

What is Equanimity?

Introduction

Equanimity is a fundamental skill for self-exploration and emotional intelligence. It is a deep and subtle concept frequently misunderstood and easily confused with suppression of feeling, apathy or inexpressiveness.

Equanimity comes from the Latin word *aequus* meaning balanced, and *animus* meaning spirit or internal state. As an initial step in understanding this concept, let's consider for a moment its opposite: what happens when a person loses internal balance.

In the physical world we say a person has lost balance if they fall to one side or another. In the same way a person loses internal balance if they fall into one or the other of the following contrasting reactions:

- Suppression – A state of thought/feeling arises and we attempt to cope with it by stuffing it down, denying it, tightening around it, etc.
- Identification – A state of thought/feeling arises and we fixate it, hold onto it inappropriately, not letting it arise, spread and pass with its natural rhythm.

Between suppression on one side and identification on the other lies a third possibility, the balanced state of non-self-interference...equanimity.

How to Develop Equanimity

Developing equanimity involves the following aspects:

- Intentionally creating equanimity in your body
- Intentionally creating equanimity in your mind
- Noticing when you spontaneously drop into states of equanimity

Intentionally Creating Equanimity in Your Body

This is essentially equivalent to attempting to maintain a continuous relaxed state over your whole body as sensations (pleasant, unpleasant, strong, subtle, physical, emotional) wash through.

Intentionally Creating Equanimity in Your Mind

This means attempting to let go of negative judgments about what you are experiencing and replacing them with an attitude of loving acceptance and gentle matter-of-factness.

Let me give you a tangible example of how equanimity can be created in your body and mind. Let's say that you have a strong sensation in one part of your body. As you focus attention on what is happening over your whole body, you notice that you are tensing your jaw, clenching

your fists, tightening your gut, and squinting your shoulders. Each time you become aware of tensing in some area, you intentionally relax it to whatever degree possible. A moment later you may notice that the tensing has started again in some area; once again gently relax it to whatever degree possible. If there are areas that cannot be relaxed much or at all, you try to accept the tension sensations and just observe them.

As a result of maintaining this whole-body relaxed state, you may begin to notice subtle flavors of sensation spreading from the local area of intensity and coursing through your body. These are the sensations that you had been masking by tension. Now that they have been uncovered, try to create a mental attitude of welcoming them, not judging them. Observe them with gentle matter-of-factness, giving them permission to dance their dance, to flow as they wish through your body.

Noticing When you Spontaneously Drop into States of Equanimity

From time to time, as we are passing through various experiences, we simply “fall into” states of relative equanimity. If we are alert to this whenever it happens and use it as an opportunity to explore the nature of equanimity, then it will happen more frequently and last longer.

For example, let's say that you have been working with a physical discomfort. At some point you notice that even though the discomfort level itself has not changed, it somehow seems to bother you less. Upon investigation you realize that you have spontaneously fallen into a state of gentle matter-of-factness. By being alert to this and by exploring the state, you are training your subconscious to produce the state more frequently.

The Effects of Equanimity

Equanimity belies the adage that you cannot “have your cake and eat it too.” When you apply equanimity to unpleasant sensations, they flow more readily and as a result cause less suffering. When you apply equanimity to pleasant sensations, they also flow more readily and as a result deliver deeper fulfillment. The same skill positively affects both sides of the sensation picture. Hence the following equation:

$$\text{Psycho-spiritual Purification} = (\text{Pain} \times \text{Equanimity}) + (\text{Pleasure} \times \text{Equanimity})$$

Furthermore, when feelings are experienced with equanimity, they assure their proper function as motivators and directors of behavior as opposed to driving and distorting behavior. Thus equanimity plays a critical role in changing negative behaviors such as substance and alcohol abuse, compulsive eating, anger, violence, and so forth.

Equanimity, Apathy and Suppression

Equanimity involves non-interference with the natural flow of subjective sensation. Apathy implies indifference to the controllable outcome of objective events. Thus, although seemingly similar, equanimity and apathy are actually opposites. Equanimity frees up internal energy for responding to external situations. By definition, equanimity involves radical permission to feel and as such is the opposite of suppression. As far as external expression of feeling is concerned, internal equanimity gives one the freedom to externally express or not, depending on what is

appropriate to the situation. (For a schematic chart of these relationships, see *How Should a Meditator Express Emotion?*)

Passion and Dispassion

Passion is an ambiguous word with at least four meanings:

- Deep perception of feeling
- Unhindered expression of deep feeling
- Dynamic behavior that rides on deep feeling
- Suffering and behavior distortion caused by feeling that is experienced incompletely (that is to say without sufficient equanimity)

Due to this ambiguity, one could validly claim that people become more passionate as they learn to be dispassionate.

Physical Analogies for Equanimity

Developing equanimity is analogous to:

- Reducing friction in a mechanical system (Equanimity = $1/F$)
- Reducing viscosity in a hydrodynamic system (Equanimity = $1/V$)
- Reducing resistance in a DC circuit (Equanimity = $1/R$)
- Reducing impedance in an AC circuit (Equanimity = $1/Z$)
- Reducing stiffness in a spring (Equanimity = $1/K$)
- A solution being *thixotropic* as opposed to *rheopectic*

Extending these metaphors, perfect equanimity would be analogous to becoming a superconductive super fluid.

Another Synonym for Equanimity

Love.

Equanimity in Christianity

Early and Medieval Christianity placed a great value on equanimity. Indeed it was considered one of the primary Christian virtues. This is because Christianity viewed itself as a path of radical spiritual cleansing (*katharsis*), with equanimity as the main tool for achieving this goal. The church fathers, who wrote primarily in Greek, had three words for equanimity:

Nepsis: “Sober observation”

Ataraxia: “Freedom from upset”

Apathia: “Dispassion” (N.B. *Apathia* does not equal apathy!)

In Christianity, the theory of purification through equanimity constituted a major branch of spiritual study known technically as “ascetical theology.”

Equanimity in Judaism and Islam

The Hebrew word for equanimity is *hashlamah*, which is directly related to the word for peace (*shalom*) and the word for completeness (*shlemut*). In a sense the entire spiritual path is contained within the three Hebrew letters shin-lamed-mem (*sh-l-m*): When one is fully present (*shalem*) and equanimous (*hashlamah*) with what is, then what is presents itself as God's peace (*shalom*).

The term *Islam* is usually interpreted to mean the peace that comes with surrender. It is the Arabic cognate of the Hebrew word *hashlamah*. A Muslim is literally “one who has become equanimous.”