

## Cultivating Equanimity ©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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The farmer in this morning's Story for All Ages saw that his old horse was sick and tired. Feeling compassion for his horse he let the horse loose to go to the mountains where it would be able to live out its remaining days. Today we may have difficulty understanding just how significant the farmer's action was. Without a horse, working the land and producing crops that were his livelihood would be considerably more difficult. Without a horse, all of that work would fall on the farmer and his son. The neighbors, recognizing what not having a horse could lead to, came to express their condolences. When asked how he would live and work his land the farmer calmly responded, "Who knows. We shall see."

I have heard this story many times over the course of my life. Each time I hear it I try to put myself in the position of the farmer. I can imagine feeling compassion for an animal I had developed a close relationship with over many years of working together. I can imagine deciding that the horse had reached a time in its life where age and health would prevent it from being able to continue to work in the fields. I can imagine making a decision to let the horse loose to go off into the mountains to live out the remainder of its life. I must admit, though, that I just can't imagine feeling calm and seemingly unconcerned about the situation I would be in.

This story provides an example of two of the "sublime attitudes" or "divine abodes" that are important in Buddhist teachings—compassion and equanimity. Compassion is something I have a reasonably good understanding of. It is something I have been striving to develop since I was very young. I expect that many of you have also been striving to develop your compassion over the course of your lives. As for equanimity, that is something I have difficulty comprehending. I would imagine that I am not the only person here today who has some difficulty with equanimity. My hope is that by focusing on this topic many, or possibly all of us, will have the opportunity to learn a bit more about equanimity. Some of us might even become motivated to cultivate more of it in our lives.

Ministerial colleagues have told me that if I hope to ever really connect with a congregation, I need to periodically preach about a topic that is my growing edge. Well, I want you to know that equanimity isn't merely a growing edge for me. When I try to imagine myself living out the type of equanimity the farmer in our story demonstrated, I feel like I just stepped off the edge of a cliff and all that is under my feet is thin air, very thin air. So as I prepare to step off the cliff this morning, I imagine some of you compassionate people may be thinking, just as the farmer's neighbors did, "how unfortunate." You might wonder how I am going to preach on something that is beyond my ability to comprehend. That is one of the reasons I decided to title this sermon "Cultivating Equanimity." In order to practice what I am preaching about it seems fitting here to repeat the farmer's reply, "Who knows. We shall see."

I recall all too well the first time I was asked to think deeply about the concept of equanimity. While working on my Masters of Divinity degree I took a class on Buddhist sacred texts at Boston College. In that class I had the chance to learn about Buddhist

history as well as many of the important teachings within it. It was in that class that I learned about the four sublime states. Those who came seeking to learn from the Buddha heard from him, again and again, to learn and to practice these four states. These are, in the order they are typically listed in the sacred texts, loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Here is what the web page titled “The Four Sublime States” on [accesstoinsight.org](http://accesstoinsight.org) asserts about these four states of mind.

They are the great removers of tension, the great peace-makers in social conflict, and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. They level social barriers, build harmonious communities, awaken slumbering magnanimity long forgotten, revive joy and hope long abandoned, and promote human brotherhood against the forces of egotism.

There is so much packed in that short statement that it deserves another reading, this time more slowly.

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If what is claimed here is true, the world could certainly benefit from many more people learning how to cultivate and actualize these four practices.

Over the course of my life I have found that the vast majority of the people I have met are familiar with and have some level of ability to practice the first three of these, namely loving kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy. By this I don't mean to imply that most people are highly skilled in one or all of these practices. Most of us probably could develop each to a much greater degree. That said, I think it is quite likely that every one of us can remember times in the past when we demonstrated loving kindness to another, when we were compassionate with another, and when we felt sympathetic joy with another. But when it comes to equanimity, at least for me, it is tough to pull up a memory of any significance. I can remember times when I was indifferent about situations. But indifference isn't the same thing as equanimity. And I can recall times when I felt resigned to some situation that I had no ability to change. Today I might refer to that as a “whatever” situation. But “whatever” isn't equanimity either. Equanimity is, as Webster defines it, “the quality of remaining calm and undisturbed; evenness of mind or temper; composure.”

When I consider this definition I am more likely to recall times when I wasn't calm, when my mind or temper was anything but even, or when my composure went out the window. It is easy to think that equanimity would only apply to difficult situations, like letting your horse go free without a replacement, or your loved one breaking a leg or worse. But equanimity is more than that. True equanimity also applies to the positive as well as the negative events in life. When I think back to some of the positive events in my life, graduating from college, getting my first professional job and getting married, I can tell you that I did not experience equanimity about any of these. I was so engulfed

in each of these events that I couldn't, as we heard in our reading today, "look over" to avoid "being caught" by them. As I look back now it is clear that I had no interest in feeling equanimity in any of these positive events. I wanted to be fully and completely immersed in each of these wonderful moments in my life. I also wanted the positive feelings that arose from them to last forever, or at least as long as possible. But all of us know that the feelings from such positive events don't last forever. I would guess that most of us would say such feelings didn't last as long as we would have wanted them to.

So today I ask myself, would I really want to be completely calm and undisturbed about any and every event. When I consider some of the major concerns in our world today, concerns such as war, terrorism and global climate change, I am unable to imagine how it would be possible to achieve, let alone maintain, a state of continual equanimity. When I think about the many injustices that are present across our country and around the world, I wonder how my ability to experience equanimity could possibly be an asset to those who are treated unfairly. As I struggle with all of this, I recall that equanimity is the last of the four sublime states. In her book "Buddha," Karen Armstrong writes about the path the Buddha traveled to be able to attain equanimity. She claims that he first had to become **exquisitely** skilled in the mental and emotional states of loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy **before** he could engage his attention fully on the experience of equanimity. As she states it, he "was so immersed in the object of his contemplation that he was beyond pain or pleasure." From this place, he "aspired to an attitude of total equanimity toward others, feeling neither attraction nor antipathy." She goes on to state;

This was a very difficult state since it required that [he] (the yogin to) divest himself completely of the egotism which always looks to see how other things and people can be of benefit or detriment to oneself; it demanded that he abandon all personal preference and adopt a wholly disinterested benevolence.

I have been contemplating the concept of equanimity for several years now and as I said earlier, it remains beyond my ability to fully comprehend. When I reflect on the quote which I just shared, four words stand out for me "a wholly disinterested benevolence." There is something of great importance in those words. I am absolutely certain that more benevolence is needed in the world. And I am absolutely certain that reducing, as she states "the egotism which always looks to see how other things and people can be of benefit or detriment to oneself" is necessary to fostering more benevolence.

Because I am dedicated to increasing benevolence in the world I know I must continue to learn about equanimity. According to Armstrong the Buddha indicated that the development of the sublime states takes at least seven years of continual practice. I recognize that I don't practice any of these continuously. As I think about all of this I ask myself; "Will it be possible for me to ever truly gain the insight necessary to practice equanimity in my daily life?" As I sit with this question I hear the old farmer's reply. "Who knows. We shall see." With that a calmness settles upon me and I say.

Blessed be.