

A Perfect Balance

Cultivating equanimity with Gil Fronsdal

Equanimity, one of the most sublime emotions of Buddhist practice, is the ground for wisdom and freedom and the protector of compassion and love. While some may think of equanimity as dry neutrality or cool aloofness, mature equanimity produces a radiance and warmth of being. The [Buddha](#) described a mind filled with [equanimity](#) as “abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility, and without ill-will.”

The English word “equanimity” translates two separate Pali words used by the Buddha, *upekkha* and *tatramajjhattata*. *Upekkha*, the more common term, means “to look over” and refers to the equanimity that arises from the power of observation—the ability to see without being caught by what we see. When well developed, such power gives rise to a great sense of peace.

Upekkha can also refer to the spaciousness that comes from seeing a bigger picture. Colloquially, in India the word was sometimes used to mean “to see with patience.” We might understand this as “seeing with understanding.” For example, when we know not to take offensive words personally, we are less likely to react to what was said. And by not reacting there is greater possibility to respond from wisdom and compassion. This form of equanimity is sometimes compared to grandmotherly love. The grandmother clearly loves her grandchildren but, thanks to her experience with her own children, is less likely to be caught up in the drama of the grandchildren’s lives.

Still more qualities of equanimity are revealed by the term *tatramajjhattata*, a long compound made of simple Pali words. Tatra, meaning “there,” sometimes refers to “all these things.” *Majha* means “middle,” and *tata* means “to stand or to pose.” Put together, the word becomes “to stand in the middle of all this.” As a form of equanimity, this “being in the middle” refers to balance, to remaining centred in the middle of whatever is happening. This form of balance comes from some inner strength or stability. The strong presence of inner calm, well-being, confidence, vitality, or integrity can keep us upright, like ballast keeps a ship upright in strong winds (see “Seven Supports for Equanimity,”). As inner strength develops, for example, from the accumulation of mindfulness in the ordinary moments of life, equanimity follows.

Equanimity is a protection from what are called the Eight Worldly Winds: praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute.

Becoming attached to or excessively elated with success, praise, fame, or pleasure can be a setup for suffering when the winds of change shift. For example, success can be wonderful, but if it leads to arrogance, we have more to lose in future challenges. Becoming personally invested in praise can tend toward conceit. Identifying with failure, we may feel incompetent or inadequate. Reacting to pain, we may become discouraged. If we understand or feel that our sense of inner well-being is independent of the Eight Winds, we are more likely to remain on an even keel in their midst.

A simple definition of “equanimity,” considering the various Pali roots, is the capacity to not be caught up with what happens to us. We can practice with equanimity by studying the ways that we get caught. Instead of pursuing the ideal of balance and non reactivity directly, we can give careful attention to how balance is lost and how reactivity is triggered. Trying to fit into some idealistic model of what being equanimous is supposed to look like can all too easily produce such threats to equanimity as indifference, aloofness, rigidity, or complacency. But when the obstacles are understood and removed, then the resulting equanimity can be the foundation for caring, presence, flexibility and diligence.

Seven Supports for Equanimity One approach to developing equanimity is to cultivate the qualities of mind that support it. Here are seven supports for equanimity:

1. Integrity

When we live and act with integrity or virtue, we feel confident about our actions and words, which results in the equanimity of blamelessness. The ancient Buddhist texts speak of being able to go into any assembly of people and feel blameless.

2. Faith

While any kind of faith can provide equanimity, faith grounded in wisdom is especially powerful. The Pali word for faith, *saddha*, is also translated as “conviction” or confidence. If we have confidence, for example, in our ability to engage in a spiritual practice, then we are more likely to meet its challenges with equanimity.

3. A well-developed mind

Much as we might develop physical strength, balance, and stability of the body in a gym, so too can we develop strength, balance, and stability of the mind. This is done through practices that cultivate calm, concentration, and mindfulness. When the mind is calm, we are less likely to be blown about by the worldly winds.

4. Well-being

In Buddhism, it's considered appropriate and helpful to cultivate and enhance our well-being. It is all too easy to overlook the well-being that is easily available in daily life. Even taking time to enjoy one's tea or the sunset can be a training in letting in well-being.

5. Wisdom

Wisdom can teach us to separate people's actions from who they are. We can agree or disagree with their actions, but remain balanced in our relationship with a person. Or we can understand that our own thoughts and impulses are the result of impersonal conditions. By not taking them so personally, we are more likely to stay at ease with their arising.

One of the most powerful ways to use wisdom to facilitate equanimity is to be mindful of when equanimity is absent. Honest awareness of what makes us imbalanced helps us to learn how to find balance. Wisdom can also be an important factor in learning to have an accepting awareness, to be present without the mind or heart contracting or resisting.

6. Insight

Insight is a deep seeing into the nature of things as they are. One of the primary insights is the nature of impermanence. In the deepest forms of insight, we see that things change so quickly that we can't hold onto anything, and eventually the mind lets go of clinging. Letting go brings equanimity; the greater the letting go, the deeper the equanimity.

7. Freedom

Freedom comes when we begin to let go of our reactive tendencies. We can get a taste of what this means by noticing areas in which we were once reactive but are no longer so. For example, some issues that upset us when we were teenagers prompt no reaction at all now that we are adults. In Buddhist practice, we work to expand the range of life experiences in which we are free.

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