

Dharmette: Delight, Joy, and Appreciation

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 6, 2010

So, I'm not sure where this dharma talk is going to go, but what I wanted to do is to explore, and consider a little bit, the conditions for delight. How do we feel delight or joy? What are the conditions that help that happen? Because I think it is a beautiful thing to feel delight or feel joy. How can we avail ourselves with the opportunities of joy or delight more often?

Years ago, when I thought about becoming joyful, I mostly would have thought that joy was a product or result of something that gave me reason to be joyful. It's a beautiful day, so I feel delight in the day, or a beautiful sunset, or something wonderful happens, or I'm with delightful friends, so I feel joyful being with a friend. Or something happens, some success in something, and there's delight in the success, or some thing is responsible for my joy.

But with my Dharma practice has come the recognition that there can be joy and delight that are not dependent on the things out there. There can be joy and delight that bubble up, that well up from within seemingly for no external reason whatsoever, and so knowing that joy is possible without the conditions of the world being a particular way. Joy is not dependent on the conditions of the world.

One of the primary inner conditions, I think, that helps us find joy, both this kind of unconditional joy, but also conditional joy in the world, is being relaxed, being at ease. And the more at ease and relaxed we are, the easier it is to notice joy or to have space for it. If we're preoccupied and really concerned about things, worried about things, planning about things, defending against things, remembering things, and being upset about things, then those things tend to interfere with the capacity for joy. If joy is like an open window, then fear and resentment and preoccupation are like the blinds or the curtains; they get pulled in front of it. But if you lift up the blinds and pull apart the curtains and the window is open, then the fresh breeze comes in. So to be relaxed, I think, is really important.

Another condition I'm thinking about for delight and joy is appreciation – to be able to appreciate something like a beautiful day. You can appreciate the beautiful day even more after it's been stormy or cold, or difficult weather for a long time, and then you have this beautiful day. And you really appreciate it, and the contrast to the difficult, bad weather days. But then it becomes sunny day after day after day for a long time, and the appreciation tends to fall away. And then we appreciate the rain when it finally comes.

But is there some way of having appreciation that is not so dependent on the vagaries of conditions? What can we appreciate that's deeper? I think that appreciation is kind of like joy as well. There can be appreciation that doesn't need a reason to appreciate. It's almost again like appreciation itself is an open window in the heart of something. And if the curtains are pulled open then there can be a sense of appreciation before there's a reason to appreciate. Isn't that great? I think it's fantastic. Maybe you think it's silly, to have appreciation without a reason.

But then there's also the ability to see things, to appreciate actual things. I think that the deeper we appreciate something in ourselves, the better then we can appreciate something in others as well. If we have nothing to appreciate in ourselves, then we can't see people, as deeply perhaps, and what's in them.

One of the classic instructions around loving-kindness practice is to start with yourself. The reason that's given for starting with yourself is that if you start with yourself and develop a capacity to have kind, loving regard for yourself, then it's easier to have that kind, loving regard for others.

If you see your own capacity to be loved, your own capacity to be lovable or appreciate yourself, then it's easier to be able to turn that around, and see that other people have the same heart, the same kind of situation in their inner life, and you can wish them the same happiness, the same safety, the same good will, because you recognise that place in yourself. So, to be able to appreciate something in other people.

What are the barriers to appreciation? I think there are a lot of reasons why people don't take the time to appreciate each other. Sometimes we're afraid of each other. Appreciation means you let someone into your life. And they'll take over, won't they? And so better to stay guarded.

So, there's fear. There can be all kinds of arguments that "That's too 'hallmarky,' too sentimental. And if you're really astute person you would mostly realise that no-one can be trusted, and that everyone's out for their own good. And to be really wise is to be on guard from being taken advantage of. So all these things are then barriers for being able to appreciate someone else.

Another barrier is to want to have something, get something from someone. There are all kinds of things we can try to get from people: we can get things; we can get their attention; we can get their approval, support. We can try to manipulate them so they can see us in the way we want to be seen. And so we talk in certain ways, wear clothes in certain ways, and do all these things, hopefully, so people can see us in the way we want them to. So we're trying to get something from someone, and desires like that also can interfere with appreciation, which arises most helpfully when we're quite relaxed, and we don't want a lot, just willing to take someone in, to experience something. When we're relaxed, it's easier to be in touch with ourselves. When we're relaxed, it's easier to have that 'intouchness,' to be in touch, to feel or sense someone else, and appreciate them as they are.

One of the sources of appreciation in this meandering talk is – I have a lot of appreciation for people because I think life is pretty hard. I think it's a struggle. It's not easy to get through this human life of ours. And people do that, even with great struggle and difficulty. And because of that, people are engaged with trying to make it work. I have a lot of appreciation that people are trying, and working so hard at it.

I have a lot of appreciation when people have a practice, like mindfulness or Buddhist practice, that they're really trying to work with this difficult life and condition we have. I think there's so much goodness, and so much sincerity or strong effort that comes through in trying to cope and deal with this life of ours. Some people are doing more than just coping; they're actually trying to do something very profound with liberation, with compassion and love, and looking very deeply at themselves. And I have so much appreciation for that; it's so beautiful.

It's an odd thing to be a teacher where people sometimes come and talk to me in interviews, and talk about how difficult their struggles are, and what a terrible person they are. And I sit there, and I just have so much appreciation: wow. There's a disconnect sometimes between what they're saying and what I'm seeing: "Wow, it's quite something to be with this person."

And then, how many opportunities are there for joy and delight in our life that are really easily available if we just take a moment or two to relax and take it in? How many opportunities are there?

There is the weather, for example, or other people, or really simple things. There's a lot to appreciate, and we want to be careful not to be sentimental about it. Very careful not to paper over the difficulties and what isn't working. I know people who choose to look at the beautiful, happy, joyful, wonderful things of life, and it's really just their way of avoiding the challenges, the difficulties, the dark side of life. And we don't want to do that. We want to be very honest and complete and seeing reality as it actually is.

But I see that more often than not, the problem is the opposite – that people have such a strong bias towards all the things that we don't appreciate, all the things that are reasons and causes for not feeling joy, or feeling the opposite. That seems to be the bias. I think we could do a little bit more encouragement to fill out the appreciation, the delight side of our life. And perhaps it just takes a moment standing in the line waiting for the checkout clerk in the market – and to look around noticing what can be appreciated standing right there. And I bet there are an infinite number of things that can be appreciated standing there at the checkout counter.

It's a phenomenal thing that all these causes and conditions come together to allow us to buy bread, or whatever we're buying there; the people there are doing their work, and there's a lot to appreciate. Is it realistic? I think there's something that appreciation and joy and delight in each other and the situation gives us a more realistic picture of this life that we live in than if we only look at the challenges and difficulties and what isn't working. And if we have healthy appreciation and delight, I think we can hold the difficulties, and hold the challenges, and the

faults that we all have – hold it in a very different perspective than if we only focus on the faults, the difficulties and challenges we have in our life.

It's such a beautiful thing, I think, to experience delight and joy. And I hope that all of you can take those moments and that time to relax enough, to begin taking in the joy and delight that maybe is much more easily available to you than you've allowed yourself to take on.

So, I offer that with my appreciation and delight in all of you.