10. Equanimity (Upekkha)
Equanimity allows us to see things impartially. With equanimity, we are no longer pulled this way and that by our passions, likes, and dislikes. Thich Nhat Hanh says that the Sanskrit word upekkha means "equanimity, non-attachment, nondiscrimination, even-mindedness, or letting go. You climb the mountain to be able to look over the whole situation, not bound by one side or the other."

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Equanimity
- Gil Fronsdal

Equanimity is one of the most sublime emotions of Buddhist practice. It 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. Each represents a different aspect of equanimity.

The most common Pali word translated as "equanimity" is upekkha, meaning "to look over." It 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 ease 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. Instead, we remain at ease or equanimous. 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 her grandchildren's lives.

The second word often translated as equanimity is tatramajjhattata, a compound made of simple Pali words. Tatra, meaning "there," sometimes refers to "all these things." Majjha 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, "being in the middle" refers to balance, to remaining centered in the middle of whatever is happening. This balance comes from inner strength or stability. The strong presence of inner calm, well-being, confidence, vitality, or integrity can keep us upright, like a ballast keeps a ship upright in strong winds. As inner strength develops, equanimity follows.

Equanimity is a protection from 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 set-up for suffering when the winds of life change direction. 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.

One approach to developing equanimity is to cultivate the qualities of mind that support it. Seven mental

qualities support the development of equanimity.

The first is virtue or integrity. When we live and act with integrity, 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.

The second support for equanimity is the sense of assurance that comes from 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.

The third support is 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.

The fourth support is a sense of well-being. We do not need to leave well-being to chance. In Buddhism, it is considered appropriate and helpful to cultivate and enhance our well-being. We often 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 well-being.

The fifth support for equanimity is understanding or wisdom. Wisdom is an important factor in learning to have an accepting awareness, to be present for whatever is happening without the mind or heart contracting or resisting. 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 them. We can also 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.

Another way wisdom supports equanimity is in understanding that people are responsible for their own decisions, which helps us to find equanimity in the face of other people's suffering. We can wish the best for them, but we avoid being buffeted by a false sense of responsibility for their well-being.

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.

The sixth support is insight, 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 this 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.

The final support is freedom, which comes as 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. 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.

These two forms of equanimity, the one that comes from the power of observation, and the one that comes from inner balance, come together in mindfulness practice. As mindfulness becomes stronger, so does our equanimity. We see with greater independence and freedom. And, at the same time, equanimity becomes an inner strength that keeps us balanced in middle of all that is.

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The Buddha's Smile
Cultivating Equanimity
- Andrew Olendzki

The most difficult Buddhist idea to explain, I've found, is not interdependent arising or nonself, challenging though these are, but equanimity. How is it that one can neither like nor not like something without being emotionally detached or indifferent? Our sense of identity is so bound up with our desires that to many people the thought of being without preferences for one thing or another is tantamount to being stripped of the very quality that makes us human. Nonattachment is just so dry. Give me the pot-bellied laughing Buddha any day (who, of course, is not a Buddha at all but a Chinese folk deity), rather than the austere figure presiding over our meditation halls with barely a hint of a smile on his face.

The Buddha is not asking us to have no emotion, only to let go of our more primitive and unhealthy emotions. Desire, in both its positive mode as greed or attachment and its negative mode as hatred or aversion, is an unhealthy emotion and causes suffering. We don't always see this, but it's true. It is easy to see at the extreme ends of the spectrum, where craving manifests as an uncontrollable addiction or hatred results in a frenzy of brutal ethnic cleansing. But even at the near end of the spectrum these same emotional forces are at work, gently pulling us toward the things we want and pushing us away from what we don't want. And though the effects of this are subtle, the heart of the Buddha's insight was to recognize that they can be just as harmful.

What is the harm, you might ask, in liking the color purple or being mildly annoyed by people who are rude? Nothing much. The problem is that desire is a house builder, as the Buddha discovered on the night of his awakening. ("Housebuilder, you have been seen! You will not build another house . . . my mind has reached the destruction of craving."—Dhammapada 154) Desire constructs the scaffolding of self upon which suffering is then draped. Only a self has desire (unlike rocks and trees), not because it is some spiritual essence unique in nature, but because the liking or not liking of something is itself what creates the self, the person who likes or does not like what is happening in this moment. This then creates the conditions for suffering to arise, for only a self can suffer (rocks and trees do not). We can only be disappointed if we set ourselves apart from what is happening by wanting it to be other than it is.

The crux of the second noble truth is not what you want but that you want. As the Buddha says in Majjhima Nikaya 43, greed and hatred are makers of measurement; they are delimiting and therefore limiting functions. They carve our minds into boxes and compartments, hemming us in with habits, wishes, wants, and needs. Consciousness, which like a luminous mirror is capable of reflecting whatever object it encounters selflessly (and thus naturally), is restricted, distorted, and even perverted by the likes and dislikes of our emotional habits—even those that seem innocuous. Under such circumstances, it is impossible to see things as they really are.

The truth is that we like our preferences and prejudices, we like defining ourselves in terms of what we like and don't like. It is precisely desire's entanglement with the sense of self that makes this all so difficult to unravel. Fortunately, there is a relatively easy and accessible way to counter the powerful forces of desire: the cultivation of equanimity. Every moment of mindfulness is also a moment of equanimity. It is not a disengagement from the object of awareness but rather a full and complete engagement with it. It is engaging with the breath, or with a feeling tone, or with a thought, without simultaneously wanting it to stay as it is or wanting it to be different than it is.

Awareness without wanting is not the same as having no emotion, for equanimity itself is an emotion. If a neutral feeling tone lies at the midpoint between pleasure and pain, equanimity as an emotional response lies midway between liking and not liking, wanting and not wanting, greed and hatred. In the former case there is still a feeling tone, just not one that is obviously pleasant or painful. So too with equanimity: there may be a powerful

emotional charge, but it is not one that falls to one side of desire or the other. It may strike many of us as surprising, and even entirely alien, but the Buddhists are pointing to an intensity of emotional response that accepts and even celebrates what is happening without trying to distort it into something else, into something that "I" prefer.

Lovingkindness can be seen as an example of this. When we practice lovingkindness, we care deeply for the well-being of another without the personal complications that come with liking or wanting them. This is not romantic love, or even parental love, but rather a selfless love. Yes, love can reach great heights of passion when we simultaneously want someone as a lover or take pride in them as a parent, but to the extent that a sense of self is implicated, the emotion tips from selfless to self-referential. This does not make it wrong, only prone to generate suffering. Loving with equanimity can also be felt intensively, as can compassion, happiness, sorrow, and a host of other nontoxic emotions, without being self-involved.

We do not become less human by purging toxins from our emotional life but rather more nobly human. Abandoning greed, hatred, and delusion at every opportunity, we are still left with a rich, nuanced, and healthier emotional life. Like all other aspects of the deep and profound dharma, this is better understood through practice than by theorizing. Explore the cultivation of equanimity in your own experience, and see if you can discover what the Buddha is smiling about.

The Equanimity Talk—Father to Son
-Thanissarro Bhikkhu

When the Buddha was teaching his son to be equiniminous he said,

"Make your mind like the earth. Make your mind like water. Make your mind like fire. Make your mind like wind."

In other words, if someone throws something disgusting on the earth, the earth doesn't shrink away. It just stays the earth. You use water to wash away disgusting things; the water doesn't draw away in disgust. Fire will burn disgusting things. The wind will blow disgusting things away. They don't get disgusted by them. It is because of your ability to stay with things, with equanimity, that you are able to perceive them for what they are.

The Buddha didn't have his son stop there. In fact, this was just his first lesson in meditation. The next lesson went into breath meditation, in which the instruction was to try to actively develop a state of rapture or a state of pleasure, and to try to develop skills in dealing with the breath throughout the body, learning how to gladden the mind when it needs to be gladdened, learning how to still the mind when it needs to be stilled, learning how to release the mind when it needs to be released.

So equanimity here is a basis for being able to observe what's actually going on in our minds so as to be able to admit to ourselves what is actually happening there, rather than allowing our preferences to color our idea of what we'd like to tell ourselves is happening. In this way, equanimity becomes a basis for developing further skills. So you don't stop with equanimity and just sort of 'let things be.' You learn to be equiniminous about things that you can't change so that you can focus on things that you really can change.

Head & Heart Together
(an excerpt)
- Thanissaro Bhikkhu

All too often we think that getting in touch with our emotions is a means of tapping into who we really are — that we've been divorced from our true nature, and that by getting back in touch with our emotions we'll reconnect with our true identity. But your emotions are not your true nature; they're just as fabricated as anything else. Because they're fabricated, the real issue is to learn how to fabricate them skillfully, so they don't lead to trouble and can instead lead to a trustworthy happiness.

Remember that emotions cause you to act. They're paths leading to good or bad karma. When you see them as paths, you can transform them into a path you can trust. As you learn how to deconstruct emotions of ill will, hard-heartedness, resentment, and distress, and reconstruct the brahma-viharas in their place, you don't simply attain an unlimited heart. You gain practice in mastering the processes of fabrication. As the Buddha says, that mastery leads first to strong and blissful states of concentration. From there it can fabricate all the factors of the path leading to the goal of all the Buddha's teachings, whether for head or for heart: the total happiness of nirvana, unconditionally true.

Which simply goes to show that if you get your head and your heart to respect each other, they can take each other far. Your heart needs the help of your head to generate and act on more skillful emotions. Your head needs your heart to remind you that what's really important in life is putting an end to suffering. When they learn how to work together, they can make your human mind into an unlimited brahma-mind. And more: They can master the causes of happiness to the point where they transcend themselves, touching an uncaused dimension that the head can't encompass, and a happiness so true that the heart has no further need for desire.

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Reflections

1. Can you remember a time in your life when you felt present, poised and balanced while in the midst of some exciting or difficult activity? Or can you remember a time in your life when you felt very present for what was happening and yet able to also see the bigger picture of what was occurring?How did it feel to not be caught up and lost in the activity, yet to still experience it? How did it feel in your body?
2. Some practitioners may be put off by their ideas of equanimity, fearing that it asks us to have a cool aloofness and indifference to our experience and the world around us. What are your ideas about equanimity? How do you distinguish it from indifference or dry neutrality?
3. What are some of the factors that help you to be equanimous? How does meditation help? What understandings help? How can you bring make these supportive factors be a more regular part of your life?

Practices

1. During your daily meditation practice, see if you can notice any feelings of poise, balance and evenness. If you don't experience a sense of balance, then explore what prevents you from being present and feeling equanimous with what has arisen.
2. At the end of your day reflect if there were times when you felt indifferent or disconnected from your experience. How does that feeling compare to the feeling of equanimity that you had been exploring earlier in the week? What prevents you from feeling connected, yet equanimous to your experience?
3. During your meditation practice notice when you feel calm and settled, then notice how balanced and poised you feel when you're calm. Also notice the relationship between feeling agitated and your ability to hold experiences with equanimity.