

The Four excellent Qualities

In both Yoga and Buddhism, four qualities stand above all others as central to living a heartfelt life.

By Denise Benitez

Yoga and Buddhism tell us that all human beings are capable of cultivating to a deeper extent the four qualities of equanimity, loving-kindness, compassion, and joy. In various traditions, these qualities are called the Four Excellent Qualities, the Four Immeasurables, the Four Abodes of the Heart, or The Four Stations. (In both Yoga and Buddhism, also called the Four Brahma Vihara.)

I think of the practice of these beautiful qualities as an antidote to a fear-based life and a way of connecting to a quality of goodness inside myself. For the most part, these qualities don't come naturally to most people; they require practice, especially when we are triggered by external events. (Which happens every day!)

As Ken McLeod says in his book, *Wake Up To Your Life*, “these qualities are called the four immeasurables because there is no limitation to their depth and scope. Unlike reactive emotions, the four immeasurables do not function in the service of any habituated pattern, sense of self, or personal agenda. While they are not personal in that they are not based on personal agendas, in their expression and experience, they are intensely intimate. Their power comes from their ability to open up a moment of presence.”

These four qualities cultivate a huge momentum of generosity in our hearts, yet we also benefit profoundly from the practice. Who wouldn't want to be more loving and forgiving? It's a win-win. We make a practice of seeing others as human, flawed, lovable, doing their best and this softens our attitudes toward our own foibles. I don't mean to make this practice sound polly-annaish; on the contrary, the practice of the four immeasurables is very advanced, one could say, and takes great restraint and creativity. We restrain from our habitual reactions, and we become creative about how we express ourselves toward others.

Most traditions start with the practice of equanimity, although there is some shuffling of the order of these practices. It makes sense to me, though, to first cultivate equanimity. This is the development of a steady inner compass, a well keeled boat, a craft you can rely on. You begin to feel your way into living from the heart, which most of us have never been taught.

Equanimity is the dismantling of our habits of response, so that we become insightful about our reactions in any moment. The edges of the world seem less sharp, and we begin to have a wider palette of colors from which to draw, colors which we never quite saw before. All of these qualities have to do with our relations with the other people and animals with whom we share our days. In becoming more skillful with equanimity, we make a contribution to the well of peacefulness in the world. As Sri Aurobindo says, “Tranquillity is a very positive state; there is a positive peace which is not the opposite of strife—an active and contagious and powerful peace, which subdues and calms.”

In my view, the other three qualities arise out of the well of equanimity. Loving-kindness is the ability to first, recognize and appreciate kindness. We often feel as if the world is a cruel, heartless place, and yet if we take a few moments and bring to mind all of those who have been kind to us, we would have to change that view. Secondly, we begin to learn how to direct kindness to others, which sometimes takes courage and often takes great sensitivity and skill. Ken McLeod says, “Loving-kindness is like the spring sun that warms the ground so that grass and flowers can grow. Human kindness is like sunshine, and loving-kindness practice is letting that sunshine warm your heart, so that you, too, radiate warmth to the world around you.” You don't have to make a grand, dramatic effort. Simply being kind to the people who come into your life on a daily basis is a huge shift for most of us. I've had amazing conversations with supermarket checkout clerks when I take the time to ask, “How is your day going?” Or when I give a dollar to the Vietnam vet at the stop light and ask, “Where are you sleeping tonight?” I was very afraid to do this at first, but it is liberating to the heart to look into the eyes of others with whom you feel you have nothing in common and to see their humanity.

When we come to the quality of compassion, we are entering the realm of the spiritual warrior. You will be building the inner strength to look at the suffering of the world, and to let yourself be touched by that suffering. As one teacher says, “A compassion practice without tears is not much of a practice.” From the steady ground of equanimity and the warm sunshine of loving-kindness, we face into the reality of the pain of existence. One teacher, when asked to define compassion, said, “Fearlessness.” But not to never feel fear; the spiritual warrior turns into fear from the sun of the heart. It's much easier to never read the paper, to avoid our friends who are suffering, to become glued to our favorite distraction. Becoming compassionate means having enough ground inside, enough inner stability, to face what is most frightening.

Finally, the quality of joy in the context of the four qualities usually refers to joy for others, or what is called sympathetic joy. This is the ability to feel happiness for others, even when they can do the yoga pose that you have been working on for five years, or they got the job promotion you've been wanting, or they inherit scads of money. As Douglas Brooks, a Tantra scholar says, “It benefits all of us if we can celebrate and encourage the prosperity of others.” You won't develop this ability overnight, but you begin to notice that even when your best friend has a new boyfriend, there is not whole-hearted joy for her; there is also a tinge of envy and you may

even wish your friend ill. Simply seeing this normal human response is spiritual progress, and will lead to a softening of your heart. Even Shantideva, an Indian master of the eighth century, struggled with jealousy. In his great epic poem, *Entering the Way of Awakening*, he says “When praise is heaped upon your merits,/You’re keen that others should rejoice in them./But when the compliment is paid to others,/Your joy is oh so slow and grudging.”

I find great solace and inspiration in the fact that people have recognized and worked with these universal challenges of human experience for so long. May the awareness of these qualities soften your heart and open the doors of equanimity, loving-kindness, compassion and joy in this lifetime.