

Hi everyone, and Happy New Year. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Zac, and I use he and him pronouns. I'm a white 37 year old male with long brown hair. Today I'm wearing a dark gray t-shirt with white lettering that says, "Disability is not a bad word". Although it's not visible on my camera, I'm seated on a gray and black manual wheelchair.

I live with both genetic and acquired disabilities. In 2022, I became a certified Awakening Joy teacher, which is a 10 lesson course developed by James Baraz that teaches enhancing joy in your life. I'm going to be teaching the version of Awakening Joy that I've adapted for a Disabled audience starting at the end of this month, January 2025.

This will be done independently of EBMC, but everyone here is invited to join. If you'd like more details, you can email me at zackrohn@gmail.com, thanks.

At the end of last year, I went to a day long retreat on five practices that support equanimity. Each practice was introduced and then followed by a period of sitting and walking meditations.

Obviously, we don't have time for all of that here. But I thought I'd report back to you about the practices with my own added commentary. When you first learn about equanimity, it sounds very challenging. However, when you break it down into smaller steps, it becomes less intimidating. I love the word practice because it implies that we are continually trying to apply something to our lives.

This means our goal is not to do the practice flawlessly, but to keep trying and continue evolving our understanding of the practice. Many days, we will only be able to maintain our practice momentarily, if at all. This is totally fine, and it's even part of the equanimity practice to accept imperfection in our practice.

Even just a moment of equanimity is a valuable moment. The more moments we have, the more we will continue to seek them. The teacher of this retreat was James Baraz, so I'd like to give him credit for helping formulate these ideas.

So what is equanimity? I'll start by using a quote from Barry Corbett. Barry is not a Buddhist, but was a trailblazer in the spinal cord injury community. And his quote touches on the essence of what equanimity is for me. He says, "Did you know that you can become unafraid of fear? You can. I know. I've done it. Fear is like a headache. If it happens, it happens. But there's nothing scary about it."

Equanimity is a quality of being centered and balanced, even in the midst of suffering. It's important to distinguish that we're not just striving for passive acceptance. One of the core teachings of the Buddha is that everything changes, and while it's just part of being alive, change is incredibly dysregulating and a major source of our suffering.

Buddhism is full of lists. Interestingly, equanimity appears on several of these lists and it's always the last item on that list. Some examples of these are the four Brahma Viharas, also known as the heart practices, the ten perfections, and the seven factors of enlightenment. I think it's important to add here that while equanimity is incredibly important, staying with negative emotions 24/7 is not suggested.

Sometimes a little of a good thing can go a long way. I don't think it's healthy to simply grit your teeth and bear down into your suffering. You can touch into it, acknowledge it, and then find a way to divert your attention into something else. That is the great thing about intention. You can take breaks either accidental or purposeful, and come back when you're ready.

The first practice that supports equanimity is observing your experience and allowing it to be just the way that it is. This is what I was touching on with the quote about being unafraid to experience fear. This isn't about bravery, but knowing that fear is a part of the human experience.

We still feel our fear, we just assure ourselves that it's okay for fear to exist. It's all part of being alive and being human. Allowing can be uncomfortable, and we're not pretending that we like what we're experiencing. Rather, we're just admitting that things are the way that they are right now.

Wishing things were different just makes us suffer more. But when we get curious about our experience, something that initially seemed bad may end up being more complex than you first thought. So another thing you can ask yourself is, "What's happening right now?" There are some phrases that you can say to ground yourself in allowing.

"This moment is like this". Or similarly, "it's like this". This can range from, "fear is like this", to, an "itch feels like this". Another phrase I really like is, "this belongs". This phrase embraces reality and acknowledges that everything has its place. Allowing doesn't preclude action. If you're thirsty, you don't want to just sit there and think, "this is what dehydration feels like".

Similarly, if you're feeling sad, you can apply self compassion. You might want to ask yourself, "what do I need right now?" Self compassion isn't about getting rid of your feelings. In fact, it's acknowledging them and responding in a caring way. A precursor to allowing is tolerating. So if it seems too much to allow, just try tolerating reality.

The second practice is impermanence. Once you observe and allow your experience for what it is, You'll start to notice that everything is always changing. At an intellectual level, we know this to be true. But it's a whole different thing to watch it in real time. Sometimes these changes are really big and notable, like losing a loved one. And other times, they're subtle and can be easily missed, like a shift in your attention during meditation, or how an itch can arise and fade away.

I feel like it's important to point out many people here, myself included, are living with disabilities and illnesses that are not impermanent. Barring major medical breakthrough, we'll experience them our whole lives.

In this case, impermanence is about our relationship to disability, and also how it presents itself on a given day. Sometimes I'm proud to be disabled. Sometimes I'm sad or angry. It can change all the time. We have minimal control over these waves, but we do have some control over our reaction to these shifts.

Getting comfortable with impermanence helps us avoid grasping after enjoyable experiences or pushing away difficult ones. When we come to the realization that things arise and fade, we become more comfortable with the waves.

The third thing to pay attention to while practicing equanimity is what is called feeling tone. In Buddhism, everything is believed to be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is subjective. Before becoming the Buddha, Siddhartha spent time with ascetics who ate just one grain of rice a day. This was said to create a spiritual experience for some, but would be horribly unpleasant for me.

Paying attention to feeling tone helps prevent unwise reactions. When we're having underlying feeling tones, we can react without even realizing what our experience is. So being aware of what is going on for us helps us choose responding over reacting. Feeling tone can be complex. An example I read while doing research for this talk was that crying can feel pleasant.

For me, joyful thoughts can also be accompanied by a longing for something I don't have. So feeling tone isn't as straightforward as emotions.

I think it's helpful to mix feeling tone with curiosity. If this moment is pleasant, what makes it pleasant? You'll find that things can shift quickly. Something neutral mixed with curiosity can become interesting, which makes it pleasant, at least for me.

It's also helpful to notice how pleasant moments can happen in the midst of suffering or unpleasant moments.

The fourth practice to support equanimity is seeing the bigger context and spaciousness around your experience. I love the metaphor of mindfulness being like a zoom lens. We have the ability to bring our awareness to a very small part of our experience, like a single fingernail.

We can also zoom out and focus on larger parts of our experience. For example, the sounds around us. A great metaphor for larger context is the difference between putting a teaspoon of salt in a glass of water versus putting the same teaspoon of salt into a lake. When we hold things in a larger context, they can have very different qualities.

When we're experiencing either physical or emotional pain, it can become our whole world. It can be helpful to notice that that pain exists in the context of our whole larger experience. We're not ignoring or denying our pain, just zooming out a little to see that it's not the only thing going on. This is really about Both/And, where an experience can be more than one thing at a time.

The last practice to support equanimity is letting go of outcomes. Letting go of outcomes has two components. First is realizing the limited influence we have over how our own life unfolds. Some things we have the power to change, many things we do not. On my worst days, I find myself thinking about everything I could have done differently throughout the day to make myself feel less badly.

Unfortunately, generally speaking, there's no rhyme or reason to why I'm feeling badly on a given day. Some days are just bad days. And it's important not to agonize over this. Secondly, letting go of outcomes is about how we relate to how other people choose to live their lives. As with all the heart practices, equanimity has a phrase that helps ground you in the practice.

The classic equanimity phrase is, "You are the owner of your karma, your happiness or unhappiness depends on your actions, not my wishes for you". This sounds pretty callous at first, but let's examine it a little bit deeper. In this context, karma is about actions, not your past that follows you around. We acknowledge that as much as we care for another person, only they can shape their own lives.

It's not our job to take away another's suffering, or fix their life for them. It likely wouldn't be to their benefit, even if we could. The point is to express that we care about another person and are here to support them, while accepting they are the ones in the driver's seat. We can also say, "I honor your life's journey", which is a kinder wording.

Okay everyone, that wraps up my talk on equanimity. I hope it's helpful to you in developing your equanimity practice.

May the merit of our practice tonight be for the benefit of all beings everywhere, including ourselves. May we be free of suffering and the causes of suffering. May we know peace and the causes of peace.