



Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

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Focus on Enlightenment #6

Equanimity & Enlightenment

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When you drop a penny in a rain puddle, it creates a splash. But if you drop it in a deep lake, it goes “bloop” and sinks in. Similarly, all your splashing around, mentally and emotionally, disappears when you deepen into your own inner essence. This is yoga’s goal, whether your practices begin with your body, breath or mind.

Yoga poses are so good for your body that you can be distracted by them, thinking the goal is to perfect your pose or to perfect your body. Meditation is also incredibly beneficial for your body, while providing mental clarity and emotional stability, yet none of these are the goal. Yoga uses your body, mind and breath as doorways to the inner infinity, called “svaroopā” or your own Self.

Your inward deepening gives you equanimity, freeing you from emotional reactivity. You still care but you’re not upset by things, no matter what is happening. Sound good? It is. It’s better than good. Yoga’s goal is enlightenment, meaning you’re living in the radiant light of your own being, ever shining from within. Enlightenment gives you equanimity and more.

The word “equanimity” combines “equal” and “animus” (mind or spirit). It means even-mindedness, even good-will or kindness. An ancient yoga text explains:

Sama-du.hkha-sukha.h sva-stha.h sama-lo.s.taa”shma-kaa~ncana.h

tulya-priyaapriyo dhiiras tulya-nindaatma-sanstuti.h.

Maanaa-pamaanayos tulyas tulyo mitraari-pak.sayo.h

sarvaarambha-parityaagii gu.naatiita.h sa ucyate. — Bhagavadgita 14.24-25

The yogi who is the same in pleasure and pain, established in the Self, who regards a clod, a stone and a piece of gold as of equal value,

who is unaffected by agreeable and disagreeable events, who is steady in both blame and praise, who remains the same in honor and disgrace, who sees both friend and foe alike, and who has abandoned all striving —

such a yogi is free from the three gunas (worldly qualities).

This sets out a high standard for you to try to attain. But pay attention to the secret hidden in the first line. The yogi is not trying to live up to an external standard. Instead, this is a description of one who is “established in the Self.”

The purpose of every Svaroopā® Yoga class and meditation session is to give you an experience of your own Self, that inner feeling of profound fullness and deep ease. When you base yourself in this deeper dimension of your own existence, external events cannot disturb you. Not even your own mind can undermine your inner state when you’re “established.”

Svaroopā® yoga is a tantric practice, which means that equanimity happens from the inside outward. First you experience the Self (inside), which gives you equanimity (outside). It is the initiation into the Self (Shaktipat) that makes all this possible, giving you easy access to the inner infinity of your own Beingness. Then nothing that happens can be scary or upsetting. Things may need your attention or help, but they don’t shake you up.

Trying to cultivate equanimity from the outside inward, you shut down your feelings or find ways to numb out. I tried them all. Drugs, sex, alcohol, extreme sports, extreme sleep, perpetual busy-ness, blaming others for everything — society offers you so many ways to numb out. They make you less and less alive.

Yoga begins with bringing you alive again, then deepening your sense of who you are. You are you. Yoga makes you more and more you, while increasing your capacity to be real in the midst of life.

I had worked at mastering the art of shutting down. To manage my turbulent emotions, I simply squelched them. I had role models all around me; together we went through the motions of life. Looking back now, it’s like watching reruns of “Everyday Zombies,” a television series I could write,

based on my memories. I thought shutting down was a pathway toward neutrality. It's not the same as equanimity but I didn't know the difference. It was an improvement that my temper rarely erupted, but the cost was high — I simply didn't care about anything. It undermined all my relationships as well as my quality of life.

Using the penny metaphor, my penny didn't splash any more but it didn't bloop either. The penny is the external event or thought that is affecting you; you are the puddle or lake. Well, my puddle was frozen. The penny skidded across the surface. I was so numb that I didn't let anything in, not even breath. I frequently noticed that I wasn't breathing, would take a big breath, then return to not breathing again.

When I found yoga, I had to learn how to breathe. In my first in-person yoga class, my teacher began with Ujjayi Pranayama. She demonstrated how a full breath expands your belly as well as your chest. It was strange to watch, then awkward to attempt for myself and ultimately thrilling as I felt it bringing me alive. I'd never experienced so much energy coursing through my body. I liked it. Even better, when I went home I felt more alive while also feeling deeply peaceful. The combination was new and strange, yet it didn't take long to get used to it. I learned I could even create it for myself, becoming both peaceful and energized, simply by doing yoga.

You don't have to get enlightened in order to attain equanimity. An inner peace, calm or poise comes fairly early in the yogic process. It's the ability to sail through life's difficulties. You might call it "chill" or think you finally have it together, maybe even seeing it as being a little like enlightenment. I agree it's an improvement, but enlightenment is better. Much better. Still, genuine equanimity is a sign that you're making progress in that direction.

Yoga gave me a superpower: the ability to choose how I wanted to feel. I was freed from the constant ups and downs, which yoga calls "the pairs of opposites." Before yoga, happy/sad, right/wrong, good/bad and pleasure/pain dictated the quality of my life. I lived in urgency; everything felt like it was a life and death matter. I felt like a yo-yo, going up and down based on what someone else was doing, saying or thinking.

Yad.rccaa-laabha-santushto dvandvaatiito vimatsara.h

sama.h siddhaa-vasiddhau ca k.rtvaaapi na nibadhyate. — Bhagavadgita 4.22

Content with what comes without strain, free from the pairs of opposites, free from envy, even-minded in success and failure, even though acting in the world, he is not bound.

When I first studied this, I missed the important phrase, "even though acting in the world." Seeking the contentment and freedom the verse promises, I withdrew from the world, giving up the things that disturbed me. I managed my family obligations and activities with friends in a way that avoided any internal upset. I quit watching news reports and got rid of my television.

Teaching a yoga class one evening, I was amazed that none of my yoga students could do the balance pose we'd worked on the prior week. Surprised, I asked them, "What's going on with you?" They said, "It's the war." I asked, "What war?" I was completely ignorant of the American invasion of another country, though it was playing live on television every night.

I realized that I couldn't serve my students unless I understood the world they live in. Now I see more, that if all the yogis withdraw from the world, who will be left to run it? We have a responsibility to participate, just like the text says: to be even-minded while acting in the world.

Equanimity is not the goal. It is a symptom that you're deepening within. As you progress toward enlightenment, you become present in your life in a meaningful way, contributing to the world and to your relationships. You face the reality of world, and more — you embrace it. While you don't lose yourself in it, you understand it and, most important, you care. Your caring shows.

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