

Thursday dharma talk

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So building on these supportive conditions on the way to freedom, the next condition is often translated as joy. The Pāli word is *pīti*, which is on the opposite of the emotional spectrum from the English word pity. And the word P-I-T-I in Pāli is somehow related to the word “to drink.” So I like to think of it as when, if you're really thirsty, how good it is to have fresh, clean spring water. And I've had times when I've been thirsty and had very good clean water. It just felt like there was this kind of spreading feeling.

It was almost like the water was spreading through my skin, my muscles, through my chest, down my arms. It just seemed like it suffused my whole torso with a kind of refreshing, full, pleasant feeling. I don't know why, but it was almost like immediately the water was spreading out into the wider body. So this joy does that kind of thing. It feels so good for the inner system. It's refreshing. It's nourishing at times.

And one of the remarkable things about this form of joy, meditative joy, is that it arises for no external reason. Nothing about the world, and nothing about our experience around us, is triggering or eliciting the joy. There is such joy, of course, but this joy is completely arising from deep within, from a source deep within, and happily and kind of remarkably independent of what goes on in the world with us. There's no great accomplishment, no great pleasure we're experiencing, no great praise, no great success. It could actually be the opposite. But something comes together in the inner conditions of our life, something gets awakened within, and starts to flow, starts to move.

And here in this sequence, the precondition for it is appreciation, or gladness, delight, contentment, inspiration. That, as I presented yesterday, does involve some evaluation. This is good. This is quite different from what I had before. And so in that evaluation, there's an uplifting feeling, a delightful feeling. But now the joy doesn't depend on any evaluation. The

appreciation we have earlier kind of prepares us to make room inside for the germinating of this inner capacity.

And in the Buddha, the sequence that goes from gladness to joy to tranquility, happiness, and *samādhi*, which is the middle section of these twelve steps we're talking about in the retreat, gets repeated many, many times in the *suttas*. And sometimes different things are what prepare the ground for it so this can arise. Sometimes it's just a deep appreciation of our ethics or integrity. Sometimes it's a deep appreciation of the *brahma-vihāras*, that there's *mettā* and *muditā*. Sometimes it's a deep appreciation of some degree of bringing something to an end, that we are so inspired this is possible.

Like my friend who brought cynicism to an end. And then just knowing that it's possible to bring this to an end was just so inspiring for her. Jealousy stops. Complaining stops. Judging people negatively, adversely, stops. And it feels so good and so inspiring. And what it does in part, what this appreciation does, is it kind of opens things up.

It's kind of a pause to appreciate, a pause to allow, to open, to feel, so there's room for something to come up. And one of the things in my experience of practice was that I remember there was a long time where I was just dedicated to being mindful moment by moment. And if something wonderful happened in my practice, it didn't matter, because I was going to be aware of the next moment and the next moment. And sometimes wonderful things happened in practice. They were really nice. And I didn't really register it, didn't take time for it, didn't take in the influence that it had for me, because I was just always going on, because that's what I was told to do, which is not the present moment.

But there's an art to letting the goodness of the practice nourish you, the goodness of the practice enter you, and to take time to feel the goodness. So if there's something to be appreciated, it's good to appreciate it if it nourishes you and gives you more time to be open and available to the experience. This *pīti*, this kind of meditative joy, arising from the inside, requires that it's not covered over. We're not distracted from it. And sometimes I think of it as something shy, deep inside, that you have to be very sensitive, very quiet, to feel and sense.

If there's a lot of static in the control tower, a lot of thinking, judging, wanting, anxiety, fantasies going on, then it's too noisy for us to feel or sense or make room for the deep source within that is there. But it hasn't been given, you know, it's in the dark. It doesn't see the light of awareness. This meditative joy has a lot to do with practicing unself-consciously, where we give ourselves over to the practice so thoroughly that we're not really thinking about ourselves anymore. We're not really judging ourselves or measuring ourselves or evaluating our-

selves or thinking, “Am I there yet?” or anything.

It's kind of like we give ourselves over fully to this activity at hand: the meditation, the breathing, the walking. And so we completely are there with all of us, kind of gather, the gathering of all of us there, so that we're so wholeheartedly present for something that all of who we are gets aligned, comes into kind of a harmony, comes into a kind of a unification. And the representative kind of example that I like, for myself at least, was in Japan, carrying the pot of rice in the monastery with one hand. And then a monk came up and, very kindly, said, “You know, here in the monastery, when we carry rice, we carry it with two hands.” And he showed me.

I was carrying it casually, like the guy was involved with other things, looking around and getting somewhere. The fact that I was carrying rice was like a secondary thing or a tertiary thing. But for him, carrying the rice was the thing. If you carry rice, you carry it. A little bit of rice represents Japan. It's kind of almost like the Japanese flag. So you want to really respect the rice in Japan.

So that's what I learned so much in Zen, that so many things you do with two hands because you want to put all of yourself into it. So the two-handed approach to meditation, where you're kind of there to the best of your ability, without straining, without pushing, without ambition, but to kind of do it wholeheartedly, kind of aiming to be complete in the attention, the absorption, the connection, the touching, the experience. Some people find it very valuable, the language of becoming the breath, becoming the walking. That really gives people a sense of really being there fully. I love the idea of alignment. Everything gets aligned. Everything is kind of going in the same direction.

Like when I was in second grade, there was a sandbox, a big sandbox we could play in. There was that little black flint, metallic flint or something. And we could get these little round U magnets, and we would run them across the top of the sand. And all that little flint would straighten out. And little patterns arose because everything lined up nicely. So everything lines up. Everything is here for this.

We're not, the mind, the heart, the body, doing ten things at one time. We're not fragmented. A common experience in life for many people is, in one way or the other, to be fragmented. Sometimes very strongly. Sometimes whole parts of a human being are cut off, sealed off. And then sometimes, just because we have so many things to do, so many concerns and preoccupations, the mind jumps around, and then different concerns, and the body jumps around, the feelings jump around, and the body is left with the residue of all these different things jumping around. It just kind of leads to a fragmented life, maybe.

And part of the opportunity with coming on retreat is to no longer be fragmented, to settle, to relax. Part of relaxing deeply is to allow everything to settle together, come into harmony, come into alignment, just here. And there's something about that. There might be some physiological phenomenon that goes on and that does this. But something happens there, the whole system coming into harmony, coming into unity, no longer fragmented, no longer in opposition to anything, no longer tense and resisting, bracing ourselves against life. Something begins to flow nicely. Something has room to surface and bubble up.

To me, sometimes it just felt like this is a natural state, and mostly we live in an unnatural state because of all the ways in which we're caught in reactivity. And so there's five different kinds of deepening experiences of this joy that can happen. And one of them is sometimes called the momentary joy, that is just there for a moment. And sometimes it's there in kind of frequently reoccurring moments, but still because they're sparks. So I call it spark joy, sparkling joy. But sometimes it just happens maybe once, and it can be subtle. It's easy to overlook. It's easy not to notice.

But it's a little bit the quality of if you're walking along for a while, just walking and walking, and maybe you don't even notice that you're stepping onto a conveyor belt, and suddenly, oh, you're being carried. It's like, oh, maybe it's even fun. Oh, there we go. That's cool. It's being carried along now. So for a moment you feel something is carrying you. Something is moving through you. It's a spark of something that lifts you or inspires you.

Like, oh, that's wonderful. Why did that happen? What did I do? Did I deserve this? Those are the wrong questions. What are the conditions that allow it? The condition was you were just fully engaged, and it gives a chance for something to come into alignment, come into harmony, and then the feeling that something, the practice practices us, the more wholehearted we are. So at some point something kicks in and we're on the conveyor belt. Or there's a kind of, now there's something happening.

And at first it just might be for a moment, a moment of goodness, a moment of inspiration, a moment of just a spark of something. And it's just like, oh, this is great. But it's usually pretty subtle. And maybe because sometimes it can be very subtle, we overlook it because we're so busy practicing or so busy being concerned about something. But sometimes, when the conditions are right and we're really settled, the sense of being on the conveyor belt, or something beginning to open up, something beginning to move through us, being practiced, has more of a quality of a flow. Something's beginning to flow now.

Sometimes it's all of us that are flowing, so the whole being kind of feels like, oh, now I'm on the path and now I'm on the conveyor belt. Now I'm in the current of the river being

carried. And this is cool. This is nice. It has a delightful feeling, not because we're evaluating it as delightful, but it's just like if you go down a slide, many people kind of smile. Oh, look, I'm on the slide, wow. I don't know all the things that factor into bringing the kind of joyful excitement of it. It might be pretty primitive in this kind of way.

Many years ago I came out to my car when it was raining. Well, it wasn't my car I was going out to, but there was a car across the street. And there was a little bird that was repeatedly sliding down the wet windshield of a car, flying up to the top of the windshield and doing it again, over and over again. And I don't know, maybe it was just trying to get rid of its fleas. But to me, it looked like it was having the best time. It was like, woo. It just couldn't believe its good luck to get this little natural high sliding down this windshield.

So it can feel that kind of way. But it's there because of the alignment, the harmony, the giving ourselves over to something in such a way that we're no longer self-conscious, self-involved. Something else that's not our self-concern, that often follows us everywhere, has dropped away. And so this flow, this movement of delight, joy, some people call it a thrill, some people call it enthusiasm, is kind of a, I like to think of it, it comes with a big yes. Yes, yes, I'll go along with this. Yes, this is right. This is good.

And sometimes, occasionally, you can actually see the clear connection between the concentration and this feeling of the flow of joy. Because if it's connected to something like concentrating on the breath, then as you're staying with the breath, you can feel that it's just there, or maybe even getting stronger. But if you get distracted, it lessens. And then you come back and you're there. And sometimes, when there's a lot of practice and a lot of momentum, it happens in daily life even, or in other circumstances, just because you're there and gathered together.

On one retreat I was at, when I had a lot of this meditative joy, and I thought it was just, this meditation was over, I thought, okay, that was nice, but now I'll go have lunch. And so I got my lunch, my plate, sat down, my fork. And just picking up my fork and sticking it into the food, all that concentration gathered around that act, and this amazing flow of kind of joy took me over. It was like a big wave. And I had to put the fork down and wait a little bit, and then try again. Oh, and that's too much.

And it took me a while to finally be able to eat because this concentration had its own life in me. And for some reason it decided that the object of concentration was the fork, or holding the fork, or something, or aiming for the food. I don't know what it was, but I just had to put it down and wait and try again. It's kind of silly, I guess, but that's my experience. And so there's a spark. Sometimes there's this flow that comes on. Actually, what I kind of jumped

over, the middle one, the second one, that was the third level.

The second one was just a wonderful feeling of aliveness. You just feel alive. It's like, oh, this is good, to feel alive. There's a feeling of a wonderful vitality that begins spreading in the body. Sometimes it's maybe just in the arms. Sometimes it's a feeling that the arms get really, or some part of the body feels very light, or a little bit tingling, or just—for me, it's just this kind of generic feeling of vitality that begins to kind of happen.

And just very alive and healthy. Something about the practice feels like I'm being nourished, the drinking. So the first is a spark. The second is a sense of aliveness that can happen that feels really good. And maybe a person wouldn't describe it exactly as joy, but it's in that family of things here, this wonderful feeling of uplift that can happen for no external reason, but rather because of the gathering together of all the factors, and the mind is getting centered and focused and really present.

So then there's the flow that happens. And the flow, this really, since we're in the flow, so we're being carried along, and that flow can take many different forms. And sometimes it can feel like an uplift, or sometimes like some kind of flow of sensations. Some people call it energy moving up the spine or up in the body. Some people seem to get the sense that they're kind of being transported, being lifted. Sometimes it's more broad, where it's this feeling of suffusion, like a radiance, a radiance of joy, a radiance of light, of warmth, of tingling, that seems to spread through the body.

So it's kind of remarkable to have this kind of flow of these wonderful qualities through the body. And sometimes it goes a little bit awry if there's straining with it, pushing for it. Sometimes it is possible to get pretty concentrated and have this joy arise with striving, with kind of really bearing down. But generally it tends to end, the good energy of it tends to get bottlenecked, tends to kind of get stuck someplace. And then people sometimes get headaches. Sometimes they really feel like this energy is kind of hitting something really strong someplace and feels blocked or feels just too intense.

And the idea, at least from the way that it's sometimes taught and described in the *suttas*, is to not have it stop anywhere, to have it be suffusive, pervasive, let it spread. Whatever this wonderful feeling is, nourishing, happy feeling, joyful feeling, let it spread through the body. Let it spread wide and full all over. So there's a spark. It's brief, momentary. There's a general wonderful feeling of aliveness that might not qualify as some deep absorption, but certainly feels really wonderful. And sometimes there's a real sense of a flow, a very strong flow, very strongly. Like now you're being carried along. You're really in the stream, or the stream is in you, flowing through you.

And then sometimes that can become really strong. It can become rapture. And sometimes the rapture is quite wonderful, especially at first. And sometimes the rapture gets to be too much. As for some people, when this *pīti*, this joy factor, gets really strong and could be qualified as a kind of rapture, some people think it's the best thing going at first. And then after a while, it's just exhausting. Like, give me a break. Not again. I've had enough of this. Please stop.

And sometimes it's hard to. This kind of feeling is going to have a life of its own in us. And so sometimes we have to be very patient while it kind of moves through. And then the fifth type, fifth level, maybe the deepest, is what I call ripening. And the ripening of this joy is when the joy begins to be felt to be in harmony with, or together with, what's called *sukha*, which we'll see in a few days. *Sukha* is kind of happiness, a happiness that feels like contentment, or a happiness that feels very tranquil, a happiness that feels very settled or peaceful.

And the difference between these two is that the happiness is very physical, it feels really embodied. The flow and the excitement of the thrill of joy, it feels physical, but it turns out it has kind of a mental excitation that comes with it. And when that mental excitation begins to quiet a little bit, then we have these two coming together a little bit, sometimes not noticed, but there's the ripening of the joy into kind of a partnership with this *sukha*, with this happiness. And so it starts becoming, again, more harmonious, more settled, not so jagged as it can be sometimes, or not too much. And it can feel very healing to have this.

All these kinds of joy can feel very healing. The joy-*sukha*, when it's really ripe, can feel very healing. And we'll see, it's the *sukha* itself, when it becomes just *sukha*, that becomes very healing. And the point is not to have these experiences of joy. Some people practice for these things, and I've known people who are a little bit over-attached to having these states. That's all they want to do, is to have them, and don't really care about anything else.

But here in this path, these are stepping stones to go further, to create really good conditions, to be really still, quiet, clarify the mind, clarify the eyes, so we really can see, and create the softness, the malleability, the flexibility, the openness, the non-defensiveness, the softness, so that some of the deepest holdings we have, attachments we have, can relax also. And it's very hard to let go of some of the deepest clinging we have just with this surface consciousness. It seems unimaginable because there's so much covering it, so much tightness and holding all around it. But as we go through this kind of deepening into this meditative dimension of joy and happiness and so forth, there is this deeper softening and quieting that goes on. That sets a stage for what's going to happen later on.

As many of you know, I really like the word yes. And when this joy factor begins happening,

it's like my whole system is saying yes. And one of the responses that I have for it is I feel very grateful. I feel that this meditative joy is a gift. And it's hard for me to take responsibility for it, or it's hard for me to say, "I made it happen," or could make it happen, or do it.

Sometimes if you're really doing a lot of retreat, it's relatively easy to dip into it. But even then, I feel that it's not really me. And I just feel so lucky and fortunate. Yes, this is good. It's a gift, a gift I've been given for now. And I don't take it for granted. But I also don't try to do a lot with it, except to settle into it, relax into it, allow it to kind of flow, to flow more fully.

And to have these things happen as natural processes that well up from deep within us is kind of remarkable, that we have this potential. And we all have it. And so slowly, slowly, we're kind of clearing maybe the mud of thoughts and attachments and fears and resistance and judgments so that the water can really settle. If you remember, in the beginning I talked about the water, the raindrop on the mountainside becoming creeks. Then at some point it becomes lakes. And the Buddha used lakes as a metaphor for this meditative joy.

And this idea that there's a flow within us, the whole body, the metaphor is that the whole body is the lake. And within the deep lake, the bottom of the lake basin, there's a natural spring bringing fresh water into the lake. And I think we're supposed to imagine sort of like an underwater fountain of water within the water. So maybe the lake water is very still, but there's a flow of water within it that maybe is strong at its source, and then it fans out in all directions, and then gets dissipated and kind of dissolves into the lake. So some distance from the source, everything goes still. So there's going to be this flow from a deep source within.

And it's a very different place to base our life than when we base our life on our reactions, reactivity, base our life on the reactive emotions of greed, hatred, and delusion, the reactive emotions of fear. Very different than when we base our life on our stories. Some of us have good stories, stories well worth keeping. But if we're overly centered on those things and reliving them and renewing them and being with them, it kind of doesn't make enough room in the field of awareness for this deep source inside to begin flowing, showing itself.

So it's one of the reasons why we attempt in meditation to include everything peacefully, so that some things can be put to rest for a while. So we don't reinforce certain things, the ways in which we can be so self-conscious, self-preoccupied. It's remarkable how much of our thinking involves me, myself, and mine, like we're the main character in our thoughts maybe. And to let that kind of go on a vacation, kind of like, okay, that's not needed right now. This is a time to discover something deeper, a deeper source of life.

And believe it or not, sometimes in the teachings of the Buddha, this deeper place is sometimes called the womb. And rather than calling it womb, sometimes I call it the source. Someplace deep inside of us is a wonderful source. That's a source of a lot of goodness that's very different than if we source our life in the control tower, in the thinking space. And one of the strategies of being on a retreat is to be in an environment where you're not going to be so distracted in daily life, to be in an environment where, more than normal life, you can give yourself wholeheartedly to being present for what's happening right now.

Certainly in sitting, walking. It can be while you're eating, to just do one thing at a time, just be with the eating. It could be how you walk down the steps. Just walk down the steps. Be all of yourself right there. It could be while you're drinking tea. Just drinking tea.

Okay. To encourage you to just be fully present for drinking tea, I'll tell you that I had my first kind of real opening experience in meditation on a retreat drinking tea. It blew me away that tea could do that. I have no idea what tea it was. Otherwise, I might try to recreate it. And it's really there to give a chance for something which is not you, that's within you, to harmonize, to come together, to reveal itself.

Here, don't, and you can't try too hard. You can't be cat at the mouse store waiting for meditative joy. Just sincerely give yourself over to the task at hand. Just this, and kind of forget yourself in the process. And if you do that throughout the day on retreat, because here's the opportunity more than anywhere else, then whatever you're doing, walking down the steps, give yourself over to that. Maybe even forget yourself, just walking down the steps.

Maybe eating. Maybe going for a stroll. Maybe looking at the clouds. Maybe in the shower. I think the shower is one of those places people sometimes will give up on the practice, but just showering. And the continuity of this just this, slowly, without effort, without straining, without pushing, but just kind of surrendering to just this, surrendering to just this, giving yourself over to this, is the conditions that kind of build a certain momentum of things coming into harmony, coming into alignment.

And maybe, just maybe, one day you'll have a feeling inside that's like a big yes, that's smiling. Sometimes with this meditative joy, you'll smile even if you don't want to. This is a kind of natural smile that is elicited by this flow of good energy feeling. And if all this seems to be too far away, too difficult, too impossible, and discouraging to hear this, this way of practicing unself-consciously, a synonym for that is practicing with sincerity. And that's actually more important than meditative joy. So don't worry about it too much. Thank you.