

# DANCING WITH LIFE

## HOW TO TURN EVERY EXPERIENCE INTO WISDOM

(Enlightened Learning 2018 Revisited in 2025)

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How do we grow through life—this continuous stream of experience? Sometimes life smiles at us and everything flows with ease. At other times, things fall apart and we move from bad to worse. Sometimes we are fortunate; sometimes we are not. That is simply the nature of life. How do we dance with it as it unfolds?

How can we develop as human beings through times of ease and times of hardship? How can we turn unwanted experiences into an advantage, as Nassim Taleb suggests, and in doing so become a source of benefit for the people around us?

At the most subtle level, every experience functions like a mirror that follows us everywhere, continuously showing us “how we are.” Do we dare to look? When life hits us hard, it is as if we bump straight into that mirror. It insists that we pay attention. Yet even then, we can stubbornly turn away. Many people live in this refusal for long stretches of their lives—sometimes until the very end. They reject the gift because they fear the difficulty of unwrapping it. Or they fail to notice the gift altogether. And so life quietly slips away.

The good news is that we can always choose to open our eyes again. Every experience—pleasant or painful—can spark our inner fire, as Marcus Aurelius reminds us. This ‘enlightened learning’ is about meeting both the beautiful and the difficult moments in a way that helps us grow in wisdom, strength, vitality, equanimity and love. In what follows, I offer a simple framework that sheds light on how the inner spark is ignited. Enlightened learning unfolds through four movements, each located in a quadrant created by two basic dimensions of experience.

## Two Dimensions of Experience

The first dimension concerns our level of activation: **tension versus relaxation**. Sometimes we feel awake and alert; at other times drowsy or calm. Sometimes agitated; sometimes peaceful. Our level of arousal shifts constantly based on our intuitive reading of the situation. How large is the gap between what is happening and what we want to happen—between reality and expectation, effort and result, demand and response? The larger the gap, the greater the perceived threat, and the higher our tension.

Life can feel like a river: sometimes turbulent and wild, sometimes still and serene. This is the dimension of tension and relaxation.

The second dimension is **appreciation versus frustration**. Most experiences carry a pleasant or unpleasant emotional charge. If something registers in our awareness, it often means it matters to us, and its primal meaning is created through feelings. Sometimes we feel content; sometimes dissatisfied. Sometimes attracted; sometimes repelled. Sometimes enthusiastic; sometimes reluctant. Sometimes we love; sometimes we hate. And so on. These are the two banks between which the river of life flows.

Crossing these two dimensions gives us four quadrants—four movements in the dance of enlightened learning:

1. **Celebrating and Embracing Gratitude**
2. **Falling and Feeling the Pain**
3. **Allowing and Finding Peace**
4. **Rising and Reaching Toward the Possible**

Let us explore each movement.

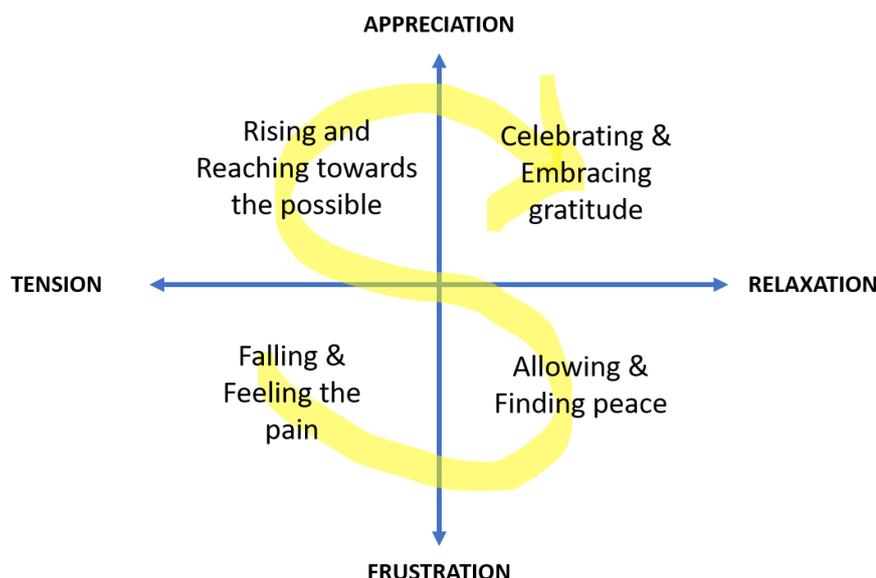
## 1. Celebrating and Embracing Gratitude

For most of us, countless positive experiences appear every day. Many things go well. There are so many reasons to be grateful: waking up, feeling healthy, arriving safely, receiving help, enjoying good food. Life offers us an ongoing stream of small blessings.

It is powerful to celebrate and honour what life gives us: the elements of nature that sustain us, the support we receive, the milestones we reach, the victories—however small. Meditative and yogic practices help us cultivate joy in the simple feeling of being alive: in bodily sensations, in conscious breathing, in subtle energy.

Yet because of our negativity bias, we often overlook these small positive moments. We miss a large part of our lives. And when we do notice them, we tend to take them for granted, as if we were entitled to them. But nothing in life is guaranteed.

Mastery of this movement means learning to absorb the good. To savour the preciousness of life. To let gratitude settle into the body, heart and mind. To make remembering the positive a daily practice—until appreciation becomes part of who we are.



## 2. Falling and Feeling the Pain

Inevitably, life brings moments that make gratitude difficult. Small irritations—a red light when we're late, a hurtful remark. And larger blows—the loss of someone we love, illness, insecurity. We fall into a pit for seconds, minutes, days, months, sometimes years. We find ourselves in crisis, overwhelmed by fear, sadness, stress or exhaustion. We slip into destructive patterns—anger, arrogance, guilt, shame, self-doubt. These are moments when we reject life as it is. These are moments of suffering.

Those who master this movement allow themselves to *fall fully*. It is better to lie down for a few minutes, hours or days than to stumble for days, months or years. Enlightened learning begins with acknowledging reality as it is. It means facing the unpleasant truth instead of fleeing into busyness (fleeing forward), distraction (fleeing sideward) or resistance (fleeing backward).

Worrying, self-pity and blaming others are strategies to avoid seeing that, in that moment, we are exiled from our inner paradise. The moment we recognise our suffering, the spell breaks. And this recognition leads us naturally into the next movement: allowing and finding peace.

## 3. Allowing and Finding Peace

Every moment of misery—brief or long, sharp or subtle—contains the seed of something new. Even in the darkest night, the sunrise is already on its way, though invisible to the troubled eye.

We fall, we lie in pain, and then—at some point—we stop fighting. We soften. After a deep breath, a relieving cry, or a good night's sleep, something shifts. This may happen spontaneously, as our exhausted body-mind realises that anger, self-pity, guilt and shame are dead ends. Or it may happen through conscious awareness.

At some point, frustration turns into acceptance: “It's okay that it's not okay. Acceptance means allowing reality to be as it is—our circumstances, our actions, our emotions, our judgments, even our self-condemnation.

Time may heal, but we do not have to wait passively. Those who master this movement know how to pause, retreat inward, and take refuge in a safe inner

space—sometimes through just a few conscious breaths. They bring presence to their experience: “Let come what comes, let be what is, let go what goes.”

Allowing has two aspects: (1) a curious inquiry into our sensations, feelings and thought, and (2) a compassionate holding of whatever we find. Ultimately, these are one and the same: we can only truly know what we are willing to love.

Practices that support this movement include meditation, body awareness, journaling, and sharing with someone who can listen without judgment. These practices help us relate to ourselves with kindness until tension releases and a quiet joy emerges. This feels like coming home—not to our ordinary home, but to a deeper place: a vast field of consciousness from which all experiences arise and pass away. This is the place beyond birth and death, where freedom becomes possible.

Our suffering becomes an invitation to rediscover this inner peace. “We can dance in a hurricane, but only if we’re in the eye.” The freedom and joy found here open the door to the next movement: rising and reaching toward the possible.

#### **4. Rising and Reaching Toward the Possible**

After every dark night, a new day rises. After turning inward, we move outward again. We feel clearer, stronger, ready for action. New ideas appear—what we can do, choose, change, say or let go of. We are ready to make new choices. It is time to move forward. As Shiv Charan Singh says: “The past consumes you. The future nourishes you.”

Wholesome action arises from the peace cultivated in the previous movement. War cannot end war. Peace in the world begins with peace within.

We step consciously into the unknown, wanting to create something meaningful. The tension we feel now is no longer paralysing but creative. We still wish things were different, but we are no longer imprisoned by that wish. Disappointment transforms into hope and inspiration. We return to the appreciative bank of the river.

Those who master this movement draw strength from trust—not naïve trust, but the trust that comes from knowing we have no choice but to give life another chance. Hope and trust fuel our imagination of a better future. From there, we can recognise our resources and take the first steps.

If this movement unfolds well, we naturally return to gratitude—the first movement. As T.S. Eliot wrote: “Arrive where we began and know the place for the first time.” We end where we began, but we are not the same. We have grown in wisdom, resilience, strength, vitality, equanimity and virtue. Perhaps dramatically; more often subtly. But repeated over time, these small shifts accumulate into profound transformation.

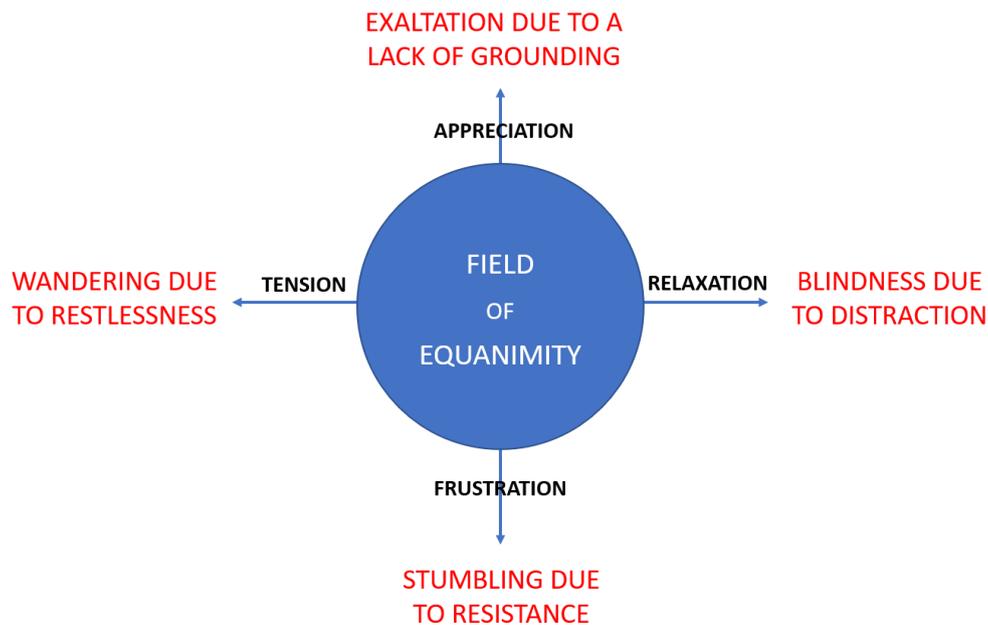
## Dancing with life

These four movements form a simple dance, though not always an easy one. Life is a river, and the art is to flow with it without getting stuck on either bank.

- If we cling to the bank of appreciation, we float away into forced positivity and naïve optimism, ignoring the difficulties that need our attention.
- If we cling to the bank of frustration, we get trapped in anger, helplessness, guilt or shame.
- If we are swept away by tension, we chase desires or run from discomfort, believing happiness lies somewhere “out there.”
- If we sink into relaxation, we drift into numbness or avoidance—sometimes even through spiritual practices.

The art is to stay in the stream without getting stuck. As Andrew Olendzki suggests, the dance of life is about discovering our fundamental openness—our capacity to embrace whatever arises. As we grow in wisdom, we are less swept away by circumstances. The dance becomes less dramatic, more subtle. This is equanimity.

Equanimity widens our window of tolerance (Dan Siegel). When the window is narrow, the mind becomes rigid. We cling to how things “should” be, and when reality doesn’t comply, we are thrown into chaos. When the window widens, awareness becomes spacious enough to hold the unruly, paradoxical nature of life.



The four-movement dance shows that we can find happiness *within* suffering, as nondual, tantric traditions illuminate. The common belief that happiness only appears when suffering disappears leads to subtle and gross forms of addiction—we become dependent on certain conditions and averse to others. This is self-enslavement.

Finding happiness through suffering, on the other hand, is liberation. We can dance ourselves into freedom. We can dance ourselves into understanding and befriending ourselves—and therefore others. Only when we accept our own fallibility, foolishness and ordinariness can we truly love.

Enlightened learning is an art we can all learn. The main reason we avoid it is that the learning process can be painful. Many prefer painkillers over healing. But every experience remains an open invitation to dance—to embrace life as it is and transform it into the growing fire of wisdom and love.

The dance is the message. Life is waiting to be met. The time is now.