The Benefits Of Equanimity

Equanimity, which is termed upekkha in Pali, has a very important function in the process of Awakening. In the context of this recent series of talks, it is the fourth of the Brahma Viharas, the Diving Abidings; it brings balance to metta (lovingkindness), karuna (compassion) and mudita (sympathetic joy, delight in the happiness of others). It is also one of the Seven Awakening Factors (Sambojjhanga in Pali). It is also understood as representing the fulfillment of the Paramis, the qualities of mind that are perfections of mental development. Equanimity is also the defining characteristic of the Fourth Material Jhana, an extraordinarily stable and peaceful flow of experience.

In this talk I want to review equanimity from the different perspectives represented by the above categories. Before describing each understanding I want to suggest the equanimity is not a “productive” factor such as mindfulness or renunciation; rather it is the result of the effective application of the productive factors. Buddhism is often described as “the Middle Way”, a quality of mental and behavioral expression that doesn’t go to extremes. Here is a quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi from Wikipedia that describes the characteristics of upekkha:

"The real meaning of upekkha is equanimity, not [indifference](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indifference_(emotion)) in the sense of unconcern for others. As a spiritual virtue, upekkha means stability in the face of the fluctuations of worldly fortune. It is evenness of [mind](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind), unshakeable [freedom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_(philosophy)) of mind, a state of inner equipoise that cannot be upset by gain and loss, honor and dishonor, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. *Upekkha* is freedom from all points of self-reference; it is indifference only to the demands of the ego-self with its craving for pleasure and position, not to the well-being of one's fellow human beings. True equanimity is the pinnacle of the four social attitudes that the Buddhist texts call the '[divine abodes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahma-viharas)': boundless [loving-kindness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metta), [compassion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karu%E1%B9%87%C4%81), [altruistic joy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mudita), and equanimity. The last does not override and negate the preceding three, but perfects and consummates them." (from “For A Threshold Of Understanding”, found at the Access To Insight website).

In this regard another synonymous term, tatramajjhatata, is important. Here is what Bhikkhu Bodhi writes about this quality:

The Pali term for this cetasika literally means "there in the middleness." It is a synonym for equanimity ([upekkha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upekkha)), not as neutral feeling, but as a mental attitude of balance, detachment, and impartiality. It has the characteristic of conveying consciousness and the mental factors evenly. Its function is to prevent deficiency and excess, or to prevent partiality. It is manifested as neutrality. It should be seen as the state of looking on with equanimity in the citta and cetasikas, like a charioteer who looks on with equanimity at the thoroughbreds progressing evenly along the roadway. (A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, pp 86-7)

This graphic might display the “middleness” manifestation of equanimity:

Energy/Effort

The unwholesome potential is restlessness

Mindfulness

Investigation/Renunciation

The unwholesome potential is skeptical doubt

Concentration/Stability of Mind

The unwholesome potential is mental rigidity and attachment to view

Equanimity/Balance

Tranquility/Relaxation

The unwholesome potential is sloth and torpor

Mindfulness

Thereis a dynamic shifting between polarities in the process—between the stability of one’s focused attention and the ability to investigate the mind’s function and renounce unwholesome attachment. Too much concentration creates rigidity and the inability to let go of unwholesome self-state organizations. When investigation is unskillfully applied, the result is the hindrance of skeptical doubt. Another polarity is the manifestation of energy—always present in the mind’s function. Too much energy manifests as the hindrance of restlessness and too much tranquility manifests as the hindrance of sloth and torpor. When these polarities are dynamically balanced in the “flow state” of vipassana practice, tatramajjhattata manifests.

This balancing effect applies to the four Brahma Viharas regarding what are called the “far enemies” (opposing unwholesome self-state organizations) and the ‘near enemies” (self-state organizations that seem to represent each of them but are actually unwholesome). Here are each of them, beginning with upekkha, as understanding the far and near enemies is crucial for the appropriate manifestation of the other three:

UPEKKHA: The far enemy of equanimity is the manifestation of sense desire or aversion and ill-will. The near enemy is emotional flatness or apathy. In the case of the far enemy, the absence of equanimity represents full identification with the self-state organization prompted by craving and clinging. The antidote for the far enemy of equanimity is the cultivation of insight, that is, the ability to notice quickly and accurately the setting in of desire or aversion and renouncing their domination. The antidote for the near enemy is the cultivation of insight regarding falling into subtle dullness and bringing more energy into investigation so that you are equanimous and non-reactive regarding craving and clinging.

METTA: The far enemy of lovingkindness is aversion and ill-will. The near enemy is attachment to outcome regarding expressing kindness (We often express kindness conditionally, expecting some recognition and “return on the investment” of kindness; when that isn’t forthcoming, it is easy to fall into aversion and ill-will). Once again, insight into the arising of aversion and ill-will and denying the craving and clinging associated is drained of its excitement and energy through upekkha. The antidote for the near enemy is to be mindful of the identification of kindness as requiring recognition and appreciation and to maintain the balance suggested in the graphic above.

KARUNA: The far enemy of compassion is harshness and cruelty. Harshness is the manifestation of misfortune—illness, injury, the loss of a loved one or the consequences of a natural disaster. Cruelty is the production of harm by another person’s intentional aversion and ill-will or greed. The near enemy of compassion is pity. The antidote for the far enemy is the direct awareness of the sense of isolation and vulnerability that comes with harshness and cruelty and the willingness to take appropriate action to alleviate the distress and confusion when possible. As with metta, the manifestation of the balancing function of upekkha supports rational responses, preventing misapplication of resources or compassion fatigue. The antidote for the near enemy is insight regarding the interpersonal isolation that occurs, not just for the person who is suffering but also for oneself, as pity creates a separation—“you poor thing” attitude. A better understanding overcomes the separation and applies this aphorism “There but for the grace of God go I”. It is beneficial to provide food for someone; however, the best application is to share a meal with her or him, overcoming the isolation.

MUDITA: Sympathetic joy is the empathic attunement and resonance with another’s happiness. The far enemy of sympathetic joy is jealousy and envy. When we feel contented and equanimous regarding our life’s purpose and accomplishment, there is an opening to enjoy another’s happiness whether it is to our benefit or not. When one’s life is lacking equanimity, there is craving and clinging that identifies another’s happiness as a personal loss, a feeling that having what the other person is experiencing is necessary for one’s personal success or fulfillment. Equanimity in this case involves investigation of craving and clinging as mental rigidity, and denying its power through cultivating tranquility and joy with a willingness to celebrate another’s happiness, to “Hitch a ride” on their success. The near enemy is an imbalance, a pretense regarding another’s happiness while feeling some residual jealousy and envy. The antidote for that is the same as with overcoming the far enemy, that is, investigating the presence or absence of craving and clinging in the experience of another’s happiness.