

Equanimity Week 3: Radical Acceptance From Chris

Equanimity is the steady evenness of mind that allows us to be aware of our inner experience without becoming entangled with it. This is sometimes called “radical acceptance”. It’s important to understand what acceptance means. It does not mean: being a doormat for abuse, condoning or ignoring injustice, disregarding symptoms of illness, approving of unwise behavior, acting on our every desire, or believing every thought.

It means recognizing *this moment* within us is just as it is, knowing that this feeling or thought or sensation has *already* arisen as a lawful consequence of all that has gone before. Rather than fight with it, we see and feel it clearly for what it is, no more, no less, allow it to pass through, or to reveal if there is anything more to know about it. Equanimity allows the space for wisdom to arise and decide when a skillful response is needed, rather than being driven by our reactive habits.

True equanimity is a fruit of practice, we can’t make it happen. But it is being slowly cultivated by all aspects of our practice, whenever we have the intention to allow awareness to see clearly what is arising as simply passing sensations, emotions and thoughts. Something in us is learning from each time we recognize the extra stress and strain of struggling with, identifying with, hating, believing, or fearing these inner experiences. And learning from each time we are able to feel the immediate relief of dis-identifying, and perhaps then the lightening up of our relationship to whatever situation triggered our reactions, the opening for fresh perspectives.

The basic moves of training in Equanimity are first to intend to soften and relax rather than tense up or run away or try to fix. Then turn toward the experience with gentleness, kindness, and the point of view that this is a natural, lawful response to circumstances. It is coming from our conditioning as an animal, as a human, as a being with our own unique history. Let me see this with bare attention for just what it is in this moment. No need add to shame, blame, guilt. Those may be part of the tangle, but they too can be seen from this point of view. How can we best use our attention and intention in this moment not to add additional stress, but to let the situation unfold and pass through by its nature, then make wise decisions about what to do out of clarity and calm.

Let’s look at *radical acceptance* of sensations. When we have some unpleasant bodily feeling, ranging from an itch to strong pain, immediately applying the concept of “pain” in “my” body tends to carry us off into tensing up against it, frantically trying to make it stop, and imagining it lasting forever. Learning to soften into and explore the actual discomfort as a series of tiny pricks of sensation, or waves that rise and fall without getting the thinking mind involved can be a revelation.

Radical acceptance of an arising emotion allows the emotion to do its job of managing the impact of unexpected events on the body: perhaps crying, shaking, preparing to clear out the

intestines, preparing the system for some kind of action. When this is allowed *under the light full of awareness* however, we retain enough perspective and access to present-time reality to more accurately assess whether this is truly an immediate danger or whether something has triggered an old memory or otherwise become exaggerated and unnecessarily reactive. We can also watch the interpretation our thoughts are offering of the situation and question that. We can learn to allow the emotion to clear out the momentary shock of the event, without obeying all the messages that might be arising. If we are in immediate danger, being chased by a tiger, the deeper system of our “wits” will take over and do what they do. But we can also gradually decondition our systems from over-reacting and invoking our physical survival mechanisms for every frustration or hurtful comment. This is growing equanimity with the everyday rubs and bumps of life. The same strategies are needed for the actual day to day survival of a personal crisis, or for making a lasting positive contribution to world issues.

Radical acceptance of thoughts is again about seeing them as conditioned phenomena, not identifying with being the owner or thinker of the thought. Allowing the perspective of observation, not needing to try to stop the thoughts from passing through but also not latching on to them with belief or losing the awareness that thinking is happening. When we lose that awareness, we go along for the whole ride of associations, emotions get stirred up and we are soon living in a world of the memory or imagination, losing touch with the reality of the present. A myriad of different motives, habits, drifts and rhythms of the mind serve up thought after thought, but we need not swallow them all, so to speak. A deeper level of insight and true understanding may find the space to come into awareness.

In looking at the perspective of “Radical Acceptance”, we’ve been focusing on working with the difficult and unpleasant, but true Equanimity is not seduced by the pleasant either. It retains the present-time perspective that can observe and recognize arising sensations, emotions and thoughts without that narrowing of awareness that tends to focus on the just-out-of-reach ideal, the unrealistic promise of lasting pleasure and complete satisfaction. In this narrowed seduced, entranced state, we lose access to wisdom and begin to act on these more short-term, instinctual pleasure-seeking messages that lead to the cycle of addictions, and to the greed that is destroying our planet. And we missing out on the deeper joy and freedom of true Equanimity and wisdom. And moments of neutral experience can lead to deeper tranquility and ease rather than restlessness, sleepiness, boredom and escapism.

Reflection: What are your habits of “first response” to pain, pleasure or the moments of neither? Often, we are pulled into a whole chain of reaction too quickly to notice our first response. So maybe you can make a point of pausing when you do happen to wake up from being entangled in some experience. Look back and ask yourself was this some kind of reaction to something unpleasant? Was it the pursuit of something that promised to be pleasant? Was it an escape from neutrality, or perhaps from a confusing bundle of all the feeling tones? Gradually you can train your awareness to catch your habits sooner, recognizing these underlying basic feelings, and begin to work with softening, observing, allowing.