why the emotion is arising. Return to the body sensation of the emotion.

7. Continue contacting these emotional body sensations for as long as you wish.

History

Meditating on emotions is a traditional part of Vipassana practice in Buddhism. It is, for example, one of the four main techniques covered in the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path to Purity*), an important Buddhist text.

The version presented here is a summary of a practice given by American Buddhist teacher Shinzen Young.



Notes

At first, practicing this meditation may make it seem as if the emotions are getting bigger. If they are negative emotions, this may seem overwhelming for a while.

This is natural. It is occurring not because the emotions are actually getting bigger, but for two interesting reasons. The first is because we are no longer suppressing them. We are allowing them to actually express themselves fully. The second is because we are observing them (actually feeling them) very closely. Just as a microscope makes small things look bigger, the “microscope” of attention makes the emotional body sensations seem larger than they really are.

The good news here is that as the emotions express themselves freely in the body, they are being processed. Usually this means that they will pass much more quickly.

If we are feeling a positive emotion in this way, it may pass quickly, but we will also derive much more satisfaction from it, because our experience of it is so rich and complete.

If we are feeling a negative emotion in this way, we will experience much less suffering from it, because we are not resisting and suppressing it.

See Also

[What Is Meditation?](#)

[Meditation Posture](#)

External Links

[Shinzen Young's website](#)

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.