

RMP BLOG: Let it Be

Vipassanā meditation provides a pathway towards insight. Not the type of insight you obtain from psychotherapy—where insights may include an understanding of personal issues and personality—but a very deep awareness of the true nature of reality, which has broad application for happiness. Vipassanā is sometimes referred to as mindfulness meditation, which requires



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an extraordinary attentiveness to everyday experiences. Such experiences perceived by our six senses are defined as what we hear, see, taste, smell, feel with our body, and think in the present moment. However, attentiveness takes us only halfway towards insight. Also, important for Vipassanā meditation is the quality of *equanimity*.

Equanimity is not a commonly used term with most usage in the mid-nineteenth century, although there has been a resurgence in its use associated with the merger of mindfulness into Western culture. Where the term is used, it is commonly interpreted as the state of being unaffected or chilled-out over certain experiences. In fact, dictionary definitions include cool-headedness, calmness, and composure, particularly when faced with a difficult situation. However, as it applied to mindfulness, it means a way of being that does not in any way interfere with information coming from our six senses. Whether the sensation is painful or pleasurable, equanimity provides impartiality and openness where we neither try to push away discomfort nor grasp on to pleasure. This requires skill because even trying to understand or bring meaning to experiences breaks equanimity. In the now immortal words of Paul McCartney, our intent is to “Let it be.”

Letting things be is essential because it seems inherent in human nature to stuff things up, particularly the natural order of things. Likewise, we interfere with experiences that are painful. Recall from an [earlier post](#) Shinzen Young’s formula $P \times R = S$, which gives a simple way to understand the impact interference has. The more resistance we apply to painful experiences, the more suffering will ensue. In this equation, the variable P stands for *pain*, but it could equally represent *pleasure*. Of course, if the experience is pleasurable our tendency is not to resist but rather to attach, cling, grasp, or otherwise hold onto it to make it last longer. In this case, we are resistant to letting it go even while our experience demonstrates all pleasure is temporary.

When we apply mindfulness and equanimity to everyday experiences, insight arises. However, there is also a therapeutic benefit to observing attentively with openness as a type of operant conditioning. When certain behaviours are rewarded, they persist and often grow in strength. When the reward is withdrawn, the behaviour extinguishes. When we attend to ordinary sensations with mindfulness and equanimity, we engage in behaviours that undermine usual reactive patterns. We are not pushing anything away or trying to change anything. We do not reward and strengthen patterns of habit.

From a Buddhist perspective, this extinction process is called *purification*, which literally occurs when “watching negativity to death.”[1] Along with insight, purification grants us an opportunity to be liberated from distress and maladaptive patterns of behaviour, so we might cultivate a degree of intrinsic happiness.

In other words, a clarity of awareness (mindfulness) and an openness to sensory experience (equanimity) naturally gives rise to a deeper understanding of our true nature (insight) and a reduction in distress (purification). In his attempts to simplify component processes associated with Vipassanā meditation, Shinzen Young put the practice, with its substance oriented towards our six senses this way: Mindfulness + Equanimity = Insight + Purification.

Vipassanā meditation does not always feel good because we may be with difficult and painful sensations. It is not designed to calm the mind but to learn something about ourselves. If we approach painful sensations, we learn that when we resist pain suffering ensues. Alternatively, if we apply equanimity without resistance or aversion—*by letting things be as they are*—suffering is diminished. If the feeling is pleasurable, adopting equanimity without grasping allows an experience of pure pleasure. Mindfulness allows you to pick up on subtle feelings and mind states we might, in ordinary conscious states, otherwise miss. It allows us a glimpse into the inner working of our mind, quietening some aspects and observing which others are at play. It provides an opportunity to view perceptual, cognitive and moral distortions, delusions, and biases for what they are. Mindfulness coupled with equanimity assists us to learn that even personality and our sense of self is a process arising moment by moment rather than a static thing.

In practice, how do we proceed towards insight and purification? One of the most straightforward and structured ways is to meditate using the RAIN approach. RAIN is a simple acronym that stands for Recognise, Allow, Investigate, and Non-identify. R is for *recognise*, and we begin by recognising the presence of the thought, feeling, or craving. A is for *allow* and here we use equanimity to let the sensation be. I stands for *investigate*, where we observe the sensation’s nature and become curious about the experience of the sensation in our body. Being curious about something flips the valence from unpleasant to pleasant and can help us to stay with the sensation. N is for *non-identification* where we attend to the realisation YOU are not your thoughts, feelings or even your mind. If you are open to it, you can note that you are the awareness that provides a context for all that is thought, felt, and sensed. Alongside the detachment that arises between the observer (subject) and observed (object) comes a sense of safety and security.

[1] P. 55, Young, S. (1994). Purpose and method of Vipassana meditation. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 22(1), 53-61. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873267.1994.9976936>