

# Equanimity

*adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal, May 29th, 2004*

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 *tatramajjhata*, 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.