



The Practice of Equanimity

The Balanced Embrace of All Experience

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Equanimity is that quality of mind that allows all of the other qualities of our minds and hearts, and the skills developed in meditation, to come together in a unified and balanced way allowing wisdom and compassion to inform our lives. It is a flexible balance and steadiness towards all experience based upon a selfless and full acceptance of whatever is present on a moment-to-moment basis.

When this state of spaciousness and balance is present, a sense of clarity, stability, and neutrality emerges which dispels confusion, misunderstanding, and misapprehension. Equanimity allows us to have a sense of perspective, of context, and to relax into our experience. It embodies what in meditation practice is called “The Middle Path,” or “The Middle Way” – a way of practicing and living that is in balance, centered, and calm. It also allows us to maintain a sense of humor in the face of challenges, difficulties, and adversities.

The primary condition that supports the emergence of Equanimity is the absence of attachment and identification. The mind unconditionally, and without judgment, accepts what is present. If it’s hot, it’s okay. If it’s cold, it’s okay. If the sun is shining, it’s okay. If it’s raining, it’s okay. If we feel happy, it’s okay. If we feel sad, it’s still okay. While we may have preferences regarding how we would like things to be, Equanimity allows us to embrace whatever enters our lives without resistance. We may still experience what the mind perceives as unpleasant or painful, but the struggle in the mind against what is present, and the resulting effort to resist, change, or fix it, is not present. In other words, suffering does not arise when Equanimity is present and stable.

It’s important to distinguish Equanimity from indifference or detachment. These states of mind are characterized by the mind turning away from the experience and by refusing to be connected with experience. Equanimity facilitates the ability of the mind to connect with experience, and sustain the connection, so we can fully investigate and explore it. The balanced quality of Equanimity is what supports the mind and heart in turning towards, engaging, and connecting with what is present, rather than turning away, disengaging, and disconnecting.

Coleman Barks’ translation of the Rumi poem, *The Guest House*, colorfully explains the value of Equanimity in the face of the wide range of mind states we face each day. It

also highlights the fact that Equanimity starts with the familiar, the ordinary, the stuff of everyday life. This is where we live, and the only place where we can find peace, happiness, and the release from struggle.

This being human is a guest-house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,

still, treat each guest honorably.
They may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Equanimity can be understood in two distinct ways. First, as a skill, or skillful means of balancing the expressions of energy in the body and mind. Second, as an unconditional embrace of life.

Equanimity as a Skillful Means of Balancing Expressions of Energy in the Body and Mind

When we speak of being “skillful,” or employing “skillful means,” in meditation practice and in daily life, we mean the intentional cultivation of conditions that point the mind towards clarity, balance, and peace and away from confusion, conflict, and unhappiness. *In this sense, Equanimity watches for deficiencies or excesses in the mind and heart and makes appropriate adjustments to maintain equilibrium.* Several illustrations may be helpful.

A number of specific mind states are recognized as foundational for freeing or liberating the mind from its

constant struggle with experience. These include, among others, Effort or Energy, Concentration, Wisdom, Faith or Belief, Compassion, and Mindfulness.

If we have a level of Effort or Energy in the mind that outpaces our Concentration, we become restless, anxious, and tired. If we have too little Energy compared to the level of Concentration present, the mind becomes dull, sluggish, or sleepy. In both instances, the mind is unable to maintain its connection with the experience that is present. Why is this important? A balance of Effort and Concentration allows the mind to stay in connection with experience and engage in Investigation into its true nature.

If we have more Wisdom than Compassion in a particular moment, our response to experience, and particularly suffering, becomes dry, intellectual, and detached. Wisdom must involve experiential inquiry and investigation, not just intellectual or conceptual questioning. If we have more Wisdom than Belief or Faith in our practice, the mind is constantly questioning, ambivalent, plagued with doubt, and unable to commit itself to practice. If we have more Compassion than Wisdom, our response to experience tends to be without appropriate boundaries and lacks what we would normally consider common sense or good judgment. Why is this important? A balance of Wisdom and Faith and Compassion allows Mindfulness to remain clear and stable to support wise decision-making and action.

From the perspective of skillful means, Equanimity involves seeing into and adjusting the imbalances in our mind, intentions, emotions, conduct, and relationships. It is characterized by the qualities of resiliency, flexibility, and the ability to adjust, restore, and re-balance the mind and heart over and over again. This adjusting, restoring, and re-balancing feature of Equanimity supports and maintains the integrity of Lovingkindness, Compassion, and Sympathetic Joy. It prevents Lovingkindness from sliding into desire and attachment; Compassion from moving into pity or sorrow; and Sympathetic Joy from shifting into ungrounded excitement.

Equanimity as an Unconditional Embrace of Life

Equanimity as a skill, or skillful means, asks us to look at and balance the *relationship between mind states*. Equanimity as an unconditional embrace of life asks us to look at our mind and heart's *relationship with experience itself*.

Our relationship with experience is at the core of meditative practice. It is the focal point for understanding how and why we struggle and suffer, and finding the means for

stepping out of struggling and suffering. From the standpoint of meditative psychology, suffering is the struggle that arises in the mind *in reaction* to the difference between the way things are and the way we want them to be. The chief mind states driving this aversive reaction are attachment and identification which attempts to control the way things are. This habit of mind of turning away from what the mind perceives as unpleasant or aversive leads to our going on automatic pilot and reacting mechanically based on conditioning, habit, and emotional reactivity.

Equanimity is the giving up of the attempt to control the flow of experience. It is the letting go of holding on to the way we want things to be; a letting go of the resistance to what the mind does not want to be present; and a letting go into the experience that is before us. It represents a shift from resistance to receptivity.

This shift from resisting to embracing experience is the first, and fundamental, step in practice towards a clear understanding of the nature of experience and reality. If we're off the mark at this very first step, if we are unable to clearly see into the nature of experience and reality, the rest of our practice, and our life, will be off the mark as well. In meditation practice this is what is called "ignorance" – believing and perceiving things to be one way, as the result of attachment and identification, when they are really a significantly different way. This new understanding arises from a series of deep experiential Insights that arise from skillful and consistent meditation practice and meditative awareness in everyday life. These include the following:

First, experience unfolds lawfully based upon our intentions and actions. Our intention points the mind away from or towards struggle. This results in conduct which has consequences both internally and in the outside world. This process takes place in the quiet of each individual mind and heart, and each individual is the owner, or heir, of the consequences of their intentions and their actions. While we can assist and support another in dealing with their struggles and suffering, we cannot eliminate, assume, or take responsibility for another person's suffering. This is commonly referred to as *karma* or the principle of cause and effect.

Second, everything, and our experience of everything, is a process which is in continuous change. Every living being, every object, everything that defines who we are – our bodies, our feelings, our thoughts, and emotions – as well as experience itself are in constant movement and evolution – day to day, hour to hour, moment to moment. Attempting to hold on to any of this as being permanent or stable is a guarantee for struggling and suffering. This is commonly referred to as *annica* or the principle of impermanence or continuous change.

Third, everything, and our experience of everything, arises through, and is dependent upon, the relationship of conditions that temporarily come together and then change or dissipate. Our breath, bodily sensations, feelings, emotions, and thoughts are dependent upon an incredibly complex series of chemical, biological, and experiential interactions. Nearly all of this is happening outside of our normal awareness and our control. This process is impersonal and selfless in nature. What makes it seem personal is our resistance to, and our effort to control, the process. This is commonly referred to as *anatta* or the principle of the impersonal and selfless nature of experience.

These Insights are experiential, not intellectual or conceptual, in nature. When they are deeply rooted in our experience of life, we can begin to settle into the present without holding back. We can begin to see that *Equanimity* provides a deep sense of hope in the possibilities that exist in each moment. A deep sense of calm, safety, and lawfulness arise in each moment when the mind is calm and clear.

The Formal Practice of Equanimity Meditation

Equanimity can be developed in both formal sitting and walking meditation.

The practice involves visualizing the object for the meditation (the selected person) in the heart/chest area or in front of you at the heart/chest level. If you have difficulty with this visualizing, hold a heartfelt sense or feeling of the person in your heart/chest area. Then feel a direct connection with the person and recite the Equanimity phrases directing their deepest meaning and intention to the person.

The traditional order for practice proceeds as follows:

1. A neutral person;
2. A benefactor;
3. A dear friend;
4. A difficult person;
5. Oneself.

When practicing Equanimity towards another person, you can use all or several of the following phrases as appropriate for the particular meditation:

Things are just as they are.

Things are impermanent.

Joy and sorrow arise and pass away.

All beings are the heirs of their own intentions and actions.

Your happiness and your sorrow depend upon your intentions and actions, not upon my wishes for you.

I care about you, but I cannot prevent you from suffering.

When practicing Equanimity towards yourself, you can use the following phrases, directed towards yourself and your own situation:

Things are just as they are.

Things are impermanent.

Joy and sorrow arise and pass away.

I am the heir of my intentions and actions.

My happiness and my sorrow depend upon my intentions and actions, not the wishes of others for me.

Remember that the practice involves *connecting* the heartfelt meaning of these phrases with the person selected and *sustaining* the connection. Watch for the mind to wander if you begin mechanically reciting the phrases. *For Equanimity practice to come alive, you need to be in connection with both the intention behind the phrases and the object of meditation.*

One helpful way to understand if we are experiencing Equanimity is to focus our attention on our experience of *what is happening in the body*. A balanced response to suffering will feel one way in the body. *Balance exists when conditions are stable, in alignment, and in a state of dynamic rest.* An unbalanced response, driven by either desire or aversion, will feel completely different. A lack of balance exists when conditions are unstable, not in alignment, and in a state of conflict. In this regard, the body can be one of the most reliable guides to understanding what we are feeling.

Be alert for the mind shifting into using the phrases as a defense against experience or as a weapon to justify harsh feelings about another person or ourselves. If the intention of the phrases moves from “*all beings are the heirs of their own intentions and actions*” to “*all beings are the heirs of their own intentions and actions, so you deserve what is happening to you*” – a shift has occurred from Equanimity into blame or criticism. When these non-Equanimity mind states arrive, acknowledge their presence without judgment, then return the attention back to the true

intention of the phrases. If non-Equanimity mind states become so strong as to interfere with your ability to continue Equanimity practice, shift to Insight (Vipassana) practice to experience and investigate the mind state. When it has subsided, return to Equanimity practice with the selection of a *new* person to use as the object of meditation.

Practicing Equanimity in Daily Life

Another simple, and powerful, way to begin cultivating Equanimity is to use the Equanimity phrases during your daily activities. You can send the phrases to the person who cut you off in traffic; a co-worker who is having a difficult day; your child who is angry or frustrated; the bank teller or grocery clerk; a person you see walking or jogging at the park; or yourself during a stressful moment.

This random, but regular, sending of the phrases to persons we know, and those we don't know, begins to connect us with the struggle in all lives and the wish inside of us for others to find Equanimity in the same way that we want to find Equanimity in our lives. It begins to help us understand that the deep aspiration in our heart for happiness, peace, and freedom is present in every other heart.

