Cultivating Equanimity

The cultivation of equanimity is a primary goal of mindfulness meditation practice. The Pali word for equanimity is upekkha (oo-peh-kah); one commentor describes the origin of the word in this way: “Corresponds to the Sanskrit utpreksha…[preksha](http://andhrabharati.com/dictionary/sanskrit/index.php?w=%E0%A4%AA%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B0%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B7%E0%A5%8D) means to be a spectator or to look on without interfering, while the prefix [ud](http://andhrabharati.com/dictionary/sanskrit/index.php?w=%E0%A4%89%E0%A4%A6%E0%A5%8D) has the meanings of superiority or separation.” Upekkha is synonymous with *tatramajjhatata* (tah-trah-mah-jah-tah-tah), which is loosely translated as *that quality of awareness that is in the middle, not too energized or too tranquil, too convinced or too skeptical*. Tatramajjhatata is primarily associated with the quality of awareness manifested as one of the Seven Awakening Factors, while upekkha is primarily associated with the Four Divine Abidings.

Here is a story describing a manifestation of upekkha:

There was a Zen renunciate who lived in seclusion near a small village. He was renowned for his wisdom and compassion. Two young lovers who lived in the village got pregnant and feared the consequences of disclosing who the father was, so they claimed the monk was the father. This caused great turmoil in the village and contempt for a monk who violated his vows of celibacy, and this caused him much difficulty, as he depended on the villagers for food, which they provided unwillingly. When the child was born they took her to him and demanded that he raise the child; he looked at the mother and at the infant with great compassion and said “Ah, just so.” and took in the child and the mother, caring for them as best he could under the circumstances, not violating his vow of celibacy. Several years later, the mother became seriously ill, and, on the point of death, told her parents of the deceit, named the real father, and then died. The parents, accompanied by the villagers, ashamed of their mistrust and mistreatment of the monk, came to him and said they would take the child back. With great compassion and equanimity, he said “Ah, just so.” And returned the child to the mother’s parents.

In an article by Anne Murphy in the Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, Volume II, Issue II, published in 2017, the author reviews commentary found in the Visuddhimagga (vih-soo-dee-mah-gah), translated as “The Path of Purification”, a primary text of Theravada Buddhism, compiled several hundred years after the time of the Buddha by a group led by the monk Buddhaghosa. There are 10 characteristics associated with upekkha: 1. Six-factored equanimity, 2. Equanimity as a brahma-vihara, 3. Equanimity as an enlightenment factor, 4. Equanimity of energy, 5. Equanimity about formations, 6. Equanimity as a feeling, 7. Equanimity about insight, 8. Equanimity as specific neutrality, 9. Equanimity of jhana, and 10. Equanimity of purification (*Vsm* IV 156-166). The following is a brief review of these 10 characteristics of upekkha, as I understand them:

1. **Six-factored equanimity** In the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, one of the categories for contemplation involves mindful contemplation of the Six Sense Bases—the eyes and seeing, ears and hearing, nose and smelling, tongue and tasting, the various somatosensory sensations in the body, along with the mind and thinking. The goal of the satipatthana (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah) practice is to cultivate *atapi, sati, sampajanna* (ah-tah-pee, sah-tee, sahm-pah-jahn-yah), that is, *diligent, mindful, clear comprehension* regarding the six sense bases. This includes non-identification and non-reactivity, which are manifestations of upekkha. Even though the commentaries seem to state that upekkha applies directly to visual, auditory and other sensory stimulation, the manifestation of upekkha applies solely to the mind and thinking base—how the mind makes a meaningful self-organization relative to any sensory stimulation.
2. **Equanimity as a brahma-vihara** The brahma-viharas (brah-mah-vee-hah-rahs) are the emotional attributes of a liberated consciousness: metta (meh-tah), karuna (kah-roo-nah), mudita (moo-dee-tah) and upekkha. Metta is the characteristic of lovingkindness regarding self-states and, by extension, other beings. Karuna is a subset of metta—the quality of lovingkindness that responds with compassion when awareness of distress and confusion are adversely impacting oneself or others. Mudita is also a subset of metta—it is the quality of lovingkindness that responds unselfishly to the success and happiness of others positively, with celebratory joy and generosity. Upekkha brings balance to the other three attributes, so that metta doesn’t degrade into idealization (which can quickly transform into aversion and ill-will if the ideal isn’t realized). Regarding karuna, one can be empathetically attuned to the distress and confusion without diminishing compassion through pity or becoming so identified with witnessing the suffering that burnout occurs. Regarding mudita, one can avoid over-identification with the happiness of others, for example, the frantic celebrations following the victory of a favorite sports team. Mindfulness and introspective investigation of the manifestation of upekkha guards against the appearance of numbness or dissociation from the empathetic attunement experienced with the other brahma-viharas.
3. **Equanimity as an enlightenment factor** The Seven Awakening Factors are also contemplated in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Energy/Right Effort, Joy/Enthusiastic Engagement, Tranquility, Concentration/Unification of Wholesome Mind Conditioners, and Equanimity/Balance. In this instance, it seems to me that tatramajjhatata more accurately describes the function of equanimity. The word translates as *that which is found in the middle*. It functions to balance the manifestation of the three energizing factors—*investigation, joy* and *energy*--and the tranquility-oriented factors—*tranquility* and *concentration*. *Mindfulness* “hovers over” the organizing process, monitoring the process, and functions cooperatively with *equanimity*. There is not too much excitement or too much sedation, or too much identification or too much skepticism—a dynamic balancing which provides the optimal internal environment for liberating the mind from distress and confusion.
4. **Equanimity of energy** There is more than one approach to understanding the Pali word *viriya* (vihr-yah), translated as *energy*. Biologically, our existence involves the transformation of the “fuel” derived from the food we eat and the air we breathe into cellular activities. In the case of the flow of energy from a contemporary perspective, we are describing neural activity—energy activates the transmission of stimulation from one area of the brain to another, creating consciousness, along with metabolic activities in the body. From a Buddhist perspective, we are describing how intention channels that energy, a process we cultivate as Right Effort, which channels the neural energy away from neural patterns that are unwholesome and towards neural patterns that are wholesome, promoting the process of Awakening. In a quote from Murphy’s article:

Equanimity of energy is the midway point of energy between the two opposing mental states of laziness and restlessness, as explained below. When a Bhikkhu devoted to the higher mind from time to time gives attention to the mark of concentration, from time to time to the mark of exertion, and from time to time to the mark of equanimity, his mind becomes malleable, wieldy, and luminous, pliant and properly concentrated for the destruction of the taints (*AN* I 257).

This description is not so much focused on the non-preferential aspects of upekkha we find regarding the divine abidings, but rather the optimal interactions between the Energy/Right Effort and the tranquility Awakening factors.

1. **Equanimity about formations** Formations, called *sankhara* ()sahn-kah-rah) in Pali, are the constituent elements that come together to shape each moment of consciousness. As a result of a highly integrated process involving persistently developed levels of insight regarding the impermanent and impersonal characteristics of subjective consciousness, experiences called the *Progressions of Insight* or *Nine Insight Knowledges* occur. Knowledge of Equanimity Towards Formations is the 8th of these insights. Subjectively, this insight manifests as *viraga* (vih-rah-gah), *dispassion regarding any formations, wholesome or unwholesome*. The next insight involves relinquishing any subjective awareness that invests in the false perception that there is an enduring and autonomous self.
2. **Equanimity as a feeling** *Feeling* is a bit misleading for understanding this manifestation of upekkha because we typically understand this word as a reference to emotions. A more psychologically useful term is *affect*, which is the impulsive, reactive urgency manifested in a moment of consciousness. The contemporary psychological research term is threefold: *affect approach* for a pleasant moment of stimulation, either physical or mental, *affect avoidance* for an unpleasant moment, or *affect neutral* which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This coincides with the Buddhist *vedana* (vey-dah-nah), one of the universal mental formation conditioners, occurring in every moment of consciousness, either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Equanimity does not represent a neutral feeling, but rather a detached and impersonalized awareness of vedana. In the Satipatthana Sutta, it is described in this abbreviated translation of the Second Foundation of Mindfulness:

"And how does a monk remain focused on feelings in & of themselves? There is the case where a monk, when feeling a painful feeling, discerns, 'I am feeling a painful feeling.' When feeling a pleasant feeling, he discerns, 'I am feeling a pleasant feeling.' When feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he discerns, 'I am feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling…

"In this way he remains focused internally on feelings in & of themselves, or externally on feelings in & of themselves, or both internally & externally on feelings in & of themselves. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to feelings, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to feelings, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to feelings. Or his mindfulness that 'There are feelings' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on feelings in & of themselves.” (translated by Thanissaro)

The references to “…feelings in & of themselves…Or his mindfulness that 'There are feelings' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on feelings in & of themselves.” This describes the impersonal function of feeling, not identified as anything other than a biological affective response, not a self. The manifestation of equanimity supports this realization.

1. **Equanimity about insight** The comments mentioned regarding #5 above are related to this characteristic of equanimity. All mental formations, including equanimity, are fabrications of the mind and therefore impermanent and impersonal, that is, not representing an autonomous self. Upon Awakening, equanimity, as a sankhara, must be relinquished, a total existential surrender into the unconditioned, Nirvana; this is a very subtle level of subjective awareness that is a complete surrender into nonduality, in ways that are very similar to Advaita Vedanta in the Hindu tradition.
2. **Equanimity as specific neutrality** This describes the specific rendering of equanimity in terms of some of the sankharas that are present in every moment of consciousness: one-pointedness, vitality, and attention. One-pointedness is the moment that all the formations reach their ultimate manifestation, vitality is the liveliness of that moment which propels consciousness into the next formation, and attention is the moment this aggregation pops into awareness. Equanimity is manifested as a totally balanced and coordinated relinquishment of even these formations.
3. **Equanimity of jhana** There is a highly refined level of highly trained and concentrated awareness that is pre-eminent in Theravada Buddhist doctrine called *jhana* (jah-nah). Certain identifiable characteristic signs of the four jhanas of form can be subjectively known, but are very difficult for most people to experience for a variety of reasons. The primary characteristics of the highest of the jhanas of form are *mindfulness* and *equanimity*. Subjectively, the experience completely disregards any embodied sensational stimulation, with unwavering attention, with a balanced flow of entirely mental phenomena of a very refined nature. The commentaries also describe for additional formless jhanas, which are subsets of the fourth jhana of form.
4. **Equanimity of purification** This represents the combined actions of mindfulness and equanimity, which are predominant when a meditator emerges from the fourth jhana back into the flow of selfing experience—the mind is fully prepared for the practice of vipassana (vee-pah-sah-nah), direct knowledge of impermanence, the absence of and enduring/autonomous self, and the distress and confusion resulting from craving and clinging. This purified way of being leads to Nirvana.

These 10 descriptions of equanimity are subtle and “nit-picking” in terms of determining their usefulness. Here is what Anne Murphy writes, quoting the Visuddhimagga, regarding this issue:

Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa states that six of these ten kinds of equanimity are one or the same in meaning. These six kinds are the six-factored equanimity: equanimity as a *brahma-vihāra*, an enlightenment factor, as specific neutrality, of *jhāna*, and purifying equanimity. He elaborates that their difference is one of position and likens this to a person being either a boy, youth, adult, a general, a king, and so on (*Vsm* IV 167). For example, equanimity as an enlightenment factor cannot be found where there is a six-factored equanimity, just as a six-factored equanimity cannot be found where there is equanimity as an enlightenment factor. Equanimity about formations and equanimity about insight are also considered the same in meaning, but are distinctly classified in two ways

according to their function (*Vsm* IV 167). However, equanimity of energy and equanimity as a feeling are considered entirely different from each other and from all the other kinds of equanimity (*Vsm* IV 170).

In sum, while the practice of equanimity might be generally considered uninteresting or even rather boring, with some analysis of the commentaries, one learns that equanimity is indeed a deeply profound and beautiful state of mind with many facets in its application.

The cultivation of equanimity is a primary goal for our practice of mindfulness meditation. A basic requirement for this cultivation is the development of mindfulness, the ability to investigate in and ongoing way what is emerging into consciousness and repeatedly disregard unwholesome states of mind while nurturing wholesome one. Practically speaking, it can be quite profitable to practice not reacting to uncomfortable stimuli such as an itch, aching back, etc. these physical stimuli are interpreted by the mind as a strong threat, which is not the case. Tempering the mind to just let the unpleasant sensation play out—not scratch the itch or alter posture to ease an aching back (except to correct posture) cultivates equanimity. Deliberately letting someone else “have their way” without objection provides an opportunity to cultivate equanimity regarding formations. As this development progresses, there is a deepening, direct knowledge of the benefits of a balanced awareness and serene mind for improving one’s quality of life, enhancing the ability to function effectively in relationships and to explore the joyful characteristics that emerge from spiritual practice. I hope these notes are helpful in that regard.