

Brahmavihāras: Appreciative Joy (2 of 5)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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So good morning, good day. I realized I'm beginning to go over time with both the meditation and the short talk. I plan to get back on track, but maybe it's a little bit the nature of the topic, which this week is appreciative joy. *Muditā* is the Pali word for what often in English is called appreciative joy or sympathetic joy.

I like to call it rejoicing. It's kind of more energetic and a more full experience to rejoice than just appreciate. It seems like sometimes a little bit of a small word compared to rejoicing. And in my vocabulary, rejoicing is something almost embodied, whereas appreciating is a more of a cognitive thing, to just appreciate.

It's a meditation practice in Buddhism. And as a meditation practice, it has a lot of benefits. One of them is that it helps to dissolve, soften, and maybe get rid of the feelings we have of discontent, jealousy, envy – kind of a discontent in the success and well-being of others. And

of course, it's very odd to say that we could have discontent at the joy of others. But for some people, jealousy and envy is a very big part of their lives. And maybe for many different reasons – sometimes, maybe there's historical reasons why that's been cultivated or developed in us.

Or sometimes there's fear to really acknowledge the well-being of others. Or there's a comparison to ourselves. And we're discontent because if we really admit and celebrate the success of someone else, that kind of implies our lack of success, that we're kind of not really a good person somehow. Or it's a reflection on me that someone else is doing well, and I'm being left behind by life in the world or something. These kinds of thoughts and ideas – that stand in the way of feeling just genuine, real appreciation, real delight and gladness for the well-being of others – is a hindrance. It keeps us limited, and keeps the heart from really opening up to be present for this life in a full way.

As I've been saying, that part of the function of this ideal of appreciative joy or rejoicing is not to obligate us to feel that way. But to help us to use that as a reference point to notice how we're still closed, to notice what is in the way, or what keeps us from opening in the heart in a full and honest way. And so we discover what we do that leads to that discontent – that's the word in the Pali text for the primary hindrance to this appreciative joy.

Discontent can mean many things. But classically, it's often associated with envy, jealousy, and a certain kind of conceit. A conceit that suggests "This says something about me and maybe it says something bad about me." Conceit in Buddhism – not just thinking you're better than someone else, but also that somehow you're less than someone else, or you don't measure up to someone else. All this concern with self-measurement and comparative thinking is a hindrance to really having the heart just open and relaxed and present.

Mindfulness practice is a practice to really recognize what gets in the way of our open heart and our full presence to experience. And then the art of it is to notice what gets in the way and then not to pile on more suffering, more judgments, more aversion to that, but learn how to breathe with it, open to it. Learn how to hold it in soft palms or the cupped hand of awareness.

And then to learn to open up a little bit to that, to realize we can hold the challenges we have, the envy, the jealousy of discontent we have, in something of a wider field, a wider sense of embodiment, or "enheartenedment," or "inmindedment." We see that there's much more here that we can begin sensing when we learn how to be present in a nonreactive way, without being swept up in our thoughts and judgments about it. Just there, allowing it to be there.

And then beginning to open up and feel whatever goodness is there. Maybe part of that goodness is the part of you that wants to help, the part of you that wants to care for yourself, and wants to be supportive for who you are. For mindfulness practitioners, to realize that one of the ways that we fulfill that desire to be helpful to ourselves is paradoxically not to do too much, except to really hold our challenges in awareness. So something opens up, something reveals itself that has a lot of goodness, joy, and well-being that's kind of beyond the edges of it – in the rest of the body, and somewhere else. Perhaps just the goodness of just having a practice.

So we want to learn to recognize the hindrances to sympathetic joy. We also want to recognize what the tradition says is what's called the “near enemy” of it. And the near enemy is that which looks like this rejoicing, this *muditā*, but it's not really it. It's really just another way in which we're not really opened up fully. The tradition defines it as the gladness or the joy that comes from... You have to listen to this carefully, because in English, it's not going to come across well and maybe it will seem a little bit off. But the gladness which comes with “domestic life.” And I think that the word for domestic life in the ancient language was a synonym for the joy that comes with some kind of attachment, some clinging to something.

And, the primary one that's referred to here is something that's associated with sensual pleasure or attachment to sensual pleasure. So if we feel this joy in engagement in

sensual pleasure, for example, someone says, "Wow, that was really good to get my fifth alcoholic drink of the day. I'm so happy to have it!" To feel joy in someone having five drinks before noon, that's not really it. It's kind of sad. And so, to have joy in that kind of pleasure is not really so helpful or supportive even for a deeper process.

But I've seen here in the United States among practitioners of *muditā* a focusing on the near enemy of *muditā* that is often something a little different, which is a giddiness. To feel joy and delight in what's happening, but to get kind of giddy about it. And giddy, I think, is to be clinging to something a little bit self-conscious and a little bit of a conceit or over-involvement with the joy. So that kind of feels a bit off. It's like there's a little bit of hyper energy involved, which is not really a settled, open, free flow of joy, but something that actually separates us a little bit from the pure engagement of appreciation or delight we might take in a situation.

This idea that there can be a kind of feeling of joy and well-being where we get too self-preoccupied or more concerned with the self is where we lose touch with the very thing that we're appreciating. And so that is my understanding of this term "giddiness" when it's used in English. It's kind of a bubbling up of joy that is self-preoccupying, self-concerned, or self-oriented. And that orientation gets in the way of this boundless feeling of appreciation, joy, and delight in the well-being and the good fortune of others.

One of the ways to have an entry point to this world of *muditā* is to begin appreciating and understanding what gets in the way, and what is making it more complicated. And, in doing so, it makes it much more realistic.

And so then we're careful not to override, jump over, and do a spiritual bypass for how we really are. But to be able to really recognize who we are, and recognize “our warts and all,” they say – all the shortcomings we have and all the challenges we have. And with that, or because of our capacity to open to that – to be able to have a heart that's more open to experience the joy of the world, the pleasure of the world, that appreciation of all the helpers, and all the goodness, that's here, the success and good fortune of others.

That ability to open is really one of the primary parts of Buddhist practice. So if we can open to our own suffering with this open heart, that very ability to open to that is the same openness we feel as we encounter the beautiful things of the world. And then there's sympathetic joy.

Or if we encounter the suffering of the world, we open to that, and then we have compassion. But because the doors are open, nothing sticks. As soon as something is stuck, part of the doors are closed. And so this open door policy of the heart. Keep your doors open. And slowly over time, we can learn the tremendous value of these *brahmavihāras*.

Appreciative joy, to rejoice in the well-being of others. This is one of the really great ones that can be nourishing, can be nurturing, can be inspiring, and can really fuel even the practice of the Dharma.

So for this next 24 hours, I'd encourage you to explore this more for yourself. And notice your reactivity as you go through the day, perhaps, to whatever contact you have to goodness in the world, or people celebrating, or having success. See if you can experience it with completely open doors of the heart, or whether you somehow resist it, or close down, or distance yourself from it. And do it with no judgments about yourself, hopefully. Just get curious for one day. Become an explorer.

Discover the whole territory of your inner life having to do with real deep appreciation, joy, and lack of it for the success, well-being, and goodness that you experience in other people. And in the process, let's all of us become people who can benefit the world by appreciating what can be appreciated. Thank you very much.