

The Gladness Pentad (1 of 5) The Flow of Goodness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Hello everyone. I am happy to be with you today. I bring with me a little of the last retreat I taught at the Insight Retreat Center, which ended yesterday. It was wonderful to be there in person, and even more wonderful to be meditating there in a very relaxed flow of the practice, the schedule, and the whole life at the retreat center. So I arrive here happy about this, and also with the theme of the retreat.

What I am inspired to share with you this week is what locally has come to be called “the gladness pentad.” I have probably taught this before – certainly, parts of it. It consists of five inner states or qualities that can grow as our practice develops. The Buddha presented these five states not as something we generate, create, construct for ourselves, or make happen, as if we are in charge and we are going to pump this up – but rather, as states that emerge and then begin to flow into each other, one after the other.

The role of the practitioner is to recognize the pentad, allow it, make room for it, and not interfere with the process. We can interfere with it by getting lost in thought. Part of the reason to learn not to wander off in thought or get caught up in preoccupations is that those thoughts and preoccupations are a dampener. They limit and close the door on something that flows and moves and can arise when those thoughts are not there.

It is like listening to the radio and you turn to the news channel (horrible as the news might be). You are now tuned in to that channel. But you can turn it back to a channel where there is some inspiring music that touches you, opens you, delights you, and helps you to be in the present moment. Similarly, when we stop being distracted, and mindfulness has developed so that we are really here, this is like a new channel, where something new can flow and move that can't flow when we are distracted.

One of the descriptions of this process is the gladness pentad: gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, and *samādhi* (concentration). One of the salient features of some descriptions of these states is that the text does not say that the meditator makes these happen. It says that from one state, the next one arises. They flow from one to the other.

“Flowing” is one of the preeminent ways the Buddha talks about the growth, expansion, and movement of healthy states of mind. In a number of places, he uses metaphors of water flowing: water in a river or a stream; water flowing from an underwater spring into a large peaceful lake, flowing from the inside out; or finding the current in the river and flowing with the current. Or, as the waters flow down the mountainside and combine, they get bigger and bigger. Likewise, as these good qualities come together and grow, something within us gets bigger and more expansive. According to the Buddha, becoming expansive and flowing is part of what happens as practice develops.

The alternative to expansiveness is what we could call “reactivity.” The Buddha uses very different metaphors to describe this. He describes it as fire that burns you; a barb or arrow that pierces you; a sickness from the outside, maybe a virus that is alien to who you are, but makes you sick; a tumor which is also not you – it is extra. Sometimes he calls reactivity a “burden” – a heavy thing outside you that is weighing you down, and that you have to carry. These are very different ways to go through life: one which is a burden and is afflictive, while in the other, we are being carried along. Something is moving within us, and we make space for and allow this movement toward freedom.

The Buddha describes the gladness pentad as beginning with something that inspires us. Sometimes it is our faith or trust in the Dharma and the practice. Sometimes it has to do with some experience of freedom we have had. This is not necessarily the big bang freedom that Buddhism emphasizes, but just the small ways that we learn to let go and experience ourselves as independent of our reactivity and our preoccupations – for example, those ways in which our ruminations are self-afflictive, and we repeat the same self-critical thoughts over and over again. This is a kind of burning fire that singes us over and over again. When this ceases, or we quiet down enough to have a different experience of ourselves, we are inspired by this possibility.

Remarkably, many of us can go through a good part of our life thinking that how our mind is operating (with reactivity) is normal, and that's the way it should be. What I mean by reactivity is the habitual mental or emotional activity that gets triggered by some event outside or inside. For instance, I might sit here quietly thinking that I haven't had the oil changed in my car for a while now, and it's time to do it, but I simply realize that. Or there could be a reaction inside, for example, I tell myself: "Gil, you're a lousy car owner. You really don't take care of it well. Your car should be cared for and respected. How could you?" And I get angry at myself.

When that kind of criticism and anger is on automatic pilot, that is reactivity. That reactivity can then produce more reactivity. Once I get angry at myself for being a lousy car owner who doesn't care for his car, then I might start remembering that I am supposed to be a mindfulness teacher who does not have reactivity. Now I am really a bad person because I am a lousy teacher as well. Now that I am a lousy teacher talking about it to all of you, I can get caught up in my reactivity, my embarrassment, my conceit, and my ideas.

It is possible that for many people, this is all they live in: reactivity triggering more reactivity, triggering more reactivity, just swirling around. This state is so normal that the mind does not think anything of it – this is what life is, and the messages in the reactivity seem to have some truth.

Instead, to allow all this to quiet down enough to experience ourselves without that reactivity, where one thing does not trigger another harmful thing – another fire that singes us or a barb that pokes us. We can experience the heart and the mind as unpoked, unsinged – relaxing, softening, and opening. Wow. We see this is possible.

For the Buddha, this kind of experience is one of the sources of gladness that is an inspiration. The Pali word for "gladness" is *pāmojja*. I like the word "delight." We can't translate it as "joy" or "happiness" because those come later. Gladness is evaluative in nature. It is a kind of joy that comes from an evaluation: a realization or understanding that this is a good thing. It does require some engagement and involvement in order to reflect on it. We take the time to reflect on it: "Oh, this is a good thing. I appreciate this. This is valuable."

The nature of reactivity is that it can go non-stop. It never takes a vacation. We just go from one thing to the next to the next. There is no room to pause, stop, and appreciate the present moment, and to appreciate that which is nonreactive and lives within us.

Dharma practice moves us towards the nonreactive life, where something begins to flow – reactivity gets out of the way so that the current of goodness that lives within us as a potential can begin to flow. To begin to get an inkling of this possibility, feel it within us, and take the time to appreciate it, allows us to begin feeling an appreciation and a certain kind of gladness.

That gladness is important because when it becomes strong enough or present enough in the non-distracted state of mindfulness, it becomes the seedbed or river that grows into a stronger and bigger river. The gladness grows into joy. "From gladness, there arises joy," says the Buddha. He does not say, "From gladness, now make yourself joyful." The joy just flows. It is a current.

Today, perhaps you can take a little extra time through the day to see what it is like to be undistracted in the present moment. Allow yourself to find a way to appreciate just being present here and now. By letting go of reactivity and thoughts enough – not that you have to stop thinking – see if you can find, bubbling up and flowing within, hints of something that is good and wants to flow, radiate, and move. Maybe the beginning of an inner smile of the heart. Thank you.