

Equanimity: The Fourth Abode — Joan Halifax Roshi

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The fourth boundless abode, equanimity, is the perfect partner of compassion. Equanimity is the stability of mind that allows us to be present with an open heart no matter how wonderful or difficult conditions are. It is said that the boundless qualities of lovingkindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy stem from equanimity.

Equanimity is grounded in the experience of letting go. The world in and around us is constantly changing. One moment your brother is alive; the next moment he is dead in a car accident. One morning you feel a lump in your breast, and your life changes in a way that you cannot avoid. One afternoon the doctor says that you have inoperable cancer with three months to live. The following year, free of cancer, you are putting your life together again.

What kind of mind and heart can stay strong and open and not fall prey to conditioned reactions? Can we grieve fully and not cling to our grief? Can we feel the post-operative pain and not cling to it? Can we be with the unknowable and open to trust at the same time? The mind that has realized the truth of change and the truth of cause and effect, what Buddhists call karma, can do this. Planting seeds of kindness, love, compassion, and joy helps us ride the waves of change without drowning.

Equanimity is the capacity to be in touch with suffering and at the same time not be swept away by it. It is the strong back that supports the soft front of compassion. These interdependent qualities are the foundation for effective work with suffering. Equanimity allows us that radiant calm, peace, and trust that receive the world and at the same time make it possible for us to let go of the world.

This traditional equanimity meditation helps us remember the truth of the nature of impermanence and cause and effect: "All beings are owners of their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their actions, not on my wishes for them." This might sound a little hard, a little ruthless, but it is true. Equanimity is ruthless compassion.