

Acceptance and Letting Go

Rebecca Dixon, August 25, 2021

Meditation teachers talk a lot about acceptance and letting go, and for good reason. These functions are necessary for meditation to happen. Otherwise, we're just fantasizing, the way we spent most of our lives before we began to practice.

How are these two mental functions different from each other? Well, they *aren't* very much. They're like two sides of a coin, facing in different directions. We need to accept what is, and let go of what we wish would be.

So acceptance and letting go are how we deal with aversion and craving which, together, add up to clinging, the cause of mental suffering or, in Pali, "dukkha."

Every time I talk about acceptance, I have to emphasize that it does not mean approval or passivity. It doesn't mean we agree to leave things as they are if we can change them for the better. If we're not distracted by dukkha we'll be more effective at making those changes.

Change happens continuously and we only get very short interludes when we're content with everything as it is. When we let go, we stop hanging on to something we don't have but want, while acceptance finds a way to live with what we have but don't want.

Both of these mental efforts put us in a position to deal with the present moment by acknowledging that this is how things are now. For example, look at the last two elections when the losing sides had a terrible time acknowledging the new reality.

The conveyor belt of change leads to "the future," which is so shrouded in mystery that it's scary to us. There is no way to escape the uncertainty and precariousness of life. But if we can stop clinging to what feels familiar, we can be flexible enough to deal with whatever the new reality turns out to be.

The only way out of this truth is through it, by acknowledging what springs into being each moment. How differently would we live if we accepted our uncertainty? It's a crucial fact of life that we just can't know what the future holds and, whatever it is, we're probably going to be quite powerless over it.

Acceptance opens us to the truth of what Zen calls "not knowing," sometimes also called "beginner's mind," which sees with fresh, unbiased eyes. It lets us engage with our unfolding lives, no longer clinging to preconceptions or judgments.

Not-knowing, said Suzuki Roshi, doesn't mean ignorance. It means we can hold what we think we know lightly enough to be ready for it to become different. It is the opposite of blind belief or a fanatic's resistance to proven facts.

Not-knowing is a mind like the Buddha's, that's directly aware of what the senses are telling us and asks, "What is this?" It keeps our perception from being clouded by expectations or fears. That mind is the product of a radical letting go and acceptance.

It doesn't seek *answers* to the question, "what is this?" Instead, it investigates the fear that makes us cling to pre-existing concepts. I love a story told by Laura Burges about a grade school pupil who asked, "Miss Burges, Miss Burges, what happens when we die? I forget." Accepting this ultimate not-knowing is a major liberation.

So, you would be justified in wondering how to achieve this 'letting go' and 'acceptance.' It's so simple you may find it hard to accept. You know when you meditate and you're observing your body breathing in and out, and a thought comes up and steals your attention away?

The practice is simply to notice that this is happening, without judgment or resistance, and just invite your attention back to the breath. That's acceptance. When the attention does turn away from that train of thought, your mind has let go. And that's it.

That **is** it. This moment when the mind lets go of its train of thought is so powerful when you also let go of any self-judgment about having had your attention interrupted. It's an exercise in acceptance and letting go that we do over and over when we meditate.

We don't judge when it's not perfect. Just keep practicing. And as you know, when we exercise repeatedly, whatever muscles we're working get stronger.

It's a very simple, elemental level of training ourselves to let go and accept; and it works, especially when we're *aware* that what we're doing **is** practicing acceptance and letting go. If you're thinking, "That's too simple," a) you're not alone, and b) try to accept it by just recognizing what you're doing.

Your next question might be how to translate this elemental letting go and acceptance into the more complex form we need in daily life. That's a good question. It's the same in daily life as it is in meditation. We train in accepting and letting go of things in life by understanding what we're doing.

Being able to recognize that we're experiencing dukkha – that we're clinging or aversive – is critical. It's the equivalent of noticing that we're lost in thought during meditation. The felt experience of dukkha “wakes us up” to what's happening.

The Second Noble Truth tells us that the cause of dukkha is craving or aversion – together, clinging to something other than what is. The Third Noble Truth assures us that dukkha can be ended.

We can always end this suffering, right in the moment, when we accept the truth of what actually is, or let go of what we've been trying to hold onto.

Knowing how it feels to accept what happens while we're meditating prepares us to recognize when we need to do that in daily life. It's also good to have a daily life practice, so that we can return to mindfulness as dukka develops during the day.

We will know we need to accept or let go when we *feel our suffering*. That tug of reluctance during meditation when we let go of a train of thought is a mild form of dukkha. Learning to recognize it enables us to let go of what's causing us to suffer in life. These capacities can definitely be developed with some attention and effort as we meditate.

Accepting that something unwanted has happened gives us the peace of mind to choose the most effective way to deal with it. Acceptance also reduces the dukkha we experience and frees up our energy as we work toward change.

As they gain in strength, the capacities to accept and let go enable us to be at peace with reality in daily life. This peace is called equanimity, and most people familiar with how Buddhism uses that word know that it's a good thing.

Equanimity is a state of mind that is seldom disturbed even under great strain. This needs to be distinguished from composure, in which we merely control emotional or mental agitation by an effort of will.

Composure may keep us from acting badly, but equanimity is a much happier state of mind. Equanimity is not a dry neutrality or cool aloofness. On the contrary, it produces a radiance and warmth of being that often inspires a lighter heart in others.

In Pali, there are two words for what we call equanimity. The one we use the most is upekkha, which literally means “to look over.” It's the ability to see “the big picture” without being caught up emotionally by what we focus on. “Upekkha” also meant “seeing with patience or understanding.”

For example, when we're confronted by someone, equanimity keeps us from taking what they say personally. As a result, we're less likely to react with hostility; we can just stand our ground calmly. We feel our emotions, but don't get carried away by them.

Equanimity is loving, in the sense that people love their grandchildren without being caught up in the dramas of their daily lives. Grandparents know kids act naughty but their experience keeps that in perspective. Imagine having this relationship with all beings!

The other Pali word for equanimity is fun to *try to* say: *tatramajjhata*. It's a composite of three Pali words that together mean "to stand in the middle of all this." I watched a documentary this week on how babies make sense of movement, both their own and others', and it made me realize how much goes on **around** us.

Even as babies, we are the focal point of our experience. In the first month of life, babies like to *look* at their arms as they're moved, gradually understanding that *they* are moving their arms, and learning how to do it.

"Standing in the middle" is a kind of balance, remaining centered in the middle of whatever is happening. The ability to be centered comes from inner strength or stability, like a ballast keeps a ship upright in strong winds.

I helped lead a retreat for women in prison with Wendy Palmer, author of *The Intuitive Body* and a master of Aikido. She says Aikido is based on centering, sensing the body's energy field and the pull of gravity.

But Aikido is not about *staying* centered; if you did, you couldn't respond. The art of both Aikido and equanimity is always *returning* to center, or 'balance.' As equanimity develops, we feel it more continuously. But we can always get off-balance – until we're fully enlightened.

The Buddhist teaching of the Four Worldly Winds says there are four pairs of experiences that come and go beyond our control: 1) praise and blame, 2) success and failure, 3) pleasure and pain, 4) fame and disrepute.

If we get attached to praise, success, pleasure or fame, we suffer when the winds of life change direction. Whatever we gain we will eventually lose. But even while we have these desirable experiences, they can lead to suffering.

Clinging to praise is a form of conceit, and it can be followed – sometimes swiftly – by blame. Success is wonderful, but if we take it personally it leads to arrogance, and a subsequent failure can really hurt. And so forth with fame and pleasure.

If our mental well-being is independent of these four pairs of winds, we are more likely to remain on an even keel in their midst, as they come and go around us and we handle them with as much peace and wisdom as possible.

We do get off-center from time to time, but then we can notice our suffering and center again by letting go, or accepting the truth of the moment.

The practice to cultivate equanimity as a Factor of Awakening is to check during meditation or daily life, “Is equanimity present?” Or is dukkha keeping us off-balance? Often, asking this is all it takes to evoke equanimity.

Just recognizing that we’re off balance can be enough to get us centered again, “in the middle of all this.”

Thank you.