

Life As It Is

“How Equanimity Can Help Us Engage More Fully”

Episode #54 with Margaret Cullen

May 20, 2026



Margaret Cullen: Those moments of actually being able to relax into uncertainty and the truth of the moment. There's a joy that comes from not fighting reality and being connected to the truth and feeling like you can take your place in the natural world, equally deserving of life and love and flourishing as all other beings. It's a kind of freedom.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Margaret Cullen. Margaret is a licensed psychotherapist and mindfulness-based stress reduction instructor, and she has taught mindfulness and contemplative practices around the world. In her new book, *Quiet Strength: Find Peace, Feel Alive, and Love Boundlessly Through the Power of Equanimity*, she explores how equanimity can help us respond to the challenges of our times with greater curiosity and compassion. In our conversation with Margaret, we talk about the difference between equanimity and indifference, why equanimity is an expression of love, and how equanimity can help us engage more fully with the world rather than withdraw from it. Plus, Margaret leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Margaret Cullen.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with Margaret Cullen and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi Margaret. Hi Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

Margaret Cullen: Hello. Thank you so much for having me.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi. It's a great delight to be with you.

James Shaheen: So Margaret, we're here to talk about your new book, *Quiet Strength*. To start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Margaret Cullen: Sure. I was feeling like equanimity was in a weird way the stepchild of the four immeasurables, not getting equal airtime, certainly to loving-kindness and compassion. I had been involved in translating contemplative programs into mainstream settings for a long time



with mindfulness and with compassion, and I started teaching workshops on equanimity, and I discovered that it really could be operationalized in ways that were quite accessible for people. And I got really intrigued. And then my publisher asked me if I wanted to write another book, and I said, “Yeah, equanimity.” And she said, “Nah, that's not really what we want. We're not interested in equanimity.” You know, not a big sell, not a sexy topic. But I got really interested, and I stayed with it. And then what I like to say, this is kind of a long answer to your question, but it circles back to Sharon because I followed the pretense of accident, as I've done with much of my professional life since I started meditating, and this book kind of took over and had a life of its own. And I just became its scribe, pretty much.

James Shaheen: So you mentioned two things. One, it doesn't get equal air time. Maybe we can ask Sharon about that later. And two, you talk about making equanimity accessible. Can you tell us about that goal?

Margaret Cullen: Yes. You know, I studied with Jon Kabat-Zinn in the very early days. I was one of the first ten people to be certified as an MBSR teacher. And I discovered really early on that, you know, this is quite different from the backlash against MBSR, but that we could really teach deep dharma in secular language. And I saw things happening at Kaiser. I introduced the program at Kaiser in Northern California, and, at least when I was teaching, it was dharma. It wasn't dharma light; it was the four foundations and the three characteristics and the four noble truths in non-Buddhist language. And equanimity, it turns out, is a value, is a virtue that's prized across all major religions, all dharmic religions, Stoic philosophy. So there's language to be found for equanimity that's quite universal, actually. And we don't have to get deep into Buddhist philosophy in order to talk about it, access it, and practice it.

James Shaheen: You know, you refer to equanimity as a virtue. I agree. And you also say that it's underappreciated and deeply needed. So why do you think people discount it, and what are some of the common misconceptions you've encountered about equanimity?

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Margaret Cullen: Well, first of all, there's just the word. You know, I've been interviewed on a lot of podcasts, and half of the interviewers can't say the word. And they say, “You wrote a book on equa, equa . . .” I was thinking Sharon should do another children's book with an “equani-moose.”

James Shaheen: That's pretty clever.

Sharon Salzberg: Oh, that's good.

Margaret Cullen: Sharon, this is waiting for you to write. An "equani-moose." So the word is kind of old-fashioned. It sounds pretentious. People don't use it in everyday language. So the word itself is a little offputting. And so that's one reason, I think. Also, like I said, it's not so sexy. You know, it's a pretty quiet virtue. It's not, I don't know, as juicy as loving-kindness and compassion. They're inviting because they feel like heart qualities. I actually think, and this gets into the misconceptions, I see equanimity very much as a quality of the heart and an expression of the heart, an expression of love. But the biggest misunderstanding is that it's not. And the near enemies of equanimity are that it's somehow detached or indifferent or not caring. A lot of the young people I talk to about equanimity, this is really interesting, they're afraid they have to give up their passion to be equanimous, and that doesn't sound very appealing.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You know, you mentioned that it's often mistaken for its near enemy, indifference or passivity. So how do you counter this idea, and how can equanimity actually help us engage more fully with the world rather than withdraw from it?

Margaret Cullen: Well, I do my best to counter the idea throughout *Quiet Strength* by revisiting again and again the idea that equanimity is about feeling all the feels and that it's actually paradoxically about feeling more deeply and being less caught. So it's not about feeling less; it's about feeling more. And I open the book with a quote I love from Matthew Brensilver, who wrote that equanimity deepens the poignancy of life while draining it of melodrama. And I think

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that distinction is so beautiful because equanimity is actually about vulnerability, about letting it all move through you and not being caught by it.

And how does this make us more effective? So one way that energy gets siphoned off is in reactivity, and it's energy that we need to respond effectively, especially when we're assaulted by polycrises and constant social media outrage algorithms. We really need to conserve our energy to respond in the most effective way, and reactivity is a big energy drain. It siphons off valuable creative capacity to respond, and it also distorts our perception so we don't see as clearly in terms of what we can and cannot do and where we can contribute in an effective way to the issues we're concerned about.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I want to say first of all that I really love that you wrote this book. I'm so happy. And my mind is still a little bit with “equani-moose,” so I'm trying to let go and actually be here now, which is a good trait. And one of the reasons I'm so very happy that you wrote this book is that equanimity, of course, is almost like the quiet virtue, and very hard to understand how it does not mean passivity or indifference, which seems like a very ready explanation for it. And it's just not. So you point out that equanimity, as you said, does not mean foregoing strong emotions, but rather building a foundation we can respond from, kind of like a surfer riding the wave. So I wonder if you can walk us through this analogy.

Margaret Cullen: Yes. Well, you know, you're a little distracted by “equani-moose,” and I'm a little distracted by so many things I've read from you, Sharon, that you've written about equanimity and borrowed freely from and put in my book.

Sharon Salzberg: Yay. I am so glad.

Margaret Cullen: Like the gyroscope, which I love, and which is another metaphor for equanimity. There are a couple things that I think are really interesting, and they are a bit subtle about equanimity, and one of them has to do with the fact that we're always losing balance and



recovering it again, and that there's a misunderstanding that equanimity means maintaining balance all the time. David Vago and Gaëlle Desbordes, in one of the early papers out of Harvard, talked about this and suggested that maybe a better way to measure equanimity is using a model like affective chronometry. How quickly do you recover? It's not that you don't have a big reaction. But you move through it without stickiness, even in the subtlest kind of second-by-second recovery time. And it's this constant process like a surfer on a surfboard. You can't stand still on a surfboard. You'd be sunk. You know, you can't surf that way. You're moving your feet, you're regaining and losing balance every second. And that's the natural world. And we're part of the natural world, and all of nature is contracting and expanding and having moments of equipoise in between. And we're an expression of that. Did I answer your question?

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah. You know, the most poetic way I think I give instructions these days for meditation is to say the healing is in the return, not in never having wandered to begin with. And that's really what you're saying, which I find both very apt and very beautiful. And one of the things I do in talking to people who are asking questions about their practice is anytime they use a word like “maintain” or “keep,” I say, “I don't think it works that way.” You’re not going to stay mindful all day long at work, but you're going to know how to return and begin again. So I think that's a really essential and wonderful thing to bring up in the context of trying to understand the subtlety, as you say, of equanimity. And you talk about the etymology of the word equanimity, and you say it comes from the Latin roots, *aequus*, if I'm pronouncing that correctly, *aequus* meaning balance and *animus* meaning spirit. So how did this etymology deepen your understanding of the term?

Margaret Cullen: I think I chose to interpret it in a way that suited me because of course *animus* also means mind. You know, there are different ways that people interpret it, but I think of it as animation, as the root to what is alive and dynamic. And for me, that captured this kind of dichotomy, you might say, of the dynamic nature of equanimity, which felt really important: that equanimity is not, as you said, maintaining.



It's funny, I gave a book talk the other day and someone asked me a really hard question. He said, “Turn equanimity into a verb. What's the verb?” And I really struggled with that. And a woman raised her hand and she said, “Maintaining.” And I was like, “No, not maintaining!” Just like you said, that feels like the statue of justice and the woman standing there holding the scales, and we're really exhausted trying to maintain a static pose. That's the danger of where people go when they think about equanimity: I've got to stand still and hold up these scales of justice. And that doesn't work, and that's not equanimity.

James Shaheen: Margaret, in Buddhist texts, there are many facets of equanimity, but the two you focus on are impartiality and nonreactivity. So could you tell us about these two qualities?

Margaret Cullen: Yes. Well, impartiality. I love that in both Zen Buddhism and Theravadan Buddhism, there's a metaphor for impartiality that involves grandmothers, which I think is just so lovely because I've heard in Theravadan contexts to see through grandmother's eyes is an expression of equanimity. And in that case, it suggests something really important, which is a kind of perspective-taking without forsaking love, because we know the grandmother, or certainly the stereotype of the grandmother, is loving, extremely loving, but without the melodrama, as Matthew Brensilver said. And in Zen, *robai-shin*, to love with grandmother's heart. So this impartiality that has perspective is also, I think, really emphasized in Mahayana in all the exercises of extending love and compassion further and further out, first to the easy targets and then to wider and wider circles. And that's one way of understanding equanimity as impartiality: the capacity to extend unconditional goodwill to everyone. And of course, a little digression here, that unconditional friendliness is at the basis of all the *brahmaviharas* and certainly includes equanimity. And what was part two of the question?

James Shaheen: Nonreactivity is another quality that you highlight.

Margaret Cullen: Yes. So that's what I was talking about with Sharon earlier and something that Shinzen Young focuses a whole lot on, and I think it's an aspect of equanimity that is echoed in



lots of other traditions. It's kind of how can you meet all the worldly winds, all the vicissitudes of life, and be the surfer riding all of those waves? And in reality, as Sharon and I were saying, it's not that you stand still in the middle of it all; it's that you don't get caught. It's kind of, I've invented this new word, I think, "uncaughtness" is how I think of equanimity, "uncaughtness."

James Shaheen: So you mentioned “to stand in the middle of,” but isn't that the Pali term for equanimity?

Margaret Cullen: Yes, it is the Pali term. *Tatramajjhata*. It's really fun to say. To stand in the middle of, *tatramajjhata*. And so standing in the middle of is an interesting paradox too, one that I had to wrap my head around and arms around to write the book, because equanimity on the one hand is perspective taking, and on the other hand, it's standing in the middle of. And the way I chose to understand this, or the way I leaned into this, was that equanimity invites us to be fully in our experience. And the perspective is really the spaciousness that allows us to accept it as part of life and not get caught in it and recover our balance more readily. But we're not leaving experience in order to do that. And that's a very tricky subtle distinction that to me is kind of at the heart of the meditative practice in a way.

James Shaheen: Right. You just said a phrase that I thought of when you said, what is the verb for equanimity, and recover our balance works pretty well, I think. It includes Sharon's idea of returning. So you mentioned perspective, and you talk in particular about broadening our perspective and taking the long view. So what does this look like, taking the long view?

Margaret Cullen: Yes, taking the long view. In moments of reactivity, our perspective narrows, and our sense of ourselves and our drama and our story grows, and it often eclipses all sorts of wisdom, and all lots of dimensions of reality and data sets get lost when we're caught and hijacked by a strong experience. And I think these days with social media, this kind of reactivity can persist throughout the day actually. I mean, it's a reality that we are living in constantly. So it really behooves us all to find ways to kind of challenge that, to break the trance, as I call it. It

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feels like a trance, actually, when we get caught in rumination, in *papañca*, in doomscrolling, in fear, anxiety, outrage, especially. You know, algorithms love outrage, and we are so affected by them consciously and unconsciously. And so perspective taking is a way to challenge those narratives.

And, you know, I got these exercises from a talk Joseph gave some time ago that I listened to, and this is part of what inspired me to do workshops on equanimity.

James Shaheen: Just for our listeners, that's Joseph Goldstein.

Margaret Cullen: Yes, Joseph Goldstein. I thought, “I can operationalize this.” You know, he asked some basic questions, basically, Is it personal? What will it look like in several years? What does it look like from outer space?

So there are simple cognitive hacks, you might even say, to just kind of check in. You know, is this as personal as I take it to be in this moment? Is the world really on fire right now? Because we use that a lot right now. And given these times, it seems like no hyperbole is strong enough to express how bad things are, but the hyperbole adds to the dysregulation and lack of clear seeing.

Sharon Salzberg: You know, you've mentioned, as is so foundational, that equanimity is one of the four brahmaviharas, or divine abidings. That's loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy or joy in the happiness of others, and equanimity. So the first time I heard that list, I could just sense the emotional resonance between the first three, and I looked at equanimity and I thought, What's that doing there? Because I didn't understand, of course. And you quote the Zen teacher Frank Ostaseski, who describes the brahmaviharas, that whole package of qualities, as the four flavors of love. So I wonder if you could talk about equanimity as a flavor of love.

Margaret Cullen: Thank you for asking that. A funny thing has happened, Sharon, since I wrote the book, and I imagine you can relate. You know, I've had a lot of conversations about equanimity since writing the book, and my sense of it keeps changing. And I kind of wish that I



had focused more on the love part than I actually did in the book, because that's become more central to me now the more I talk and think about it. You know, I've felt very lucky to engage in some deep conversations like this one about equanimity in the past six months, so what I'm thinking these days, yes, I love what Frank wrote on the four flavors of love. We talked earlier about loving-kindness, the first one, being unconditional goodwill and how this is a kind of love that doesn't love you because you're special. And so it's not the kind of fuzzy, cozy love. It loves all of life. It wants all of life to flourish. That's the unconditional goodwill part. And we all have it. It's not like because I wrote a book or because this or what, whatever.

And when that kind of love meets suffering, it becomes compassion. So same love, different context. That's how I see it. And that love turns into a motivation to help, to care, to respond. And when that kind of love meets good fortune and success, it becomes sympathetic joy. It becomes happiness for others. And when that kind of love meets vulnerability, when it meets the reality that we can't prevent our loved ones from suffering, that we can't control life, we can only influence to some unknown degree, but we can't control life, it becomes equanimity. And what's key here is that the love persists in the face of this vulnerability.

And another way of thinking about equanimity is that we don't kind of get into defensive patterns. Some teachers talk about equanimity a lot in the context of ego defenses. You know, how puffed up is the ego in relation to praise? How crushed is it in relation to blame? That's a deep expression of equanimity. So equanimity meeting vulnerability of the ego and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and the limits of our ability to control outcomes is equanimity as an expression of love.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I was just thinking as you were speaking that in a way you're saying equanimity is the wisdom of not being in control. Like it or not, that's the truth of things. And so how can love prevail in that reality?



Margaret Cullen: Exactly. And it doesn't, I had the same experience. What is equanimity doing there? And actually, it really wasn't until after I wrote the book that I fully understood and felt equanimity as an expression of love. And really, without that love, it isn't equanimity. Then it's a near enemy.

Sharon Salzberg: Mm-hmm. And the other way around. You know, loving-kindness isn't loving-kindness without equanimity. It becomes its near enemy as well, which is attachment or that effort. And in the near enemy of loving-kindness, it's no longer a freely given gift. You know, there are a lot of strings attached and so on.

Margaret Cullen: Exactly. And that's also where, as you were saying earlier, James, the expression of impartiality tempers the love in a sense.

Sharon Salzberg: I also really appreciated your discussion of the relationship between equanimity and compassion, because that, in so many ways in our time, in my teaching, is one of the critical questions. There's also, of course, just the general application of equanimity and adversity and so on. But so many people are really right at that juncture of compassion and yet needing equanimity. And so how can those two support each other?

Margaret Cullen: Yeah, it is really important and another thing that motivated me to explore equanimity. At the time I had been a part of the Compassion Cultivation Training program at Stanford, and I helped to develop it and I taught it and trained teachers and really immersed myself in the study and teaching of compassion for about fifteen years. And we never talked about equanimity at all. And I got really interested in it, and I wanted to understand how it could serve in those contexts. And of course, the people who were coming to our trainings were very compassionate. It's not like they really needed more compassion, actually. They needed more equanimity. They were already compassionate. That's how they self-selected into those trainings.

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So equanimity helps in a whole bunch of ways. As you said just now, Sharon, there's a beautiful relationship between the four immeasurables, and, in many ways, equanimity is sometimes understood as that which permits each of them to be immeasurable. In some ways, equanimity allows compassion to be sustainable. And how it does that is through the wisdom factor, I would say, of understanding the limits of your control and influence, not being attached to outcome, giving yourself permission to feel fully the suffering and pain, which I think people defend against in all sorts of ways and in ways that actually drain them and burden them more than simply feeling the suffering.

Equanimity also protects against what some psychologists call compassion collapse. And again, one of the surprising things that I think most meditators know but is a little bit surprising in general is that emotion regulation can lead to more compassion collapse. Emotion regulators, so people who are good at emotion regulation, tend to have their compassion collapse more readily than those who do not regulate their emotions.

Sharon Salzberg: Can you say more about that? I'm trying to understand that.

Margaret Cullen: Yeah. So this is research that Daryl Cameron and his colleagues did. They were using images of starving children, I think it was Darfur, it was a long time ago, but upsetting images. They had a couple of arms of the study. In one, they primed people to regulate their emotions before they looked at the pictures. And in another branch of the study, I guess they tested for people who were high emotion regulators. So they measured them against people who weren't. And compassion collapse is different from compassion fatigue, which has been challenged by Tania Singer and a lot of her colleagues, and we agree with that in Buddhist philosophy, that real compassion can't fatigue because it's boundless, but in this case it can collapse. And what that means is we have less compassion for more starving children than for one starving child. That was compassion collapse. And that compassion collapse was increased with emotion regulators.



Sharon Salzberg: What do we mean by emotional regulation?

Margaret Cullen: So what we mean really is people who were told to, or people who tested more strongly, both cases, to manage their emotions. So, you know, they were primed in some way, and I can't remember the exact instructions, but they were primed in some way before seeing the images to manage what they felt.

James Shaheen: So is it a kind of emotional restraint?

Margaret Cullen: Yes. Emotional restraint. And this research was echoed, or these outcomes, I would say, were echoed by Iris Mauss, a psychologist at Berkeley I interviewed for the book. She and a number of people at different research centers around the world have been looking more and more at how emotion regulation actually has poor outcomes psychologically on a lot of different scales. And what we're suggesting is, in a way, what we've been saying all along with mindfulness meditation and with equanimity: Feel your feelings. Feel them. You know, make more space around them. The interference with feelings, the attempts to manage or restrain, as James said, they backfire in a whole bunch of different ways. They backfire on psychological health, depression, anxiety, and compassion collapse.

Sharon Salzberg: This is real. It's so interesting, because you're positing equanimity as an alternative to simple restraint, and that is really very interesting. And maybe a part of that is also why it may be that with equanimity it actually becomes more possible to engage, which sounds like a contradiction. If you don't really understand equanimity, if you think of it as indifference, then it makes no sense. But if it's an alternative to collapse, then very much so.

Margaret Cullen: Exactly. And you know, in some ways, I think we first saw this in the seminal research that Antoine Lutz and Richie Davidson did with adept meditators, and that was one of the first studies where he got their brains in the fMRIs. I don't know how many years ago that was. And what they saw when they showed them provocative stimuli was that their reactions



were bigger than the hundreds of undergrads at Madison or whoever they compared them to, that these people who'd been training for thousands of hours had a stronger reaction and a quicker recovery time and less anticipatory anxiety.

James Shaheen: Margaret, you also discuss the relationship between mindfulness and equanimity, and you quote Sharon in saying that equanimity is the secret ingredient of mindfulness. So can you say more about this connection? How can equanimity and mindfulness reinforce each other?

Margaret Cullen: Can't Sharon answer that?

James Shaheen: You've been quoted, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, the reason that I said that is because as far as I knew, at least in terms of what I had seen, the very early studies on mindfulness trying to figure out what it was and thereby measure if people were growing in it or not doing different practices, the ways that mindfulness was defined were largely about knowing what you were feeling, like “I'm feeling anger,” “I'm feeling joy,” but there wasn't anything about how you were relating to that feeling. So you could know you're thinking and loathe the fact that you're thinking, and we wouldn't call that mindfulness, actually. So it seemed to me that there was kind of a hidden ingredient, which was equanimity. It's like knowing in a certain way or having a certain surround to that knowing. And that really was the equanimity part.

Margaret Cullen: It's interesting, in terms of the research, I also talked to David Creswell at Carnegie Mellon, who did a lot of research on mindfulness and has kind of pivoted to research on equanimity, and he did a study where he taught MBSR with and without equanimity, and of course with equanimity, the results were much better. And some of us would argue that without equanimity it wasn't mindfulness.

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Sharon Salzberg: Correct. I would argue that. “Equani-moose” and I would both argue that.

Margaret Cullen: And of course Jon Kabat-Zinn would argue that too. And that's always what I thought kind of from the beginning, that really without equanimity we're talking about something different than how I understood mindfulness.

James Shaheen: Yeah. I mean, Jon always adds nonjudgmental as part of his definition. It's not to be confused with a lack of discernment, but it's nonjudgmental. Is that fair enough to say, Sharon? You know Jon so well.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I think very much so.

James Shaheen: Yeah. OK. Margaret, you write, “The best way to tame the mind is to give it freedom. Equanimity allows us to embrace such a paradox.” Can you say more about this?

Margaret Cullen: Well, speaking for myself as a very rebellious person in general, you know, the more you “should” me and tell me I should be doing this or that, the less I'll tend to do it. And yeah, so I think creating greater room, and that's how I learned from Sharon and Joseph and all of my great teachers. There was tremendous skill in how instructions were given that were invitational rather than commanding or demanding, and they're just skillful means. So creating space around settling into mindful awareness, in many ways that spaciousness is a hallmark of equanimity, I would say.

I mean, there are a lot of ways to approach and think about equanimity. One analogy that I use sometimes when I'm teaching, and it's an old one, who knows, I may have heard it from Sharon, I don't know where I got it from. But imagine you've got a small container and it's got liquid in it, and you shake it up and it creates a big disturbance. So get bigger and bigger containers, same water, same agitation, less and less disturbance created by it. So that's another way I sometimes think about equanimity as space, you know? And this space, more and more I'm coming to

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believe and feel that this space is love. It is loving-kindness. That this is the ground, this is both ground and space that's always available and that can hold it all.

James Shaheen: Well, you talk about holding it all, and I mentioned just a moment ago paradox, and life is full of paradoxes. And yet you say tolerating paradox or holding paradox is a big part of equanimity. So can you talk about the role of not knowing and being able to be comfortable or the ability to be comfortable with uncertainty?

Margaret Cullen: Yes. Well, you know, fundamentally equanimity is part of my perspective of the Buddhist path. That's how I encountered it, and that's my deepest relationship to it, although I explored other philosophical and religious perspectives, and this path to me is one of taking refuge in the truth, in reality, and kind of finding that safety in not knowing, in the truth of uncertainty, in the truth of the limits of our control, in the truth of suffering and beauty and joy and impermanence, in the truth that I'm no more deserving or special than anyone else, in the truth that my loved ones will suffer, in all of these truths. And equanimity invites us to rest in this, to find peace in this. You know, equanimity is often equated, at least in Christianity, the word they use is peace. And it is a kind of peace in uncertainty, a peace in lack of control. And to me, it's a peace in vulnerability. You know, uncertainty is very vulnerable. And at least for me personally, I'm constantly trying to know, trying to solidify, trying to curate my experience, my image, what comes in, what goes out, trying to pin it down to avoid this fundamental vulnerability. And I think that's probably why I wrote the book, you know, just my longing to rest there.

James Shaheen: So I really enjoyed your interview with the climate scientist Kritee Kanko, with whom we've done some work, and she describes equanimity as grounded joy. And we don't often think about equanimity as joyful. So I wonder if you could say more about that.

Margaret Cullen: Yeah, it's very interesting that she used that expression. And I don't think of it often that way, but there's certainly a very quiet joy, right? It's a very quiet joy. Those moments



of actually being able to relax into uncertainty and the truth of the moment. There's a joy that comes from not fighting reality and being connected to the truth and feeling like you can take your place in the natural world, equally deserving of life and love and flourishing as all other beings. It's the kind of freedom that has joy. I don't know if that's what Kritee meant and I haven't really thought about that question before, so I'm just making a stab at it here, James.

James Shaheen: We just took a stab at asking the question. So Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: So, you say that equanimity is inextricably linked to ethics, which is an unusual pairing actually, which I also really appreciated, and you say a truly ethical life is a life of equanimity. So I wonder if you can tell us about this connection between equanimity and ethics.

Margaret Cullen: Yes. Well, this one is quite personal. You know, I wrote about it in the book, joining a 12-step program in my 20s for overeating and having this profound insight that this unethical behavior I was involved in, shoplifting at the time, was deeply tied to my overeating, my compulsive behavior. And I really saw in a very direct way, kind of like the power of insight that we talk about in mindfulness meditation a lot, in a very visceral, revelatory way, that unethical behavior really agitated me. It agitated me so much that I had to overeat to calm myself down.

And then fast forward forty-five years to an equanimity retreat, I sat with Sylvia Boorstein right when I got the contract to write this book. It's kind of a funny story. I was supposed to be sitting a retreat on equanimity, and I got a text saying, “You just got a preemptive offer to write a book on equanimity.” So I wasn't an “equani-moose” at that moment. But Sylvia in that retreat talked about how we sit in meditation, and eventually every unskillful behavior we've ever committed bubbles up to the surface to be seen. And she talked about mistreating a high school boyfriend in her youth, you know, seventy years later or whatever, sixty-five years later, and she called it our scrupulosity machine at work. And I do feel that in a very direct way, behaving ethically quiets

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the mind. When we behave in a way that is not aligned with our values, it agitates us. And often that agitation is below the threshold of awareness. It fuels addictive behavior, which further agitates and becomes a vicious spiral. And it's fueled by being out of balance with how we want to be in the world. And it's not anybody's fault, but it ends up unsettling us and makes it difficult to find equanimity or peace.

James Shaheen: Well, we're nearing the end of our time, Margaret. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we close?

Margaret Cullen: Well, I probably don't need to say this to the *Tricycle* audience. But I do like to always remind people that equanimity, like all the four immeasurables, is already here. It's not something we have to go out of ourselves to find or to reach for. We're uncovering it. We're accessing it. It's holding us all. It's here. It's accessible. It's really close. It's right here. Yeah, I think that's probably it. Thank you.

James Shaheen: OK, Margaret Cullen, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand it over to you, Margaret.

Margaret Cullen: Thank you. So let's do just a short equanimity practice together. Taking a moment to settle in your seat wherever you are, beginning with three deep and diaphragmatic breaths, and allowing these deep breaths to soothe and settle the nervous system and reboot the mind. After the third out breath, allowing the breath to find its own natural rhythm. If you can, take a moment to notice the natural equipoise that occurs effortlessly between the in-breath and the out-breath, relaxing into this natural rhythm of expansion, contraction, and equipoise, and checking in: Am I safe in this moment? Can I rest here?

Just being with the breath in this brief meditation, resting in the simplicity of the moment, allowing thoughts from the conversation to just be a dust swirl, and experimenting with a simple equanimity phrase.

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Bringing to mind a loved one, someone you care about, and bearing in mind your circumstances of the moment, bring to mind a situation that's challenging, but not something that triggers you in a way that overwhelms you. Maybe they have a problem at work or a concern in a relationship. Maybe they didn't get a job recently. Let yourself feel the love and care that naturally arises in your heart, compassion for them, well-wishing, how much you'd like them to be happy, and then experimenting with the following phrase: “Much as I want you to be happy, there's a limit to my control. Your happiness and unhappiness are more a function of your life, your thoughts, your words, your actions, your circumstances, than of my wishes for you. Knowing this full well, I will never stop wishing for your happiness.” Allowing the heart to be softened by whatever truth you find in these words, your love continuing and the limits of your influence both true, and sending this loved one these phrases or any version of them that works better for you.

May you be happy. May you understand the truest and deepest sources of your own happiness. May you find peace and equanimity. May you be free from suffering.

To close this brief meditation, extending these wishes, these very simple wishes, to everyone who's listening right now, to our sangha, and further out in this crazy, troubled world of ours. May all beings be happy. May they find peace and equanimity. May they be free from suffering.

James Shaheen: Thank you Margaret, and thank you Sharon. It's been a real pleasure.

Margaret Cullen: Thank you so much for inviting me. It's been an honor to be here.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, it's wonderful and congratulations again on the book.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Margaret Cullen. To read an excerpt from Margaret's book, visit tricycle.org/magazine. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your

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