

## **INQUIRING DEEPLY INTO EMOTIONAL EQUANIMITY**

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### ***I. IF EQUANIMITY IS THE ANSWER, WHAT IS THE QUESTION?***



It is sometimes said that “insight begins with bad news”. While I would never be one to recommend pasting a happy face on whatever may be happening, I am nonetheless frequently struck by the fact that what is emotionally painful often winds up contributing great value to my life. For this reason, painful psychological events have become a special point of focus in my practice of mindful awareness. I make it a point to continually “inquire deeply” into my emotions, feelings, and moods. To me, such deep self-inquiry and self-reflection are a creative variation of mindfulness/awareness practice. I sometimes call it “practicing with problems”, since there always seems to be some emotionally-laden situation which comes forward as a “problem du jour.”

The reflections presented in this essay have come about during the process of my own inquiries about equanimity over several decades. My observations and conclusions are grounded in my dedicated practice of Buddhist mindfulness meditation as well as extensive professional clinical experience as a psychologist and psychoanalyst. In the process of investigating my own emotional experience, I have organically developed a way of using the method of deep inquiry to unpack psychological issues and problems and, in so doing, to cultivate emotional balance. I call it "Inquiring Deeply" (see Schuman, 2017). It is a method suited both to self inquiry and to psychotherapy.

Equanimity may be defined as the ability to maintain mental and emotional stability in the midst of whatever may be happening. Challenges to equanimity arise from all manner of circumstances: misfortunes, losses, and traumas (sometimes 'positive' things as well). Here, my primary purpose will be to show how we can use the method of Inquiring Deeply (inquiry and mindful self-reflection) to develop a deeper and wiser understanding of our emotional lives.

<p><b>II</b>                    <b><i>THE FRAME OF PRACTICE: INQUIRY DEFINED</i></b> <b><i>WHAT IS INQUIRY AND WHAT DOES IT SHOW US ABOUT EQUANIMITY?</i></b></p>
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"Inquiry" means to live in the question of something, on and off the cushion; to consciously engage experience in an ongoing way which invites it to unfold. We Inquire Deeply into emotional experience simply by asking ourselves basic questions such as "*what am I feeling?*" and then "*what is underneath that?*". This is not intellectual analysis, but rather an effort to see emotional reality clearly, just as it is.

Inquiry can be general, using open-ended questions such as the ones just mentioned, or it can be used to explore a particular emotion, challenging situation, or difficult relationship. For example, we may inquire into a specific experience that is occurring in the moment (such as "*What am I reacting to right now?*" or "*Why am I uncomfortable with this person?*"), or may be questions of a more general nature about something problematic (such as "*What is making me unhappy?*" or "*Why don't I have the love I want?*"). Inquiry is an ongoing process of bringing conscious attention and self-reflective awareness not only to the felt experience of the present mindful moment, but also to the meaning we are giving to things. It is a process which unfolds in its own way as a function of intuitive wisdom.

One of the first things we discover as we engage in deep inquiry about equanimity is that the mind is often not very equanimous. Indeed, emotional upset can be the rule rather than the exception in human life. Emotions, feelings, and mood are the internal weather of the mind: capricious and subject to as many changes and variations as meteorological conditions. Though emotional weather is fundamentally beyond our control, we do have at least some choice in how we *relate to* those experiences, and in so doing we can cultivate equanimity.

Bringing attention to equanimity has the immediate effect of highlighting areas of emotional challenge. As a general principle, this seems analogous

to what happens when engaging in mindfulness meditation. Hindrances to meditation arise, and it is the very awareness of those obstacles that helps us learn to discern states of relaxation and calm.

The felt sense of equanimity is something which will probably be familiar to most readers who practice Buddhist meditation. The basic posture or attitude of mind is the intention to lean into and relax with the present moment of experience. We *pause* and intentionally notice what we are feeling. Equanimous mind states which arise during meditation practice show us what a calm and grounded sense of psychological center in the present moment *feels like*. This then can provide a proverbial North Star for navigating our emotional lives with balance. Such moments provide a refuge from the emotional turbulence that may be occurring; a respite and an opportunity to soothe ourselves.

However, it is more helpful to think of equanimity as a practice rather than as a particular state of mind. It may be difficult or impossible to soothe ourselves in some moments, and in any event emotional equanimity entails much more than the ability to feel serene in the here and now. Most fundamentally, equanimity is about how we *relate to* our feelings. It is about opening to and *being with* our emotional reactions; the commitment to meet painful emotions with awareness.

We can also understand emotional equanimity in relation to its opposite, reactivity. Emotional reactivity means the tendency to be easily triggered (such as having a 'short fuse' with anger). We describe someone as reactive when we judge that they too easily "get their buttons pushed"; when their emotional responses tend to seem uncontrolled, labile or out of proportion to the circumstances, or when their emotional comfort zone appears small.

Whereas emotional reactions are a normal part of being human, reactivity can be deemed to be a problem.

People vary greatly in the intensity, range, and nuance of their emotional sensations. They vary not only in how reactive they are, but also in how expressive they are in communicating their reactivity, and in how consolable they are when upset. Recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions are important and interrelated capacities of emotional intelligence. Equanimity as a practice cultivates each of these capacities.

It is important to recognize that maintaining emotional equilibrium is not a simple technique but rather a multifaceted psychological function (called "affect regulation" in clinical parlance.) Equanimity lives in multiple layers of both body and mind, including innate temperament, biochemistry, and early trauma history. Except perhaps for the lucky few people who were effectively parented in early life, emotional equanimity requires a lot of inner work.

As is often said, the more we can be mindfully present with what is happening, the better able we are to respond rather than to react. Even when we are not calm in a particular moment, we can endeavor to "self-remember" and self-reflect on our reactions. Sometimes it may only be after the fact, in a more balanced state of mind, that we remember to reflect on how we have reacted. Retrospective self-reflection is an important component of equanimity practice. It is an opportunity to remind ourselves of prior intentions or formulate new ones.

It is important to emphasize that Inquiring Deeply into emotional experience does not aim itself towards attaining an ideal state in which we will transcend painful emotional reactions. Instead, deep inquiry about equanimity as described here is an awareness *practice*, one which reveals an ever-deepening

psychological landscape. Analogous to physical balance, this practice seeks to hold our experience in a space of awareness which can facilitate the regaining of emotional composure.

**III. TOWARDS “DEEP EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING”**

**WHAT AM I FEELING, AND WHAT TRIGGERED IT? WHAT AM I RESISTING? WHO IS DOING WHAT TO WHOM? WHAT IS AT STAKE ?**



Inquiry about emotional experience begins with the premise that there is wisdom in problems. Analogous to pain in the body, emotional pain is useful. It wakes us up to what we need to see. It provides opportunities to deepen our emotional understanding both of self and other.

The practice of inquiring deeply into an emotional reaction begins with awareness of being upset and with the general intention to discover “*What is this feeling telling me?*” We turn *towards* our embodied experience, recognize what we are feeling, and invite our emotions to reveal themselves. Bottom line, we try to understand our experience by consciously feeling our way into it. I often liken this process to locating a splinter: first we have to probe the inflammation to find out what is sharp and psychologically painful.

When we inquire deeply about our emotional reactions, very often we discover that the trigger is what other people have said or done (or *not* said/ *not* done) and the meaning we have assigned to those things. These reactions are grounded in emotional patterns and, fundamentally, in the structure of our personalities. Although it is possible to experience moments of equanimity without investigating these deeper meanings, emotional stability is best achieved when we can see our patterns clearly. Not only do we gain a window of view into how relational events orchestrate our emotional lives, we begin to see that our minds are actually organized around our connections with others.

What is often insufficiently recognized is that many emotions are inherently inchoate. Early nonverbal experience tends to be unformed and may not be readily expressed in words! To get the messages conveyed by our emotions, we need to be sensitive to their idiom of expression, and to develop an understanding of how they function within us. Deeper knowledge surfaces when we open to what is expressed in body sensation and images, metaphors and narratives.

*Trying to discern why she was feeling depressed, a woman found herself with an unexpected image of Londoners in World War II sending their children off to relatives in the countryside. As she reflected on what this image was telling her, she realized that her depression was providing a zone of emotional safety, a respite from the bruising forces in her daily life<sup>2</sup>.*

Ultimately, working through emotion involves **acceptance, release, and letting go**. This is not something that happens all at once or in a flash of insight. It requires, instead, an attitude of gentleness with ourselves; a receptive and compassionate presence that allows us to drop down into deeper levels of our experience. It is not something that we can 'do', but rather a capacity that we must cultivate.

It is helpful, too, to develop a sensitivity to the felt sense of struggle and resistance. Struggling with experience is a good indicator that something has unresolved (unfelt) feelings at its core which need attention. Simply put, it is important to pay attention not only to what we are feeling, but also what we may be resisting feeling. We can notice the truth that "*what we resist, persists*". When we are up tight about what is happening, we can pay attention to the judgments we have about ourselves and others. We can notice how resistance fuels an ongoing cycle of reactivity and contributes to emotional turbulence; and conversely, we can notice that release happens of its own accord when we allow things to be as they are.

**IV. EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE, DEEP INQUIRY, AND PERSONAL GROWTH**  
**WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DOES IT CONTAIN? WHAT IS MY INTENTION? WHAT IS MY HEART'S LONGING?**





Inquiry is a process. Perhaps the best way I can convey the nature of how it unfolds will be for me to describe the sequence of my personal experiences in this extended self-inquiry about equanimity.

Among the most salient of the hindrances to my own equanimity that came to light during this inquiry had to do with anxieties that arose for me in the process of writing. For example, I found that sharing drafts of the manuscript with friends and colleagues was something of an emotional roller coaster. On the one hand, positive responses felt very rewarding; on the other hand, criticisms of my writing— even when I agreed with them— felt like puncture wounds to the skin of my professional “self”. It was clear to me that I was highly invested in feedback about my writing and that sensitivity to approval/disapproval lives very close to the surface of my psyche.

The top layers of this emotional reaction were quite obvious. I was invested in writing a good paper; just beneath that, being seen as a good writer; beneath that, being impressively smart. Typical of psychological knots which present themselves as afflictive emotions, my “issue” was organized in layers which revealed themselves as I repeatedly asked myself the question “and what is underneath *that?*”.

As I further probed into my emotional reactions, their childhood origin was abundantly clear. My “identity” in life was constructed around expectations in my family of origin that I should become someone *who knows*. This part of my personality appeared when I was quite young, and was strongly reinforced during my experiences in school. I was highly motivated to perform well.

But, there were costs connected with the need to perform. To mention only one of several, on more than one occasion I was subject to what felt like envious attacks by others. This left me always on guard against being “shot down”, and I have gone to great lengths in my adult life to avoid that experience of vulnerability. No wonder that publishing my work was reactivating for me!

As I felt my way into this “problem”, what surprised me the most was discovering that my writing style itself expressed a posture of defense! Rather than making simple assertive statements of my point of view, I saw that I tended to pad sentences with unnecessary qualifying phrases such as “in my view” or “in my opinion”, which I now saw as very transparent efforts to protect myself from attack. In seeing all of this, this layer of defense dropped away and a new written voice began to emerge.

There were other levels of insights as well. The teeter-totter of the wish to be seen and the fear of being seen were quite familiar to me as a psychotherapist, but now my experience of this dynamic seemed to deepen. For example, I could see clearly that this core psychological conflict was embedded in my choice to become a teacher and a writer.

Most importantly, as I recognized more deeply than ever before how much the need to be smart has gotten in my way in life, I also had a deep insight into the Buddhist truth that the root cause of this suffering was my identification with this image of myself (“selfing”). This was not a new understanding, but it came alive during this inquiry. What I saw was that professional writing is one of the principal means I enlist in support of my sense of self, and that this “clinging”, as the Buddha would have termed it, was causing me a lot of pain. I saw clearly how I get caught up in *becoming*, and the angst connected to that. My personal mantra became “no-one to become!”

Although I cannot honestly claim that any personality wounds were “healed” as a function of this inquiry (much less that I was “liberated” in the process), I *can* report that the way this process unfolded validates my ideas about deep self-inquiry. Inquiry has an inherent wisdom which unfolds into insight, and emotional integration is an important by-product. For me, this was demonstrated in the new written voice that emerged, as well as in parallel developments marked by a greater sense of comfort being in my own skin. I see this as “working through” in action. It affirms within my own experience that there is great opportunity for growth available in this kind of self-inquiry, and it is this freedom that is what my heart most longs for.

**VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:  
INQUIRY AND THE WISE UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTION**



My major intention in writing this essay has been to bring conceptual clarity to the idea of emotional equanimity. I have wanted to convey the value of deep self-inquiry both as an awareness practice and as a way of being with

one's emotional life. And, most importantly, I have wanted to articulate some of my conclusions regarding the wise understanding of emotion.

in contrast to Buddhist teachings which focus on training the mind in order to subdue or master emotion, emotional equanimity as discussed in this essay does not imply attaining a mental state characterized by the quiescence of distressing emotions. Instead, it is seen as a practice, a process which endeavors to harness the wisdom contained in our emotions in order integrate them into the psyche. This does not imply that we should be passive in the face of pain, but rather that we need to be clear about the messages contained within our emotions so that we can take appropriate actions and make wiser choices. Cultivating emotional equanimity in this sense means learning to use our emotional challenges as opportunities for growth.

The practice of deep inquiry, as I conceive it, is based in the existential premise, beautifully articulated by the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl<sup>4</sup>, that one of the most important things humans beings can do, regardless of their circumstances, is to consciously find— create— meaning in what is happening.

Posing an inquiry question to oneself is a powerful act in of itself. Inquiry frames and constructs an intentional matrix of meaning around experience. As such, inquiry can serve as a kind of psychospiritual exoskeleton to support growth and the emergence of new experience. It frames the intention to consciously develop emotional intelligence; to grow *with* and *from* awareness of emotional life. In this way, inquiry provides a way to exercise conscious ownership of psychological growth and transformation.

In the everyday reality of our psychological worlds, there is much that can be learned by paying attention to feelings. Bottom line, our feelings reveal

what we are unwisely holding onto and where we need to grow. Finding the wisdom in these experiences is beautifully expressed in the metaphor of a lotus in a pond, its roots in the mud below, its flower orienting towards the light above.

No mud, no lotus.

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