



## ENLIGHTENED LEARNING

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HOW TO GROW FROM LIFE EXPERIENCES AND DANCE YOURSELF INTO WISDOM, VITALITY, STRENGTH, EQUANIMITY AND LOVE

How do we grow through life, this ongoing stream of experience? Sometimes life smiles at us when everything runs smoothly. At other times we go from bad to worse. Sometimes we are lucky. At other times we're unfortunate. That's life. Enlightened learning is about how to deal with beautiful experiences and difficult ones in such a way that it allows us to grow in wisdom, strength, vitality, equanimity, love. How can we develop as human beings through times of good fortune and times of harsh difficulties? How can we turn unwanted experiences into our advantage (Nassim Taleb) and therefore to the benefit of the people surrounding us?

At the most subtle level every experience is like a mirror that is following us, never ceasing in its attempt to show us "how we are". Do we dare to look? When life hits us in the face, we are so to speak bumping into that mirror. Insistently it invites us to look. But even then we can stubbornly refuse and turn our heads. A lot of people live in this state of refusal to look for long periods of time, if not their whole life time until the very end. They are refusing the gift because its unwrapping is expected to be too difficult. Or maybe the gift is not even noticed. That's how life is wasted away. The good news is that we can always choose to open

our eyes, time and time again, so that every experience, the good as well as the bad, can spark our inner fire (Marcus Aurelius).

Here I present a simple framework that can shed some light on how this sparking process unfolds. Enlightened learning is described here as a process consisting of four movements, each situated in a quadrant model created by two basic dimensions of awareness.

The first dimension is about the level in which our organism is activated: “tension versus relaxation”. Sometimes we feel awake and alert; at other times we feel drowsy. Sometimes we feel agitated, at other times we are at ease and peaceful. Our level of arousal changes constantly based on our intuitive assessment of the situation in which we find ourselves. To what degree is there a discrepancy between what is and how we want it to be, between reality and expectancy, between what we plan and how things unfold, between what we ask and what we get, between effort and result, between demand and compliance, ... ? The larger the gap, the bigger the seeming threat to our survival, the higher our level of tension. At times the river of life can be rough and intense with powerful waves. At other times we find stillness, tranquillity and serenity. This is: “tension versus relaxation”, one of the two very basic experiential dimensions of life.

The other dimension is “appreciation versus frustration” based on the simple fact that most experiences have a positive or a negative charge. The fact that we are aware of something, and register something as an experience means that it has some meaning to us, and its primary meaning is given by its emotional flavouring. Sometimes we feel content; at other times we feel dissatisfied. Sometimes we feel attracted to what we experience; at other times we feel aversion. Sometimes there is enthusiasm; at other times there is reluctance. This all is “appreciation versus frustration”, the two banks in between of which the river of life continuously flows.

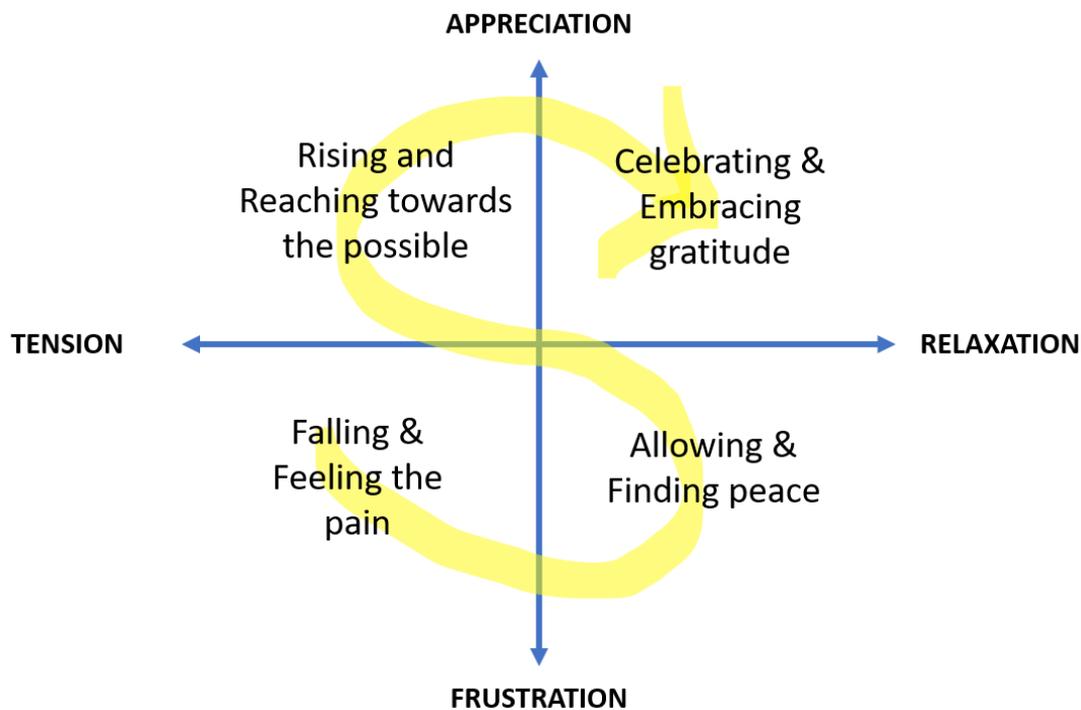
If we cross these two dimensions we get four quadrants, each of which I will explain in more detail:

- CELEBRATING AND EMBRACING GRATITUDE
- FALLING AND FEELING THE PAIN
- ALLOWING AND FINDING PEACE
- RISING AND REACHING TOWARDS THE POSSIBLE

#### CELEBRATING AND EMBRACING GRATITUDE

Let us start with the simple observation that for most people an abundance of positive experiences can be found every day. So many things turn out well each day. There are so many reasons to be happy. There is so much to be grateful for: waking up, feeling healthy, arriving at work on time, receiving help from friends and colleagues, eating tasteful food, ... Therefore it is so powerful to celebrate and honour whatever life brings us: the elements of nature that makes our lives possible, what we daily receive, milestones and transitions,

achievements and victories however small they are, ... An important aspect of meditative and yogic practices consists of finding joy in the subtle feeling of aliveness, in body sensations, conscious breathing and the cultivation of energetic awareness.



Because of our negativity bias we often overlook these often small, positive events. That is how we miss out a huge part of our life. And if we do notice, we tend to take these for granted: we expect them to happen or feel entitled to what we receive. But of course by doing so we fool ourselves: nothing is owned in this life.

The mastery of this movement is all about absorbing the good. Embrace the preciousness of life, enjoying it, and feel gratitude in your body, heart and mind. Make it a daily exercise to remember the positive and feel grateful. Make it a wholesome habit so that the appreciative stance becomes part of “how you are”.

#### FALLING AND FEELING THE PAIN

Sooner or later, things happen that make it too difficult to feel satisfied and happy. Small things like this one red traffic light to many when being late, or a nasty remark of a colleague. Big things like the loss of someone we love, getting really sick, losing security ... We tumble into a pit, for few seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, .... We find ourselves in some crisis, in despair. We feel caught up by circumstances and negative

emotions such as fear, sadness, ... or in one of the more modern mental states of chronic stress and chronic fatigue. We slip into other-destructive patterns such as anger, superiority, arrogance, ... Or into self-destructive patterns such as guilt, shame and uncertainty. These are all moments of suffering.

People who master this movement are able to fall down, fold back and feel the pain. It is better to really allow yourself to fall and lie down on the ground for a few minutes, hours, days than to keep on stumbling for weeks, months and years. Enlightened learning starts with acknowledging reality as it is. It is about facing the shitty state that we are in – instead of running away in action (“busy busy”; fleeing forward), distraction by comfort and amusement (fleeing sideward) or destruction in the sense of fighting against our unfortunate circumstances and/or the accompanying emotions and judgement (fleeing backward).

Worrying, victimizing ourselves and blaming our misery on others are nothing but strategies to overlook the simple fact that we are banished from paradise at that moment. From the instant that we recognise that there is suffering, we break the ban of our own imprisonment. That is how we arrive at the next movement of the enlightened learning process: allowing and finding peace.

#### ALLOWING AND FINDING PEACE

Every moment – short or long – of misery, despair – rough or subtle – preludes a moment of refreshing newness. Even in the darkest night the morning sun rise is already there, although still invisible to the troubled eye. We fell, are lying down in pain and then at some point we cease fire and relax into the situation - after a deep breath, after a relief bringing cry, after a good night sleep. This may happen spontaneously. Our exhausted body-minds can discover apprehensively that anger, self-pity, feeling victimized, guilt, shame, ... are dead end streets, offering no wholesome perspective for no one whatsoever. Or maybe some conscious effort of awareness helps us to ease into our pain. Anyhow, at some point frustration can turn into acceptance, an “It’s okay that it is not okay” feeling. Acceptance is a state of allowing reality to be as it is: our circumstance, what we’ve done, how we feel, how we judge, ... and how we condemn ourselves and others for the mess we’re in.

Time heals, some say, but that doesn’t mean we have to wait. People who master the movement of allowing have learned to stop, to retreat and to take refuge into a safe inner place, maybe just through a few conscious breaths in and out, and to bring the energy of presence to their experience: “Let come what comes, let be what is, let go what goes”. Allowing has two complementary characteristics. Firstly it is all about inquiring the difficult sensations, feelings and thoughts in a spirit of curiosity. Secondly, it is about holding these experiences compassionately, warm heartedly and without judgement. Ultimately these two elements are one and the same: we can only know what we love.

On a practical level there are different ways to make this movement: (1) meditating (zen or vipassana), (2) body awareness of tension and frustration (because it is easier to relate to our body than to our mind, and because body sensations tend to be more neutral than emotions; night and day the body is whispering to us; can we hear it?), (3) journaling, i.e. writing down regularly what you experience, or (4) sharing your experiences with someone else who is present and unconditionally available. These practices invite you to *relate to* yourself with kindness to the point that tensions are released and we enter a state of relief, serenity and even a subtle kind of joy. Ultimately this feels like homecoming. Not our habitual, conventional home, but a more profound place, a vast plane of pure consciousness from which all experiences, good and bad, arise and perish; the good and the bad. This is the place beyond birth and death where we can be free. Our suffering discovered in the previous movement is an open invitation to rediscover this place of peace. “We can dance in a hurricane, but only if we’re in the eye”. The feelings of freedom and joy that we find there, turns out to be the passage to our next movement: rising and reaching towards the possible.

#### RISING AND REACHING TOWARDS THE POSSIBLE

After each dark night there is a new day rising. After the moment of inward retreat there is the outward movement back into the everyday world. We now feel purified, strong and ready for action. New ideas emerge of what we can undertake, what we can choose, what we want to leave behind, what we can say to whom, ...

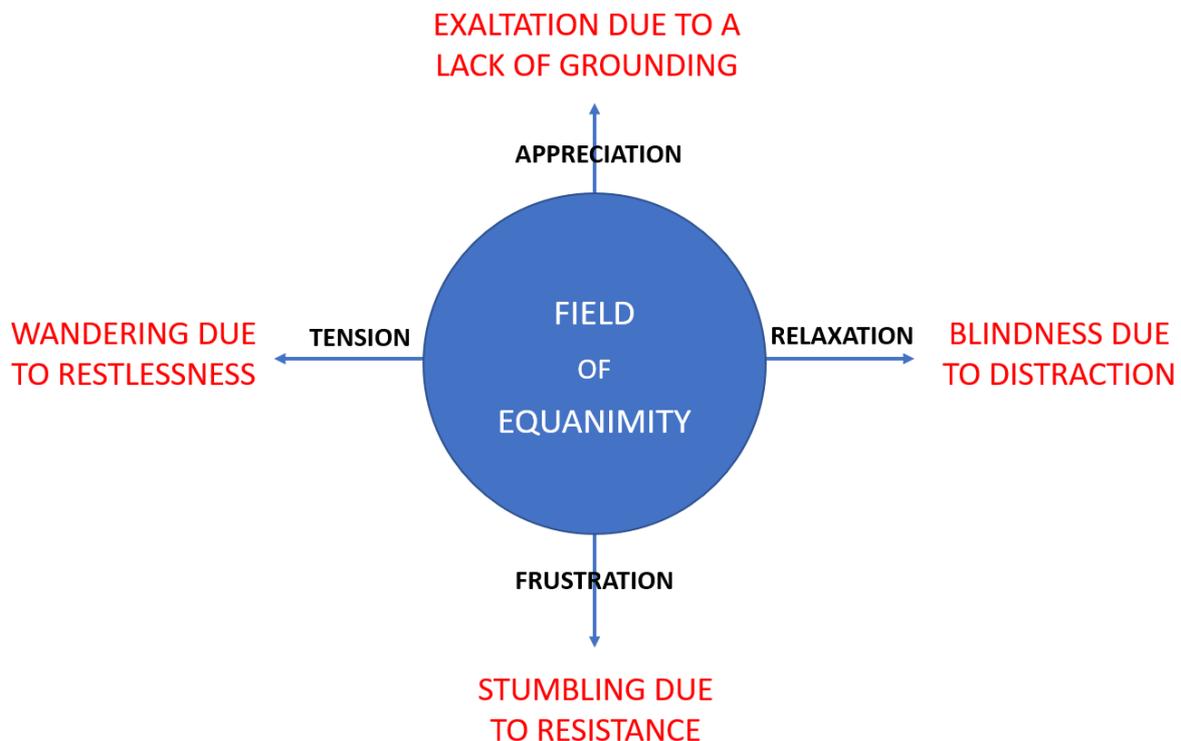
Wholesome action arises from the peace we found in the previous movement. War cannot defeat war. Peace in the world is born from the peace within ourselves. So if we want to act constructively we first have to take care of ourselves. And that is exactly what we did in the previous movement. So now we are prepared to make some new choices. It is time to move on. “The past consumes you. The future nourishes you.” (Shiv Charan Singh) We’re stepping consciously into the unknown future, want to make something happen, change things for the better. The tension we experience now is no longer discouraging or paralyzing but propelling and creative. We still want things to be different, but we feel less imprisoned by this longing, which allows our initial disappointment to be tilted towards renewed hope and inspiration. We are again approaching the appreciative bank of the river of life.

Those who master this movement of “reaching towards the possible” find strength in their trust. Trust – not because they are naïvely blind to lurking risks, but because they realize that we have no choice but to give life a next chance, to believe in possibility without any guarantee. Here the initial despair that accompanied our suffering is transformed into hope. Trust and hope fuel the imagination of the ideal, desired future. From there we can become aware of all the available resources and envision the first next steps that can be taken.

“ARRIVE WHERE WE BEGAN AND KNOW THE PLACE FOR THE FIRST TIME“ (T.S. ELIOT)

If this movement of rising and reaching turns out fine, we can again start to embrace gratitude and celebrate the abundance of life, i.e. the first movement that we discussed. So our journey ends where we have started. We are in the same place of innocence but nothing is the same anymore: we have changed, we have grown in wisdom, resilience, strength, vitality and equanimity and virtue. Maybe radically; probably just a tiny bit. But when we dance this dance, going through this four movements time and time again, all these small changes gradually become one big, life changing transformation.

Together, these four movements make a simple dance, but in many cases not an easy one. We already compared life with a river. The question here is how to make it flow instead of being swept away by its dynamics or getting stuck in one of its banks?



- If we get entangled in the bank of appreciation, we levitate and fly away into exalted spheres. We constantly act cheerfully, think positive, talk appreciatively etc... and in doing so we ignore the small, often small difficulties that sneak into our experiences. Covering up our suffering is not the answer.

- If we hit the frustration bank, we can get stuck if we start blaming others and cultivate emotions such as anger, helplessness, self-pity, guilt, shame, ... In this case, as mentioned earlier, we are in a state of resistance, not wanting to learn deeply from our experience. We stubbornly stumble through life. We are in a state of destruction towards self and/or other.
- If we are swept away by the turbulence of tension, we are consumed by cravings of desire or aversion. We restlessly look for our way out of the situation that we are in. People can be seeking constantly for something new, special, exquisite. They are imprisoned by the illusion that the answer to happiness can be found “out there” in some hopefully near future. Well, it turns out that if happiness cannot be found here and now, it will be lost forever.
- If we lose ourselves in the quiet state of relaxation we enter a state of comfortable numbness or sleepiness. We allow ourselves to be distracted and disconnect from the challenges that are waiting for us to deal with. Not only television screens, but also formal spiritual practices can serve this purpose. The accompanying prayer sounds like: “Thank you God for reality and for the possibility to escape from it.” (Anthony de Mello)

So the art is to navigate onto the stream of life without getting stuck too often in each of these four traps (cf. Andrew Orleandzki). The whole dance of life is about discovering our fundamental state of openness in which we embrace whatever comes on our path. As we grow in wisdom we get less and less swept away by circumstances, which means that our four movement dance gradually becomes less dramatic and more subtle. That is where equanimity comes in. In a state of equanimity we have an enlarged window of tolerance (Dan Siegel). If this window is too small our mind becomes rigid: we fearfully want everything to fit into our narrow frame of reality and how things should be. And if the inevitable “not getting what we want” happens, we easily get catapulted in a state of chaotic agitation. If our equanimity grows, i.e. our window of tolerance is widened, then our awareness becomes a holding space for the volatile, unruly, paradoxical nature of reality.

The four movement dance we outlined in the text, shows us that we can find happiness “in” our suffering (Cuong-Lu). Conventional intuitions lead us to the conclusion that happiness can only arise when suffering ceases. This misunderstanding leads to all kinds of subtle and gross addiction in its broadest definition: we become needy towards some life conditions and averse towards other conditions. That is how we enslave ourselves. Finding happiness *through* our suffering, on the contrary, brings liberation. We can dance ourselves into freedom. We can dance ourselves into the process of understanding and befriending ourselves – and by extension the rest of humanity: only if we can be okay with our fallibility, foolishness and ordinariness, we can love others.

Dancing the enlightened learning dance is an art that we all can learn. The main reason why this art is often left unexplored is that its learning process is too painful. Most of us prefer to take painkillers over real healing. But every single experience remains an open invitation to dance, to embrace life as it is and to transform all it offers in our ever growing inner fire of wisdom and love.

The dance is the message. Life is waiting to be encountered. Time is now.



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