



Do Not Disturb

*If you are distressed by anything external,
the pain is not due to the thing itself but
to your judgment of it; and this you have
the power to revoke at any moment.*

Marcus Aurelius

IT MAY BE THE MOST FAMOUS OF Zen stories, often used in self-improvement courses to extol the virtues of equanimity.

In one of many versions, a poor farmer discovers that the only horse he owns has escaped from the barn and run away. His neighbors gather around, exclaiming, “What bad luck! Now you have no horse to help you get around.” But the old farmer just smiles and quietly replies, “Is that so?”

A few days later the horse unexpectedly returns, bringing with it two other wild horses, and the neighbors all rejoice, exclaiming, “What good luck! Now you have *three* horses!” But once again the farmer just smiles and says “Is that so?”

A few days later, the man’s son is thrown off one of the wild horses and breaks his leg. The neighbors come around again, saying, “What bad luck! Now your son won’t be able to help you work in the fields!”

By now the neighbors are all scratching their heads, thinking the poor old man must be losing his mind, but once again the farmer just smiles politely, saying, “Is that so?”

The very next day the army enters the village and conscripts every able-bodied man to fight in the war, but they pass by the farmer’s son, owing to his injury. Knowing their own sons will likely never return alive, the neighbors finally understand what the old farmer was trying to tell them.

By not judging experiences as good or bad, not needing to justify or defend himself, the farmer displays *equanimity*, a virtue highly prized in both Stoicism and Buddhism.

While it sounds like it might indeed have something to do with horses, the word ‘equanimity’ actually combines the Latin words *aequus* (*level*) and *animus* (*spirit*). The result implies that balance of mind is a key factor in the ability to stay calm and composed even in a challenging situation.

Learning to focus on what you can control and let go of what you cannot leads to much greater peace of mind. But just as important, the opposite is also true: The more calm and centered the mind is, the easier it is to see which of these two is the case, as well as to make better decisions under pressure.

Equanimity (called *ataraxia* in Stoicism) provides one with protection from what Buddhists call the Eight Worldly Winds: praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, and fame and disrepute. (Attachment to praise can lead to conceit, blame to arrogance, success to complacency, and failure to discouragement.)

Similarly, two words in ancient Pali refer to the state of equanimity: *uppekkha* and *tatramajjhata*. *Upekkha* means *to look over*, and refers to a quality of discernment that arises from the power of observation—in other words, the ability to keenly see, but without being caught up in *what* one sees. (The great Tibetan Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Han referred to this ‘looking over’ in terms of a person climbing a mountain in order to look over the whole situation, to avoid being bound by one side or the other.)

The compound word *atramajjhata* translates as *to stand in the middle of all this*, and refers to this ability to remain calm in the middle of whatever is happening.

Maintaining equanimity is like keeping one’s boat on an ‘even keel’—stable and balanced to assure smooth sailing and to remain unswayed by the winds of change.

Like the ballast that keeps a boat upright in strong winds, having inner calm and equanimity gives one the confidence to face whatever comes one’s way with a clear mind.

These two forms of equanimity, the power of keen observation and the quality of inner balance and detachment, come together most perfectly in mindfulness practice.

As we become more mindful we grow in equanimity, which in time becomes an inner strength that helps keep us balanced in the middle of all that is happening around us.

Equanimity is sometimes seen as implying emotional coldness, impassiveness, or aloofness, but this is a misunderstanding. In reality, equanimity applies not only to the mind, but equally as well to the heart.

For example, if a compassionate person sees someone in pain, they may be tempted to become reactive to the person’s suffering, potentially even becoming codependent or wrapped up in trying to ‘fix’ the situation.

Equanimity allows one to fully empathise with someone in distress and feel sincere concern, but to maintain the detachment and presence of mind often necessary to actually help improve the person’s situation.

In this respect, it’s helpful to make a clear distinction between equanimity and apathy or indifference, which are obstacles to wisdom. Equanimity simply means not getting caught up in one’s preferences, abandoning attachment to what one might like or dislike, and resting the mind in an acceptance of things just as they are.

Equanimity doesn’t diminish the joys of life, but enhances them. It simply keeps us from clinging to them and trying to make them stay, which always results in suffering.

The Buddha described a mind filled with equanimity as “abundant, immeasurable, and exalted, without hostility or ill-will.” ■