

## Mudita: Rejoicing in Others

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Hello, everyone, and welcome to this Sunday morning talk. This morning I'm going to talk about *muditā*, *brahma-vihāra*. It's a Pāli word for abiding in the divine quality of rejoicing, rejoicement. The word is often translated into English as sympathetic joy, or as appreciative joy. I think it gets said in a single word, very nicely, with the English word "rejoice." Maybe we're a little shy to use the word rejoice in the *vipassanā* world, because it maybe feels it'll be too emotional or excited to rejoice.

But in fact, there's nothing wrong with having some strong energy of delight and joy coursing through us. That is rejoicing. Rejoicing also has a quality of clearly recognizing something, appreciating something, valuing something. Almost maybe even rejoicing is naming it, or feeling a certain surge of happiness, very particularly in relationship to it. There is a wonderful term in Pāli called *anumodanā*. Probably I can't pronounce it well today—*anumodanā*.

It's more commonly translated as rejoice and to celebrate wonderful things that happen in the world. To celebrate the goodness of others and their generosity, their success, their good things that happen to people, and really to rejoice and celebrate has also a contagious quality to it that may be a little different than delight, which can be calmer and more personal. The word *muditā* is translated often as sympathetic joy and comes from the verb *modati*, which means, by dictionary definition, to rejoice, to rejoice in, to enjoy oneself with, and to be happy. This is one of the four places to abide, because *vihāra* means a place of abiding, to dwell. So the desire to dwell in delight or rejoicing, just as we can dwell in compassion, and we can dwell in loving-kindness, in kindness or goodwill.

Last week, Josia Gibson gave a talk on compassion, and it was wonderful. In many ways I was happy—you can meet him, he is a wonderful new teacher. But also he was setting up the theme of compassion during the seven sittings that week and today. I may be inspired

by him when I talk about sympathetic joy, because that's the topic for the seven sittings for the next week. It's kind of a coincidence this worked out. For some people, this is a season to celebrate joy, this type of time of year.

So it's nice that in Buddhism we can also focus on this particular wonderful quality. One of the reasons I like "rejoicing" as a translation of *muditā* is that in my mind I connect it to the topic of generosity, in the sense that when we rejoice or celebrate, we are giving joy. It's a gift of joy. It's one thing to rejoice privately in oneself, to feel delight and happiness. But I think of it just like compassion is something that is meant for the world, to share goodwill as something to share with the world. So this *muditā* is something we share with the world.

It's something we offer. To give joy gives a very different feeling for what *muditā* is than just, say, appreciative joy. But to know to celebrate and offer joy, or expand joy, or spread joy in our delight—maybe it's contagious a little bit to feel, express this, and to do it. Certainly joy, happiness, well-being, gladness—there are many words for these qualities of well-being in the teachings of the Buddha, and there was a real expectation. This was a very important part of the path, and it's a wonderful kind of paradox—maybe it doesn't have to be, but that the Buddha's path is a path to the ending of suffering, and that path, along that path, there is a joy and happiness, delight, gladness that are stepping stones on that path.

It's part of that path that we address suffering in a very honest way in Buddhism, but not so that we can suffer better, but so that the suffering—we can find our way through it. And that way through goes through a phase of all kinds of experiences of joy and happiness and delight. The Buddha was, in the epitaphs of the Buddha, the happy one, and we have records of that. In ancient times, people commented on the joyfulness of the Buddhist community, the followers of the Buddha. So joy is an important part of all this. But I think it's a nice principle to understand that a crowded mind has very little room for joy.

It's very easy to go through a day in a life with a mind crowded with concerns and complaints and troubles and challenges and resentments and jealousies and planning and rumination. It's easy to come and get caught up in all our concerns, and ride them, and review them, and revisit them, and churn them out—a kind of whirlpool of concerns that the thinking mind can have. Some of those concerns are certainly valid. But when we're in the whirlpool of thoughts around those concerns, I don't know how useful it is when the mind becomes crowded with preoccupations. I don't know how useful it is—certainly useful to deliberately and intentionally address our challenges, but to be in the whirlpool of them, I don't think it's so good. The most important thing I want to emphasize here is a crowded mind has no room for joy, has no room for appreciation.

If you go into your kitchen like I did this morning to make breakfast, for that I had a choice. Do I think about the different things that I have to do today and my concerns, and do I spend my time filling my mind with thoughts about a talk on appreciation and joy and rejoicing, or do I make room in my mind to really be there in the experience of making breakfast, and to appreciate the things that are there, to appreciate just the clarity in the moment of this particular thing? I have a particular bowl that I ate breakfast from, and that bowl—I know the person who made the bowl, and it was a gift that my wife gave me, and it's a beautiful bowl. It was made with one of my favourite colours. So I just, I don't know, it was there on the counter, and kind of sparkly clean, and just picking it up and touching it, I just felt, as in the moment, a kind of clarity, kind of delight, appreciation, a kind of pleasure of just this bowl that I wouldn't have felt if I'd been busy thinking about my concerns of the day. I get preoccupied.

It turns out there's much more opportunities for appreciation, for delight, for beauty, for well-being, for respect, for gratitude in our lives than I think most people avail themselves. I think that because of this crowded mind. Now, one of the things that gets in the way of appreciation, of joy, delight, is some idea that we're not supposed to experience those things, some idea that if we're really serious, that we would be serious, then we would be preoccupied and angry and concerned and worrying about things, and that we're guilty, and you know, the world's going up in flames, and the only thing that we're allowed to do is to be anxious and preoccupied and caught up in it, or feeling guilty that we're not doing enough, and you know, just in this world, a swirl of thoughts and ideas. To stop, to quiet the mind, to pause, and to notice the details of our life, that we can appreciate the particular things that go on, and what's here for us right in front of us, and here and present. To take the time to, if you go shopping, to notice the checkout clerk, and to notice and appreciate the person, and take time just to notice and see. You often let the person know you're doing this.

But can you take in the person so they are not just, you know, taken for granted? So it might as well be a robot. But really to take in—this is a human being with a background of history and challenges and joys. Really, can I take in and try to get a fuller sense of the person so that there can be some appreciation? After all, the person is doing a service for you. So a crowded mind has very little room for joy.

A mind that is not crowded with thoughts and ideas has a lot of room for a lot of things, and delight, appreciation, gratitude, and joy is what I want to emphasize today. For this week, there could also be the protest that it's selfish and self-centered to be involved in joy, and there's so much suffering in the world, and so, you know, we should get serious, and maybe

suffer ourselves because of it, and not really allow ourselves to feel joy on the path to liberation from joy's beautiful path. It is a path that allows us to really feel and experience suffering much more strongly, more openly—maybe not the right word, but more clearly. As the practice deepens, most people who do this meditation practice become much more sensitized, aware, and open to experience the suffering around them, and also to experience our own suffering in a deeper way and fuller way. So what I like to propose is that the ability to be open to joy, open to delight, it's exactly the same ability to be open to suffering in a useful way. It's kind of like it's the same door in our hearts.

Whether we want to make sure that door can swing open and the hinges are well lubricated and is easy to open. If you learn to do that for joy, then the door's also learning to do it for suffering. If we're learning it to do for suffering, then appreciate how that opens doors. Opening—there's non-resistance, non-clinging, non-resentment, non-pushing away. It's just openness to it. Then as we go through our lives without the mind being crowded, that open door policy that we have in our hearts, when you see a beautiful bowl as a gift on your kitchen counter, then there's joy or delight and happiness in that.

When you encounter someone who is suffering, then there is compassion for that. When you are walking down the street and you see someone that maybe you don't know, but the person greets you, and so you offer—you, an open door, offers a greeting back in goodwill and friendliness. So this ability to have the doors open, this is what allows for these things to go on. Rather than focusing on needing to be now delightful and present, appreciating and grateful, or needing to be compassionate, the mindfulness practice has no need of what we're supposed to be, has no requirement. You're supposed to be loving or compassionate. What mindfulness is about is noticing where we're stuck, where the door doesn't open, and helping us to relax and open to release, so the doors of the heart can swing open easily at any time.

Then we can talk more seriously about—if that's the right word—more seriously about joy, about rejoicing. So this idea of sympathetic joy, or rejoicing in the fortune, well-being, success of others and for oneself as well, can't be selfish because selfishness is a symptom of a closed door. A self-preoccupation is a crowded mind which is conceited. *Muditā* is actually seen as an antidote to conceit. It's an antidote to selfishness. It's an antidote to self-preoccupation because it's the ability to open up the door and appreciate and delight in other people's success, which is not an easy thing to do.

It's often been said that this third *brahma-vihāra*, sympathetic joy, is the hardest one for people to experience or to have. It seems like maybe it's easy to feel resentful of other

people's success, or be jealous of their success, envious of them, or to feel somehow that their success says something about ourselves. If they're being successful, well, I'm not, and therefore I must be lazy. So it becomes a self-concern again, back to conceit, back to self-preoccupation, back to the crowded, a whirlpool of thoughts—Oh, poor me, and I'm not really up to it. They're doing really well and not. I've been left behind.

So you know, it's so easy to get caught up in self-concern around all this, or ideas that they don't deserve it. When I was in Burma meditating, there was a group of Americans meditating there and we didn't talk hardly at all, but there was one man that we showed up the same day and we had a little bit of conversations occasionally, very occasionally. I remember, many months into it, there was a woman who had some really deep kind of realization experience, and you know, something that people go to meditate to experience and to have happen, and something to celebrate. When this person I knew heard that this woman had this experience, he got upset. He said, "No, it can't be. I knew her back in the United States, and no way that she could have done that."

He was just all kind of upset and angry, and resisting the very idea of, rather than celebrating her good fortune, appreciating it, rejoicing—why, this is so great. She came here for this, and she got what she wanted. So this thing about the doors of the heart being able to open is a very important principle, because in many spiritual traditions, not just Buddhism, it is pointed out that it's easy to pursue happiness the wrong way. To actively try to manufacture happiness or be happy doesn't really work very well, or to put together the pieces in our life that will make us happy—the right relationship, the right job, the right home, the right thing, the right anything—then I'll be happy. Sometimes people confuse pleasure with happiness, and pleasure itself is often, in many spiritual traditions—not just Buddhism, as I just said—also that pleasure is often considered to have a dual edge.

Certainly pleasure is pleasurable, but it often can come along with disappointment, discomfort, suffering. Because pleasure is often temporary, and it's no longer unless the object that's bringing pleasure continues. We lose the pleasure, and then we don't have that piece of cushion, that piece of delight, or that piece of energy that we were holding on to or expecting or kind of depending on. Also, too much focus on pleasure is an alienation from something deep in ourselves, some deeper sense of well-being. Something that's more enduring—and this is what spirituality is often looking for—is a more enduring, deeper feeling of well-being, of happiness and joy that doesn't so much depend on what's going on in the world around us. The conditions of life don't have to be just right so we can be happy, but we have this wellspring of happiness that can be there even if the conditions of life around us are not

going so well.

So they saw, rather than pursuing happiness directly, there's a movement towards opening the doors, learning this process of not clinging, not holding on, not resisting, not being assertive and grabbing on and wanting it. But being available, being available. We show up at the kitchen counter for the bowl that's there, being available as we eat our breakfast, to appreciate this is pretty special, this food, and how it got to us, and what we're doing, we're having or eating, to appreciate, to have room in openness, to notice when someone is celebrating, someone has success and happiness, or to notice the things about other people that can be appreciated, things that only take a little bit of time to study and look at and be present for. If we are in the whirlpool of thoughts and concerns, we are not really able to take in another person fully, but to take in other persons more fully and enough so we start appreciating people. If we appreciate people, maybe we can be grateful for people, or we can start feeling some delight and joy in people. Perhaps even we can rejoice in others just because we know them, just because they are who they are, in addition to every success they have.

Traditionally, the idea of rejoicing in the good fortune of others is not only for spiritual success, that somehow they become happier, more open, and more loving, but also for any kind of success—a healthy *dhammic* success, *dhammic* meaning that doesn't cause any harm to anybody, and any success that doesn't cause any harm. That could be that they receive gifts or resources or all kinds of things that, you know, maybe you don't receive. But rather than feeling like, "Oh, you know, why do they get that? And I don't get it. You know, they won, and I didn't win." Celebrate their winning rather than suffering over the loss.

Why they won? It's not fantastic—I happen to lose the race, but you know how wonderful they won. There's a wonderful little teaching: I think that when the sun sets for you, it's rising for someone else. When it's winter in the northern hemisphere, it's summer in the southern hemisphere. If you're replaying a game, it's not winning—if you lose, guess what, someone else has won. Rather than looking at everything from the point of view only of me, myself, and mine, and the impact for me, and how it is for me, and my comfort, and well-being, and my success, and my status, to have the doors open, the mind not crowded with self-concern, and to be available, to really appreciate and delight in how it is for other people.

Paradoxically, doing this is a phenomenal vehicle for your own happiness. Turns out that doing something like this can bring more happiness than if you celebrated your own win. If you won the game, there is a kind of joy or happiness that comes with winning. But you might look, next time you win something or get benefit on something at the expense of someone else—like they lost the game—I believe that there's a more lasting, in my experience, more

lasting, deeper, more satisfying sense of well-being that you'll benefit. You'll win, actually, in some kind of way, if you really appreciate and rejoice and celebrate their win. Your loss may be as incidental.

You don't have to be so concerned about whether you are or not, your loss, and what it means, and how people see you or something. Play the game well, but then rejoice in how someone else wins. I suspect that, as I said, you'll feel better, more at ease, and it will be more enduring to celebrate that win in someone else than to celebrate your own win if you did so. It's a fascinating and wonderful and profound way to live a life—to have your doors able to be well lubricated, well able to open, to be at ease, to not cling, and to walk through the world, and then respond with, or have the heart respond with, friendliness when friendliness is called on, compassion when compassion is called on, and with rejoicing when rejoicing is called on. Don't shortchange yourself. Allow yourself to rejoice more often.

Allow yourself to have this joy—sympathetic joy, appreciative joy. Let go more so that you can rejoice and appreciate and delight in the good fortune of others, and in the goodness of others, the beauty of others, the wonderfulness of all beings. May your rejoicing be your gift to the world, the gift of joy that helps other people feel more at ease and safe and happy. So it's easier for other people to feel also a settled joy and happiness, and well-being. May all beings be happy, and may we contribute to that happening. Thank you.