

# Upekkhā: The Most Important Virtue

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 5 min read

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Ven. Nyanaponika, the German monk, who founded the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy wrote what is still a classic: *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. He also wrote *A Vision of the Dhamma* and there he says Equanimity is the most important of all the virtues. So what are the qualities of Equanimity, *upekkhā*? The word has *animus* as its basis. *Animus* is part of the trilogy that makes up a sentient being: *corpus/body*, *animus/heart and mind* and *spiritus/spirit* or as we would say Nibbana or the Buddha Within. We tend to think the mind with thoughts and imaginings and the heart with emotions and moods to be separate, but they work together. Perception always arises with feeling and vice versa. So, equanimity has two sides - an intellectual and an emotional side. Intellectually it means not to hold on tightly to any view or opinion, but to see whatever one believes is but a perspective. It limits the conceit of I am right and everyone else is wrong! Emotionally it means that we are not biased by acquisitiveness, aversion, fear or preference. These are the qualities you would expect of a judge – not to be seduced by bribery or some sort of personal gain, not to be swayed by clever arguments from lawyers, not to be afraid of threats, not to be biased towards the accused by dislike or aversion and have no preference as to the verdict of the jury. It leads to composure, to an unruffled poise. This becomes obvious when we consider the Climate Crisis. What I do that affects the climate impacts on every other being and vice versa. Equanimity prevents us from becoming panicking preppers, people who are building up supplies and bunkers for future disasters. It undermines fear and anxiety of imagined future scenarios, although frankly what's happening to temperatures, fires and floods doesn't leave much to the imagination. It stops us from being angry with deniers and helps us maintain an attitude of whatever the outcome I shall remain true to my principles. This has been tackled by Noirin in her Tips for the Newsbyte around the Six Maxims. This attitude naturally develops a calmness, a tranquillity, an inner composure, a serenity. As to all the other social virtues, the balanced heart and mind, stops them falling into their subtle enemy. *Metta*, love or goodwill, can easily fall into attachment whereby we become dependent on the other, possessing them and presuming them to always please us; compassion can be distorted by pity, feeling sorry for someone which may mean we give them preferential attention or if in the caring services preferential treatment, and there is also the danger of falling into the do-gooder trap; joy easily slips into excitement. We've all had the experience of a party or holiday where we have said we must do this again and the second time it has lost the sparkle. Equanimous joy stops us believing we can repeat experiences. It means we can just enjoy something, appreciate it and then let it go. Equanimity stops courage falling into foolhardiness; humility from becoming humbleness, false self-effacement. Take any virtue and equanimity will stop it falling into its subtle enemy. Equanimity, however, also has its subtle enemy and passes off as cool indifference, aloofness, apathy, a lack of concern. The antidote is the applicable virtue. If

we feel we lack a sense of caring, for instance, we can develop it through a compassion contemplation.

**Factors of Enlightenment.** The Seven Factors of Awakening or Enlightenment are headed by Sati/Awareness. One teacher said that if you were to choose one word to encapsulate the Buddha's teaching it would be Sati! This is the supremely important Factor. All other factors are there to establish Right or Correct Awareness. They are paired to balance each other. Focus or steadiness of attention needs a steady Effort. Interest or curiosity needs to be prevented from becoming excited by Calmness. The Investigation of the Dhamma in vipassana is to clearly see The Three Characteristics of Existence – impermanence, how we create suffering for ourselves, self-inflicted dukkha, and not-self. This is made possible by Equanimity which stops us from becoming emotionally reactive or investigating with some preconceived idea or concept in the mind. Equanimity allows us to stand apart, objective to whatever we are experiencing. It allows the investigative, intuitive intelligence, pañña, to come from a place where it is not being distorted by acquisitiveness, aversion and delusion! In daily life, these Seven Factors express themselves in how we speak, behave and work. It is the quality of equanimity as a base line that keeps us from over-reacting and supports wise response.

**Vipassana:** During vipassana practice, what we are specifically investigating are those Three Characteristics of Existence – impermanence, how we cause suffering for ourselves, dukkha and not-self. We are undermining the delusion which manifests as experiencing continuity especially the sense of self always being there, seeking ways to establish happiness as best and as long as we can, and having a persisting sense that this I, that I sense to be, is really real. Equanimity, especially around these tightly held views, is needed for our effort is to see these delusive perceptions for what they are. Such equanimity rests upon certain virtues. There must be that interest that finds the investigation fascinating and the courage to look where we may experience truths that frighten us for they undermine that sense of self, 'who I am'. As insights arise, these virtues are strengthened and so the process of vipassana, to see and understand the causes of unsatisfactoriness, becomes even more alluring. From a transcendent viewpoint, all human beings are seeking the end of Dukkha, suffering and unsatisfactoriness. Since what prevents them to achieve this is a delusion, it is inevitable that at some time, the veil of misunderstanding will fall away for the Dukkha itself forces us to seek the end of Dukkha. And that is what we mean by Nibbana, unshackling the bonds that bind us to Samsara, the relentless cycles of days, months, years and lifetimes, driven by the insatiable Self. So we can see equanimity is as the base line as on a cardiogram. Whatever the strength or rapidity of the beat, the heart always falls to a resting place. How can we develop this virtue in daily life? As usual there has to be some practice that begins to develop an attitude. We are all familiar with the Metta Practice. So, in the same way we choose a set of words and begin to wish these qualities for ourselves and all the categories we go through with Metta. May I be :

- Calm– this refers to a physical relaxation, loosening bodily tensions and with it calming the heart. Using the outbreath to relax.
- Peace-loving– this refers to the attitude of always wanting to engender an underlying sense of safety and peacefulness
- Open– this refers to our attitude towards others, receiving their opinions, even if supported with strong emotion and not refusing to listen, but to engage.
- Composed– this is our basic posture, a serene, unruffled poise (as best we can!)

You may think of other qualities to add. Once you have your set of attributes, go through all the

categories. Then, the hard bit, taking it out into daily life. Keep drawing ourselves down into that composed state – before eating, before meeting, before a phone call, before doing anything. It is just another habit, like any other habit we can develop it if we will it.

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