



ColomboArts

Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

Volume II | Issue 2

2017

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Recommended Citation

Murphy, A. (2017). "The Ten Kinds of Equanimity (*Upekkhā*)". *ColomboArts Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, Volume II, Issue 2*.

Available at: <http://colomboarts.cmb.ac.lk/?p=278>

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Abstract

Upekkhā has been translated from Pali as “hedonic neutrality or indifference,” the “zero point between joy and sorrow,” and “disinterestedness, neutral feeling, equanimity.” In Buddhist philosophy, equanimity (*upekkhā*) is most typically recognised as one of the four *brahma-vihāras* (also *mettā*, *karuṇā*, and *muditā*). In meditation practice, equanimity is also commonly known as the faculty most prominent when experiencing the fourth *jhāna*. However, in the commentaries of the *Atthasālinī* and the *Visuddhimagga*, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa defines equanimity in ten different ways. These ten kinds of equanimity are: a) six-factored equanimity, b) equanimity as a *brahma-vihāra*, c) equanimity as an enlightenment factor, d) equanimity of energy, e) equanimity about formations, f) equanimity as a feeling, g) equanimity about insight, h) equanimity as specific neutrality, i) equanimity of *jhāna*, j) equanimity of purification. This article will discuss each of these ten kinds of equanimity in detail, sourced from the canonical literature, for a multifaceted understanding of the faculty of equanimity. This discussion raises the question why, in both commentaries, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa placed such an emphasis on equanimity as a faculty to be cultivated. It is proposed here that it is because, according to the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, the faculties of mindfulness and equanimity were most predominant in his mind when the Buddha comprehended the three knowledges and became fully enlightened. Thus, while the mental practice of equanimity, in general, might be considered uninteresting, with some reading of the canonical literature, equanimity may be appreciated as a deeply profound and beautiful state of mind with multiple facets in its application.

Keywords: Equanimity, *Upekkhā*, *Atthasālinī*, *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhist Psychology

Introduction

According to the Pali Text Society *Pali-English Dictionary*, *upekkhā* is defined as “hedonic neutrality or indifference,” the “zero point between joy and sorrow,” and “disinterestedness, neutral feeling, equanimity” (Rhys Davids & Stede, 2015, p. 134). In Buddhism, equanimity (*upekkhā*) is most typically recognised as one of the *brahma-vihāras*. For meditators, equanimity is commonly known as the faculty most prominent when experiencing the fourth *jhāna*. As one of the *brahma-vihāras*, *upekkhā* is defined in the *Visuddhimagga* as “promoting the aspect of neutrality towards beings” (*Visuddhimagga [Vsm] IX 96*). However, in the commentaries of the *Atthasālinī* and the *Visuddhimagga*, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa defines equanimity in ten different ways:

1. Six-factored equanimity
2. Equanimity as a *brahma-vihāra*
3. Equanimity as an enlightenment factor
4. Equanimity of energy
5. Equanimity about formations
6. Equanimity as a feeling

7. Equanimity about insight
8. Equanimity as specific neutrality
9. Equanimity of jhāna
10. Equanimity of purification (*Vsm* IV 156-166)

Each of these ten kinds of equanimity will be discussed in detail, drawing on the commentaries, for a multifaceted understanding of this most profound state of mind.

The Ten Kinds of Equanimity

Six-factored equanimity

The six-factored equanimity links *upekkhā* to each of the six senses: “Having seen a form with the eye, a monk is neither joyful nor saddened, but dwells equanimous, mindful, and clearly comprehending...” (*Āṅguttara Nikāya [AN]* III 279). This phrase repeats for each sense associating the sense organ to its corresponding function: “heard a sound with the ear,” “smelled an odour with the nose,” “experienced a taste with the tongue,” “felt a tactile object with the body,” and “cognized a mental phenomenon with the mind” (*AN* III 279).

Here, equanimity is said to arise concomitantly with mindfulness and clear comprehension. Moreover, the Buddha states that when a monk possesses these six qualities, the monk is worthy of receiving gifts, hospitality, offerings, and reverential salutation, and emits an unsurpassed field of merit for the world (*AN* III 279).

In the *Visuddhimagga*, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa enumerates that the six-factored equanimity is the name for the equanimity possessed by the arahant, “one whose cankers are destroyed” (*Vsm* IV 157; *AN* III 279). He describes this as “the mode of non-abandonment of the natural state of purity when desirable or undesirable objects of the six kinds come into focus in the six doors” (*Vsm* IV 157). In other words, this sublime mental state maintains equanimity, mindfulness, and clear awareness, irrespective of the interaction between the six senses and their corresponding sense-based objects.

Following from this, the canonical literature makes a clear distinction between the life of the householder and the renunciant (or monk) in relation to the six kinds of equanimity. The householder is an untaught ordinary person who has not conquered his limitations or conquered the results [of action] and who is blind to danger. Such equanimity as this does

not transcend the form; that is why it is called equanimity based on the householder life. (*Majjhima Nikāya [MN]* iii 219)

However, equanimity is said to arise within a renunciant who has developed an understanding of impermanence and suffering, knowing that all is subject to change. Thus, the six kinds of equanimity are based on the renunciant life (*MN* iii 219). Here, the concept of equanimity is differentiated, with its conventional sense based on the ordinary householder life, while the six-factored equanimity which surpasses the sensory world belongs to the accomplished renunciant.

Equanimity as a *brahma-vihāra*

Here, *upekkhā* is listed as one of the four *brahma-vihāras*, which also includes loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and sympathetic-joy (*muditā*).

He dwells suffusing the whole world, upwards, downwards, across, everywhere, always with a heart filled with equanimity, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill-will. (*Dīgha Nikāya [DN]* i 251)

In the *Visuddhimagga*, equanimity is defined as “promoting the aspect of neutrality towards beings,” which supersedes feelings of resentment or approval directed at others (*Vsm* IX 96) and, therefore, nullifies subjective personal preferences or prejudice. Moreover, equanimity is said to help overcome greed (*DN* iii 248) and resentment (*Vsm* IX 101). Thus, as a *brahma-vihāra*, *upekkhā* is unbiased and devoid of any discriminatory treatment towards others, being neither negative nor overly positive. The faculty of equanimity transcends the detrimental effects of bias and prejudice, which cause harm to others. Therefore, the cultivation of equanimity as an impartiality practice has important implications in relation to entrenched biases.

Equanimity as a *brahma-vihāra* is described as the outcome of the first three *brahma-vihāras* (*Vsm* IX 104), which are altruistic and other-focused expressions. In this way, it is compared to building the gable rafters of a roof, which first requires the scaffolding and the framework of beams. In other words, without the foundational faculties of loving-kindness, sympathetic-joy, and compassion, equanimity could easily be misconstrued and regress into maladaptive mind states, such as insensitivity and emotional callousness. While the faculty of equanimity builds upon the three altruistic *brahma-vihāras*, conversely, equanimity is said to fail when it produces an equanimity of unknowing, which is called a worldly

indifference of ignorance (*Vsm* IX 96). This statement clearly implies that equanimity as a *brahma-vihāra* is connected to the other three altruistic *brahma-vihāras* and, therefore, when expressed authentically cannot denigrate into a mind state of worldly indifference.

Equanimity as an Enlightenment Factor

Equanimity is listed as one of the seven enlightenment factors (*bojjhanga*). These are:

1. Mindfulness (*sati*)
2. Investigation of states (*dhammavicaya*)
3. Energy (*virīya*)
4. Rapture (*pīti*)
5. Tranquility (*passaddhi*)
6. Concentration (*samādhi*)
7. Equanimity (*upekkhā*)

The seven enlightenment factors are said to be developed to abandon the defilements, annoyances, and passions of the world, and are supported by seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, ripening with renunciation (*MN* i 11). The enlightenment factors are not linear but multidimensional and interdependent. For instance, equanimity as an enlightenment factor supports mindfulness and helps boost energy. As such, an equanimous mind balances faith, energy, mindfulness, and concentration, helping to regulate emotion (*Dhammajīva*, 2011, p. 34-38). Thus, equanimity as an enlightenment factor is interwoven and interrelated with the other enlightenment factors, contributing towards and upholding the mind of the enlightened being.

Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa states that there are five things leading to the equanimity enlightenment factor:

1. The maintenance of neutrality towards living beings
2. The maintenance of neutrality towards formations (inanimate things)
3. Avoidance of persons who show favouritism towards beings and formations
4. Cultivation of persons who maintain neutrality towards beings and formations; and,
5. Resoluteness upon that equanimity (*Vsm* IV 62)

Here, a steadfast commitment to maintaining complete neutrality, including the seeking of others with the same objective, is advocated. On the surface, this may appear contradictory

to Buddhaghosa's statement regarding equanimity as the outcome of the other three *brahmvihāras* (*Vsm* IX 104). However equanimity as an enlightenment factor is the attainment of emotional balance that has been developed from cultivating a wise mind and a gentle heart (*Dhammajīva*, 2011, p. 37).

Equanimity of energy

Equanimity of energy is the midway point of energy between the two opposing mental states of laziness and restlessness, as explained below.

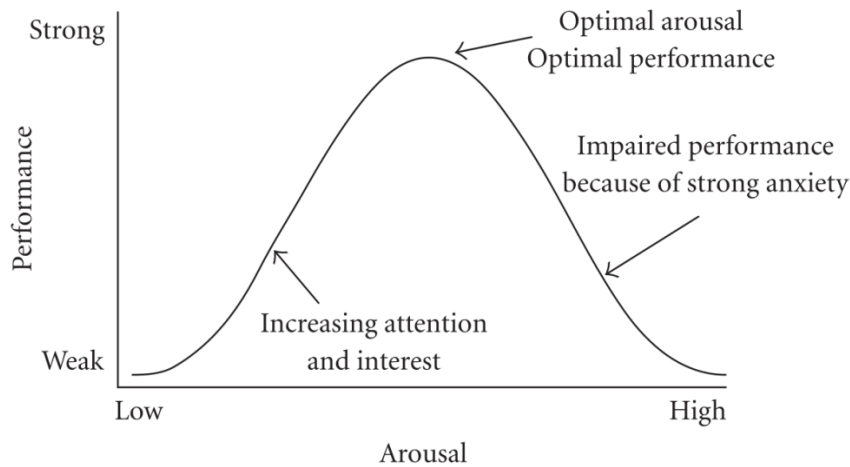
When a Bhikkhu devoted to the higher mind from time to time gives attention to the mark of concentration, from time to time to the mark of exertion, and from time to time to the mark of equanimity, his mind becomes malleable, wieldy, and luminous, pliant and properly concentrated for the destruction of the taints (*AN* I 257).

Here, equanimity has a pivotal role in meditation practice to find the optimal point of concentration to help overcome the opposing hindrances of restlessness or laziness: so, equanimity of energy balances energy, mindfulness, and concentration. Indeed, in meditation, it is difficult to develop mindfulness and concentration when one is feeling too restless or, conversely, when one is drowsy.

Therefore, equanimity of energy is the optimal performance point between low and high energy levels. In the *Soṇa Sutta*, the Buddha provides a beautiful analogy for equanimity of energy when explaining to the monk Soṇa that meditation practice requires a balance of energy like the strings on a lute which can be neither too tight nor too loose in order to be played properly:

if energy is aroused too forcefully this leads to restlessness, and if energy is too lax this leads to laziness. Therefore, Soṇa, resolve on a balance of energy, achieve evenness of the spiritual faculties, and take up the object there. (*AN* III 375)

Interestingly, the Buddha has aptly described the Yerkes-Dodson Law. The Yerkes-Dodson law, developed in 1908 by psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson, demonstrated that optimal performance is achieved at the midway point between high and low levels of physiological arousal (1908). This process is frequently depicted as a bell-shaped curve to depict the relationship between energy levels and performance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Yerkes-Dodson Law (Hebbian version)

Source: Diamond et al., (2007)

Equanimity about formations

In the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha*, the nine insight knowledges are listed as:

1. Knowledge of rise and fall
2. Knowledge of dissolution
3. Knowledge of the fearful
4. Knowledge of danger
5. Knowledge of disenchantment
6. Knowledge of desire for deliverance
7. Knowledge of reflective contemplation
8. Knowledge of equanimity towards formations
9. Knowledge of conformity (Bodhi, 1999, p. 352-54)¹

These nine insight knowledges are a progression of insights made known through experiential understanding of the three characteristics of *dukkha*, *anicca*, and *anattā*. Included here is the knowledge of equanimity about formations (*saṅkhār’upekkhāñāṇa*). The knowledge of equanimity towards formations arises from the realisation that the formations are not *me*, *I*, or *mine*, and thus, opposing states of attraction or aversion towards them are abandoned. Instead, equanimity as neither attraction-nor-aversion towards all

¹ Otherwise known as “purification by knowledge and vision of the way” (Bodhi, 1999, p. 352).

formations is developed (Bodhi, 1999, p. 353). Therefore, by knowledge of *anattā* (non-self), the extremes of terror and delight are abandoned, and equanimity, indifference, and neutrality are established towards all formations, the *saṅkhāras* (*Vsm XXI 62*).

In the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, equanimity about formations is further divided into two parts: a) arising through concentration (8 kinds) and b) arising through insight (10 kinds). The eight kinds arising through concentration are related to the eight *jhānas*. The ten kinds arising through insight are related to the four paths, the four fruitions, the void, and the signless abiding (*Paṭisambhidāmagga I 64*).

Equanimity about formations is said to predominately govern the difference in progress along the four paths (*Vsm XXI 119*). This statement from the *Visuddhimagga* implies that equanimity towards all formations (*saṅkhāras*) has an important function in the progression of spiritual development from the initial attainment of the path of stream-entry towards becoming an arahant. Moreover, it is supported by the *tilakkhaṇa*, which states, “*sabbe saṅkhāra dukkhāsabbe saṅkhāra aniccā sabbe dhamma anatta*” (*AN I 286; Dhammapada 277-279*). This generally translates to “all conditioned phenomena is suffering, all conditioned phenomena is impermanent, all phenomena is non-self.” All conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra*) is equated with suffering (*dukkhā*) and is impermanent (*aniccā*), whereas all phenomena (*dhamma*) is equated with the unconditioned state of non-self (*anattā*). Thus, the knowledge of all formations as *dukkhā* and *aniccā* leads to knowledge of the unconditioned state, *anattā*.

Equanimity as a feeling

In the Pali canon, feelings are classified into three kinds, pleasant, unpleasant, or neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant (*Samyutta Nikāya [SN] IV 204*). Equanimity as a feeling is described as follows: “...when a good thought concerning the sensual world has arisen, accompanied by equanimity, associated with knowledge, prompted by conscious motive” (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī [Dhs] VI 156*).

Equanimity as a feeling is the neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant (*adukkhamasukhā*) response rather than a pleasant or unpleasant feeling. The canonical teachings advise the abandonment of desire in response to pleasant feelings, the abandonment of aversion in response to unpleasant feelings, and the abandonment of ignorance regarding the neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant feelings. Otherwise, without a deeper understanding of the nature of feeling,

the natural tendency is to respond with attraction when experiencing a pleasant sensation and with aversion to a painful sensation. It is this underlying predilection that is acknowledged with the mindfulness of feeling meditation practice so that it may be attended to and fully understood (*SN* IV 205; *MN* i 303-304). Thus, equanimity as a feeling offers a haven of neutrality by mediating the ongoing vacillating of feelings between the opposing states of pleasant and unpleasant feelings.

Equanimity about insight

Equanimity about insight is “a name for equanimity consisting in neutrality about investigation” (*Vsm* IV 163). Below is a method suggested to develop an equanimous mind state in insight meditation by practicing and finally realizing the concept that, “It might not be, and it might not be mine. It will not be; it will not be mine. I am abandoning what exists, what has come to be” (*MN* ii 264-265; *AN* IV 70). This equanimous approach, which uses investigation to relinquish clinging to all attachments, precedes the profound realization that one is, “not attached to existence, not attached to origination, and sees with correct wisdom: there is a higher state that is peaceful” (*AN* IV 70). Moreover, one also remains unattached to that state of equanimity while practicing investigation in insight meditation:

Thus he obtains equanimity. He does not delight in that equanimity, welcome it, or remain holding to it. Since he does not do so, his consciousness does not become dependent on it and does not cling to it. A monk without clinging, Ānanda, attains Nibbāna. (*MN* ii 265)

This proclamation of becoming equanimous even about equanimity itself is a poignant reminder of the simile of the raft (*MN* i 135), the understanding that one even relinquishes the *dhmma* at the stage of realising the *dhmma* (*dhmmā pi pahātabbā*). Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa elaborates: “For equanimity about insight, which is neutrality about formations, arises strongly in him at that time. It is also equanimity in adverting in the mind door. For whatever the subject he adverts to, his adverting works” (*Vsm* XX 121). Thus, equanimity is used as a powerful mind tool in insight meditation to maintain neutrality towards all mental phenomenon that arise, while also engendering an attitude of detachment.

Equanimity as specific neutrality

Equanimity as specific neutrality is the “name for equanimity consisting in the equal efficiency of conascent states” (*Vsm* IV 164). The *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* defines 50 mental factors, the *sāṅkhāra*, and combined with *vedanā* (feeling) and *saññā* (perception),

overall constitute the 52 *cetasikas* (*Dhs* 17; *Anālayo*, 2006). Neutrality of mind (specific-neutrality) is listed as one of the 19 primary beautiful factors included under the defined 50 mental factors, concomitant with consciousness, the *saṅkhāra* (see Table 1).

The Pali term (*tatramajjhataṭṭā*), translated as “neutrality of mind,” means “there in the middleness,” as a synonym for equanimity in terms of a mental attitude (Bodhi, 1999, p. 78-99). *Tatra* means there; *majjha* means in the middle; and, when combined with *attatā* means impartiality or balance of mind, synonymous with equanimity. Thus, the Pali term means “there in the middle, with a balance of mind.” In other words, a mind that possesses the characteristic of specific neutrality towards everything.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa defines this mental factor as specific neutrality, as one of the four “or-whatever-states,” along with zeal, resolution, and attention (*Vsm* XIV 133). It has “the characteristic of conveying consciousness and consciousness-concomitants evenly.” It manifests as neutrality and its function is to prevent deficiency and excess or to inhibit partiality (*Vsm* XIV 153). Here, the neutral and non-discriminatory nature of the faculty of equanimity is emphasised.

Equanimity of *jhāna*

Equanimity of *jhāna* is described as “a name for equanimity producing impartiality towards even the highest bliss” (*Vsm* IV 165). While equanimity develops in the third *jhāna*, equanimity is the predominant characteristic apparent in the fourth *jhāna*: with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, a monk enters upon and abides in the fourth *jhāna* (*MN* i 296). Thus, the fourth *jhāna* meditative state transcends feelings of pleasure and pain or the emotions of joy and grief and manifest as a completely impartial state of mind.

Further, in the *Vibhaṅga*, joy and grief are reframed as “mental pleasure and mental pain” to more clearly differentiate between the physical and the mental aspects:

by the abandoning of pleasure and by the abandoning of pain, then first terminating mental pleasure and mental pain he attains and dwells in the fourth *jhāna* which is neither pain-nor-pleasure but is purity of mindfulness caused by equanimity. (*Vibhaṅga* 245)

The following phrase, “which has neither pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity,” indicates that the predominant characteristics in the fourth *jhāna* are mindfulness and equanimity. Here, there is reference to the neither pain-nor-pleasure state

of feeling which is equanimous. In both phrases, the assertion is that the purity of the mindfulness is due to or caused by the mind faculty of equanimity.

Equanimity of purification

Equanimity of purification refers to the purifying capacity of equanimity on the mind. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa defines this as, “Equanimity purified of all opposition, and so consisting in uninterestedness in stilling opposition” (*Vsm* IV 166). Again: “It is purified by means of the state of mindfulness purified by equanimity” (*Vsm* XII 14). Moreover, the outcome of a mind purified by equanimity is said to be, “thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability” (*MN* i 182). According to the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, it is from this preliminary mind state of mindfulness and equanimity that the Buddha came to know the three knowledges: the knowledges of the recollection of past lives, the passing away and reappearance of beings, and the destruction of the taints. From these three knowledges, the Buddha then became fully enlightened (*MN* i 182-184). Thus, it appears from the canonical literature that mindfulness and equanimity are fundamental to enlightenment and further explains why both these faculties are specifically defined as enlightenment factors (*bojjhanga*). These two faculties are concomitant as strong mindfulness yokes the mind, allowing equanimity to be present without distraction.

Conclusion

In the commentaries of the *Atthasālinī* and the *Visuddhimagga*, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa defines equanimity in ten different ways. Each of these ten kinds of equanimity were discussed here in detail for a multifaceted understanding of the powerful nature of equanimity on the mind. Moreover, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa states that six of these ten kinds of equanimity are one or the same in meaning. These six kinds are the six-factored equanimity: equanimity as a *brahma-vihāra*, an enlightenment factor, as specific neutrality, of *jhāna*, and purifying equanimity. He elaborates that their difference is one of position and likens this to a person being either a boy, youth, adult, a general, a king, and so on (*Vsm* IV 167). For example, equanimity as an enlightenment factor cannot be found where there is a six-factored equanimity, just as a six-factored equanimity cannot be found where there is equanimity as an enlightenment factor. Equanimity about formations and equanimity about insight are also considered the same in meaning, but are distinctly classified in two ways according to their function (*Vsm* IV 167). However, equanimity of energy and equanimity

as a feeling are considered entirely different from each other and from all the other kinds of equanimity (*Vsm* IV 170).

In sum, while the practice of equanimity might be generally considered uninteresting or even rather boring, with some analysis of the commentaries, one learns that equanimity is indeed a deeply profound and beautiful state of mind with many facets in its application. The most auspicious application is of course its predominant role, concomitant with mindfulness, in the attainment of the enlightened mind as described in the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta* (*MN* i 182-184).

Table 1: The 50 Mental Factors

The fifty kinds of formations associated with consciousness (adapted from Nyanatiloka Mahāthera's *Buddhist Dictionary*)

GENERAL

Five Primary: invariably present in any consciousness.

- (i) Contact
- (ii) Volition
- (vii) Life
- (viii) Concentration²
- (xxx) Attention

Six Secondary: sometimes present in any consciousness.

- (iii) Applied – thought
- (iv) Sustained – thought
- (xxix) Resolution
- (vi) Energy
- (v) Happiness
- (xxviii) Zeal

BEAUTIFUL³

Nineteen Primary: invariably present in any beautiful consciousness

- (ix) Faith
- (x) Mindfulness
- (xi) Conscience
- (xii) Shame
- (xiii) Non – greed
- (xiv) Non – hate
- (xxxi) Specific – neutrality
- (xvi) Tranquillity of mental body
- (xvii) Tranquillity of consciousness
- (xviii) Lightness of mental body
- (xix) Lightness of consciousness
- (xx) Malleability of mental body
- (xxi) Malleability of consciousness
- (xxii) Wieldiness of mental body

- (xxiii) Wieldiness of consciousness
- (xxiv) Proficiency of mental body
- (xxv) Proficiency of consciousness
- (xxvi) Rectitude of mental body
- (xxvii) Rectitude of consciousness

Six Secondary: sometimes present in beautiful consciousness.

- (xxxiv) Abstinence from bodily misconduct
- (xxxv) Abstinence from verbal misconduct
- (xxxvi) Abst. Fr. Wrong livelihood
- (xxxii) Compassion
- (xxxiii) Gladness
- (xv) Non – delusion

UNPROFITABLE

Four Primary: invariably present in any unprofitable consciousness.

- (xl) Delusion
- (xxxvii) Consciencelessness
- (xxxviii) Shamelessness
- (xlii) Agitation

Ten Secondary : sometimes present in unprofitable consciousness.

- (xiv) Hate
- (xlvi) Envy
- (xlvii) Avarice
- (xlviii) Worry
- (xxxix) Greed
- (xli) Wrong view
- (xliv) Conceit (Pride)
- * (xliii) Stiffness
- * (xliii) Torpor
- (I) Uncertainty

1. (Ch . . . XIV, 131ff.)

2. The Roman numbering from (i) to (I) corresponds to that given in Ch. XIV. The total is 50. However (vii) concentration and (xlix) steadiness- of- consciousness are simply different grades of the same thing. Consequently (xlix) steadiness-of- consciousness is not included in the list above. On the other hand (xliii) stiffness- and- torpor are treated as two separate formations and are therefore included above separately. Thus the total remains 50. The 52 concomitants of consciousness (*cetāsika*) sometimes mentioned are the 50 above plus feeling and perception.

3. Beautiful (*sobhana*) consciousness includes all profitable consciousness, resultant consciousness with root – cause, and functional consciousness with root – cause. (Table III (1)-(21), (42)-(49), (57)-(69), (73)-(89).)

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