

## The Hidden Treasure of the Heart

Love and compassion are the heart's hidden treasure, locked away behind concepts like "friend" and "enemy," "like" and "dislike." The key to the treasure of unconditional compassion—the Buddha's love for all beings without distinction—is the three-step practice of equanimity.

NO MATTER HOW LONG we've been in the habit of protecting and armoring ourselves, it's always possible for people like you and me to dissolve the barriers of fear and confusion and open our hearts.

It's like we are standing at a crossroads—the choice is ours. We can spend our lives circling familiar ground, deepening habits of aggression and craving, sowing the seeds of suffering, or we can summon the courage to step off the well-worn path of our habits and begin sowing the seeds of love, compassion, and well-being.

In the Mahayana tradition we are encouraged to arouse *bodhichitta*, the heart of awakening, as the fuel for our journey. Bodhichitta is the wholehearted commitment to free ourselves from the suffering of ignorance and destructive habitual patterns so we can help others do the same. And not just some others—all others. The practice of compassion has to be unconditional and unbiased; it needs to include those we fear or loathe, as well as those we may never meet. It doesn't work to be selective. As long as we are picking and choosing who is worthy and who is not, we remain trapped by the very self-centeredness that prevents the growth of real compassion.

The trick is that if we want to generate love and compassion for all without exception, we need to experience a sense of closeness and connection that we don't normally feel. This is why the Buddhist teachings instruct us to train in equanimity as the foundation of compassion.

Over the years of trying to put these teachings into practice, I have come to appreciate how key equanimity is. As soon as we try to practice equanimity we start to notice how we are influenced continually by all of our opinions and judgments. We see how our lack of equanimity holds us back, stops us in our tracks. Suddenly we meet head-on an ancient double-padlocked

door to the heart, and, try as we might, compassion won't flow until we open it.

One of the most effective ways to open this door is the practice of equanimity. To do this we train in keeping our hearts and minds open in increasingly difficult circumstances, and in relaxing the mind's reactivity, we increase our capacity to love.

EQUANIMITY IS NOT a necessary part of the compassion we usually feel. To the extent that we think of compassion as a feeling reserved for a few, or as an occasional response of the heart to the suffering of a stranger, we don't need to train in equanimity. But if we aspire to open beyond the usual "me and mine" definition of compassion, equanimity is like the magic key found in fairy tales—the key that opens the door to a hidden treasure. It is also like the hospitable and fruitful earth that allows the heart of great love and compassion to grow and flourish.

There are three stages in the development of equanimity: aspiring, dissolving, and equalizing. Each stage builds on and includes the previous. Together, they become the springboard for the contemplative practice of "exchanging self and other" and the actual practice of *tonglen*. At this stage equanimity reaches beyond any imagined borders and becomes what in Tibetan is called *dagzhen nyamje*. *Dagzhen* refers to self and others, and *nyamje* is equal and exchange. Seen in this way, we can appreciate how closely connected equanimity is to *tonglen*, a practice intended to free us from our ancient prison of selfishness.

### Aspiring

The first stage of equanimity is part of the practice of the "four immeasurables" (love, compassion, joy, and equanimity). Equanimity is one of the four limitless qualities of heart



*Luohan (Persona)*, 2005-06

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and mind we wish for ourselves and others to experience. And because we wish for *all* without exception to dwell in love, compassion, and joy, equanimity is also the thread that unites them.

The deceptively simple word “all” conveys the vastness of this practice. It reminds us that we aren’t simply thinking, “May my friends, family, co-workers, and everyone who I love and care about have happiness and its causes.” We reach out beyond the current limits of our love and think, “May the person who cut me off in the parking lot be free from suffering and its causes. May that bookkeeper who messed up my account and cost me extra money have happiness and its causes. May the person who won’t stop talking in the movie theater have joy and its causes. May the person who insulted me, may the person who embarrassed me, may the friend who doesn’t return my calls, may all of these people have happiness and its causes, be free from suffering and its causes, have joy and its causes. And may all of them dwell in equanimity free from attachment and aversion.”

Until we actually develop equanimity it can feel like what we are really saying is, “May all beings have happiness, and may they all be free from suffering—but really only those I like and not those I dislike.” We might sincerely love “all beings” in a general way when we’re sitting on our meditation cushions, but actual, or even imagined, encounters with real people show us with unflinching honesty where we get stuck.

The practice of equanimity at the level of aspiration is incredibly helpful because it stretches our heart beyond its current capability. However shut down or worked up we may feel, we start with whatever equanimity we have and we nurture it. It doesn’t matter if it seems really, really tiny as long as it is genuine. We are not telling ourselves that we feel something we don’t. We are not trying to deceive ourselves, convince ourselves, or cover our true feelings. We are just expressing our wish to open our heart further and encouraging ourselves to move closer to our resistance. In the process, we learn firsthand how much pain there is in grasping and aversion. We see how we automatically open up to some people and shut down with others. We also see how one moment of openness can lead to another.

With aspiration practice, if we find ourselves shutting down when thinking of certain people or groups of people and can’t bring ourselves to include them, we simply stop and observe what’s happening. We notice our fear, revulsion, or prejudice without running away from it and without condemning ourselves. And then we can return to our aspiration. Strengthening our aspiration at times like these can help us stay in touch with the motivation to nurture our awakened heart. We can think to ourselves, “At this moment I can’t

open my heart to this person, but I hold the wish that one day I’ll be able to open my heart more fully than today.” With this approach we stay connected to a sincere wish to deepen our experience of equanimity, without adding layers of criticism and self-recrimination. In fact, the times we feel furthest from equanimity can be the moments that inspire us to strengthen the aspiration for our heart to open beyond what now seems possible.

## Dissolving

The Buddha observed that all of the misery in the world can be boiled down to three basic causes: grasping, aversion, and ignorance. We want, we reject, and we ignore. Always reaching for what we want and pushing away what we don’t, while ignoring the rest, is our typical routine. The problem is, the more we narrow life into yes and no, acceptable and unacceptable, wanted and unwanted, the more we suffer. The truth is, we will never get life to work on our terms or according to our plans. We will never get rid of everything we don’t want and get our hands on everything we do. At this level of equanimity we begin to work more directly with our habits of mind. We soften the hard edges of our biases and dissolve the solidity of our projections by really looking at them and seeing through them.

The meditation practice that supports this stage of equanimity involves observing our attachment, aversion, and indifference in response to the three kinds of beings we encounter—those we like, those we dislike, and those about whom we’re indifferent. Traditionally, these are labeled friends, enemies, and strangers. In this practice, we bring to mind as vividly as possible three people who fall into these categories. We notice all of the opinions, judgments, emotions, and bodily sensations that arise as we think about each one.

At first glance these distinctions seem straightforward and our attitudes justified. The whole thing looks quite reasonable. But when we dig a little deeper, the building blocks of our logic start to crumble. We realize that our feelings about others often have a lot more to do with us than they do with the other person. Our mother is a stranger to someone else and perhaps another person’s enemy. The bank teller who is a stranger to us is someone else’s precious mother. We perceive people a certain way because of the way they treat us, how important or unimportant they are to us, or because we feel threatened, annoyed, supported, or cared for by them. But life’s reality is much vaster than that. Today’s friend can be, and often is, tomorrow’s enemy. All of our friends began as strangers. In truth there is no rock-solid enemy, no absolute friend, and no permanent stranger. It is in our minds that we are making it so. It is easy to say this, and may not sound like much, but every time we actually experience a glimpse of this truth, a little bit more of our self-protective armor dissolves.

It can be very helpful to practice cultivating this second level of equanimity on the spot. Walking down the street or sitting in an airport terminal can be a good time to observe how easily we shut down or open up. We see how automatically we form opinions about others, and how these opinions can nail us to a posi-



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*Luohan (Light Step), 2003-2006*

tion. Before we know it, we're taking sides. It doesn't take much. There's the panhandler on the corner, the group of men in suits, the woman in stilettos and a fur coat, the person in a wheelchair. Paying attention, we notice when we feel appreciation or irritation arise and try to catch it before it hardens into grasping or aversion. The trick is to do this with both honesty and kindness, without adding a whole storyline about how we "ought" to feel. This takes both courage and curiosity—the courage to face ourselves and notice our meanness, greediness, or loneliness, and the curiosity to not recoil but move closer to it.

Paradoxically, moving closer sometimes means first stepping

back. I recall some good advice I received from my teacher, Gehlek Rimpoche, when I asked him about an issue I was struggling with. He said, "You know, in Cleveland I drive very often on a street called Overlook. That may be a good street for you to drive on." When we are caught up in our reactions to things it can help to step back and overlook the situation. Things can feel a lot less claustrophobic when we have a bird's-eye view. As we open to a bigger picture we actually get to know our anger, prejudices, and fears, and learn a lot about what every other human being is up against. We see how much pain there is in shutting people out of our hearts, and how much joy there is when we express our willingness to open to all of life.





*Luohan X, 2005*

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## Equalizing

At the third level of equanimity we begin to rock the foundations of our self-centeredness through the practice of equalizing self and others. We see beneath the surface to how we all want the same thing. Instead of holding ourselves apart from others, we realize how close to them we really are. We do this by acknowledging a simple human truth—everyone, just like me, wishes to have happiness, and everyone, just like me, wishes to avoid suffering. Just like me, everyone wants to be loved, to be safe and healthy, to be comfortable and at ease. And just like me, no one wants to feel afraid or inadequate; no one wants to be sick, lonely, or depressed.

Differences in religion, values, race, or social status create illusions of separateness and distance. Equalizing practice is a way of cutting through the surface of things and realizing that whatever differences there are between people, at the core we are kindred spirits seeking the same thing. We often look out at our troubled,

messed-up world and wonder why people act in such destructive and hurtful ways. But if we think about it, it's really not such a mystery. Their motivations are the same as ours; their deepest fears and longings are the same as ours. They want comfort, ease, and security; they don't want discomfort, anxiety, and pain.

In this fundamental way we are intimately connected with everyone else on the planet. This is why when the Dalai Lama says he feels a closeness with everyone he meets, we sense he means it. Through the practice of equalizing we see beyond the differences that divide us to the common humanity that unites us. We acknowledge our shared humanity and feel our heart break open when we see how in seeking our peace and comfort, we so often sow the seeds of our misery.

The equality practice can be done while sitting on your meditation cushion and contemplating people you know, person by person. You can begin with friends, move on to strangers, and gradu-

ally include enemies. Imagining each person, you think, “Just like me, this person wants happiness and doesn’t want suffering. Just like me, this person doesn’t want stress and illness and misery. Just like me, this person wants comfort and safety and ease. When this person has a headache she wants to be free of it. When he hurts, he wants relief.” Really allow yourself to be touched by the awareness that each one of these people is just like you in these wishes. The more personal we make it, the more powerfully it will move our heart. Practicing this way, even for a few minutes a day, can really make a difference in our lives.

This practice also works well in our daily life. Instead of going through our day caught up in our own world, we can take a few minutes, or a few hours, to focus on the practice of equalizing. It is so simple and direct, and yet it’s a real eye-opener to consider others in this way. When you meet another person you think, “Just like me, she wants to be happy; she doesn’t want to suffer. Just like me, this cashier who is looking tired wants happiness and doesn’t want suffering. Just like me, this parking attendant who seems impatient wants happiness and doesn’t want suffering. Just like me, all the people standing in this long line getting restless want happiness and don’t want suffering.”

When we do this practice we encounter our habit of thinking we are the center of the universe, and that our pain, our fears, our dreams, our yearnings are somehow different and more important than everyone else’s. It can be quite shocking and humbling to realize just how alike we all are. The more we cultivate this practice of equalizing, the more difficult it becomes to draw a solid line between us “the good” and them “the bad,” and it is not so easy to justify hurting or neglecting others. The Buddha said, “See yourself in others. Then who can you hurt? What harm can you do?”

Seeing ourselves in others keeps us connected to genuine empathy and grounds us in a deeply embodied ethic. When we see ourselves in others we don’t hurt them because we know how it feels to be in pain. And we help for the same reason. Over months and years, as we practice equalizing ourselves with others, we gradually open to this understanding, until ultimately we can no longer close our heart to anyone. Loving others then becomes a natural expression of feeling our closeness with them and our likeness to them.

An image for equanimity, fully developed, is a heart so vast that all beings can be welcomed as guests. Every human heart has this capacity. Training in the three stages of equanimity—aspiring, dissolving, and equalizing—supports us in steadily awakening our heart in this way. Each stage gives inspiration for the other, and each stage leads us into further openness. We can take one stage and work with it for a while, or we can weave our way between them. Fundamentally, they all work together. Aspiration allows us to continually extend the reach of our heart. Dissolving softens the fixations and defenses that keep us habitually caught in accepting some of life and rejecting the rest. And equalizing brings us back again and again to the naked truth of our shared humanity and shared heart. Together, these practices of equanimity move us closer to ourselves, closer to life, and closer to the heart of compassion. ♦

## Imagine There’s No Suffering

**With a mind is free of judgment, SHARON SALZBERG says, we see only suffering and its causes, and wish only that all beings be free from pain.**

THE STATE OF COMPASSION arises with a quality of equanimity. Can you imagine a mind state in which there is no bitter, condemning judgment of oneself or of others? This mind does not see the world in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, good and evil; it sees only “suffering and the end of suffering.” What would happen if we looked at ourselves and all of the different things that we see and did not judge any of it? We would see that some things bring pain and others bring happiness, but there would be no denunciation, no guilt, no shame, no fear. How wondrous to see ourselves, others, and the world in that way! When we see only suffering and the end of suffering, then we feel compassion. Then we can act in energetic and forceful ways but without the corrosive effects of aversion.

Compassion can lead to very forceful action without any anger or aversion in it. When we see a small child reaching toward a hot burner on a stove, we instantly take action. Our response is born out of the compassion we feel; we move to pull the child back, away from harm. We do not reject or condemn the child.

To be compassionate is to wish that a being or all beings be free from pain. To be compassionate is to sense from within what it must be like to experience someone else’s experience.

To view life compassionately, we have to look at what is happening and at the conditions that gave rise to it. Instead of only looking at the last point, or the end result, we need to see all of the constituent parts. The teachings of the Buddha can be distilled into an understanding that all things in the conditioned universe arise due to a cause. Have you ever had the experience of feeling resentful toward someone and then having an insight into what in their history might have caused them to behave in a certain way? Suddenly you can see the conditions that gave rise to that situation, not simply the end result of those conditions.

I knew two people who had both suffered from abuse in childhood. One, a woman, grew up to be quite fearful, while the other, a man, grew up to be quite angry. The woman found herself in a work situation with the man, disliked him intensely, and was trying to have him fired from his job. At one point, she got a glimpse into his background and recognized how they both had suffered in the same way. “He’s a brother!” she exclaimed.

This kind of understanding does not mean that we dismiss or condone a person’s negative behavior. But we can look at all of the elements that go into making up that person’s life and can acknowledge their conditioned nature. To see the interdependent arising of these impersonal forces that make up our “selves” can provide the opening for forgiveness and compassion. ♦

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