

Sympathetic Joy

SFVS Brahma Vihara Month – March 2018

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It is important to understand how much your own happiness is linked to that of others. There is no individual happiness totally independent of others.

~ His Holiness, the Dalai Lama

Connection to Others through Joy and Suffering

For that matter, there is nothing in the practice that is not linked to others. But this is particularly true with joy. It is similar to the experience of knowing our own pain and suffering. When we begin to know our suffering, it is easier to understand the suffering of others and to open to compassion. Experiencing joy ourselves helps us to wish the same for others.

The Buddha taught over and over and again, repeatedly throughout his discourses, that the Brahma Viharas are naturally occurring qualities of mind and heart, and that when our minds are spacious, they arise naturally within us. As I mentioned in the first talks on loving-kindness and compassion, the Dalai Lama calls the Brahma Viharas our “spiritual birthright.” They are part of our very essence as humans. We need only to carefully tend and cultivate them and give them the space they need to fully mature.

This week we are on *mudita*, or sympathetic joy. Again, the four Brahma Viharas are loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).

What is Mudita?

The teacher, Lloyd Burton, once said that

Experiencing *sukha*—the liberated and liberating joy of letting go that arises from within—facilitates the experience of *mudita*, which can be

thought of as a combination of *intending* that others might experience the same joy arising within themselves, and *taking delight* in the recognition of that joy when you see it in others . . . *mudita* can be thought of as resonance with the recognition of joy in others occasioned by the recognition of it in oneself . . . Then the two become indistinguishable, and can be thought of as “selfless joy.”

Resonance

There is that word *resonance* again, which we encountered when contemplating compassion. Compassion is a resonance with the suffering of others—like the vibrating together of the strings of the sitar—and *mudita* is a resonance with their joy. In this way, sorrow and joy are deeply related.

I think of all those poems, American spirituals, and other songs that express this idea so beautifully, like Dolly Parton’s, “Seems to me if you want the rainbow, then you gotta have the rain.” The two go together, and the more we have one the more space there is for the other.

The Mind’s Deliverance

The Buddha referred to sympathetic joy as the mind’s deliverance of happiness. That word deliverance is very important because it describes exactly what *mudita* cultivates—it helps to deliver us from oppressive and constricted states of suffering. It is painful to feel the constricted and negative states that come with jealousy and envy. For a moment there may be a sense of justification, satisfaction in being right when someone else is wrong, but as a way of being in life, negativity is very painful. To know this particular suffering helps us want to create more wholesome ways of living.

Appreciative or sympathetic joy is the antidote to envy, jealousy, judging, the demeaning of others, and all the constricted mind states of aversion and attachment. *Mudita* comes after compassion practice because it helps to infuse more ease into our practice and to counteract any melancholy and sadness resulting from practicing compassion. It keeps us from being overwhelmed by the suffering of the world.

As I mentioned in the first talk on metta, the Brahma Viharas introduce us to what might be termed the *mature emotions*. We grow into adulthood and become socialized, and for the most part, we have learned to modify our outward emotional reactions. But inwardly something very different may be going on. We may have a bad reaction to someone's good news. Even if it is not something we would want ourselves, there can often be a feeling that we may not wholeheartedly want another to have it either.

Think for a moment about this. Isn't there enough happiness to go around? Does someone else's happiness really take something from us?

Mudita is considered to be the most difficult of the Brahma Viharas to practice. I find it both interesting and curious that it is considered more difficult to find joy in another's good fortune than it is to have compassion for them. One of the reasons for this is that we humans have many deeply conditioned, constrictive mind states that keep us from open-heartedly rejoicing in one another's good fortune. It is a rare and beautiful quality to feel truly happy when others are happy or when they have material success. There is that tendency to be happy for someone but to hold back just a little.

Being able to rejoice in our own good fortune and that of others challenges some of our deepest assumptions about what can make us happy. Happiness will not go away when it is shared. In fact, it can only increase.

Insufficiency

But, for some reason a profound sense of insufficiency is programmed into humans at a very early age. This is not new. It is not just occurring in this century. The Buddha recognized this tendency 2500 years ago, and today it is still a dominant characteristic of the human condition. This sense of insufficiency tells us that we never have enough, that others always have more. And the fact that they have more is not only painful but also a cause to rationalize our negative emotions. We say to ourselves, "That person gets too much attention. Their head is already swollen. If I say something nice, isn't it just going to make them more inflated?"

I never thought that I would be quoting Joan Rivers in a dharma talk, but this is what she said, “Don’t expect praise without envy until you are dead.”

The feeling of insufficiency doesn’t just occur in the material realm; it goes much deeper into emotional realms. If we look closely we can discover the truth of this. It often seems that others have more attention, more love, and more luck. There is a sense that happiness is a limited commodity and that, when someone else has it, then there is less for me. Mudita challenges this assumption.

I can remember when I was a child and my mother poured milk for my brother and me. We would do this endless whining, “He got more than I did!” In frustration one day my mother took out a measuring cup and measured out the exact same amount for each of us. What I was really whining about was, “You love him more than you love me, and it shows because you gave him a quarter of an inch more milk that you gave me.”

We may not act this out in front of others, but inside we are still experiencing these painful emotions. Whole nations, ethnic groups, religious groups are taking them out on one another. We see it all the time.

What a hopeful gift our practice gives us, offering the possibility of cultivating and responding from the mature emotions and not from that whiny inner child.

Letting Go of Envy

So mudita, like metta, is a form of generosity of the heart. To be able to let go of envy and wish others joy and success, without holding back even a little, is one of the most profound forms of generosity. Bringing more joy into our lives—particularly by resonating with the joy of others in a selfless way.

Rousing Joy in Ourselves

One of the things we are doing when we practice mudita is rousing that sense of joy and generosity that is accessible within every one of us. We may wonder how sitting and repeating the same phrases can possibly produce a profound joy. Here is how: repeating the mudita phrase, “May your happiness and good fortune continue,” begins

to bring the idea into consciousness that to be happy for others is possible. And, as with the other Brahma Viharas as well, at first it may have just the opposite effect because shining a light on something also reveals all the cobwebs. We stay with it because we have built faith in our practice.

Wholesome Habits

Staying with mudita also helps us to start to form a wholesome habit. We all know that the way we create a habit is by doing something over and over again. So this is a good habit of mind we are forming, the deep mental path. Earlier I quoted Thoreau in relation to metta, but it also applies here to mudita and to all four of the Brahma Vihara practices. "To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives."

The Buddhist texts say, "The practitioner endeavors, activates [with] persistence, upholds, and exerts their intent for the maintenance, increase, plenitude, development . . ." of any wholesome state.

Abandoning Unwholesome States

But sometimes we find ourselves noticing that some unwholesome state has arisen and we are caught in its grip. Those of us who have sat and observed the contents of our minds know how fickle the mind is. It does what it wants and thinks what it will. We find that we do not have as much control as we believed we had. And thus we often find ourselves wondering how to work with unwholesome states that we are caught in.

Intersection of Vipassana and the Brahma Viharas

And this is where our Vipassana practice and mudita or any of the other Brahma Viharas intersect and become allies. We do them as separate practices but in truth they are inseparable. The tendency when there is a strong negative feeling is to just react, to turn sullen, or to rationalize the feeling away. But our Vipassana practice of clear seeing helps us to be with that feeling, to identify it, and to allow enough space for an appropriate and skillful response.

When we are present to the process of envy, judging, or ill will, we are no longer simply

harboring a reactive, negative mind state. Instead, we shift to mindfulness of an unpleasant emotion and mind state. We are not getting rid of anything, we are just shifting our perception from the content of an emotion to a detached interest in the process of the emotion. This is what happens with difficult emotions that arise from our feelings of insufficiency—like envy or ill will. When we create a spacious mind, a shift in perception is enabled.

Often, when awareness is strong and our energy is constant, there is an opening, an opportunity to inhabit that moment in a new way—a way that we had not before imagined possible. This is why it is important to develop strong habits of mind and heart that can meet those moments when we observe a difficult emotion arising.

Value of Formal Brahma Vihara Practice

The formal practices of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, generosity, and gratitude help to arouse those wholesome states and make them available when we are faced with difficult moments. Formal practice awakens those qualities even if we do not feel them at the time. Still the seeds are being planted and they will mature in their own time and be available to us, possibly when we least expect it.

It is the awakening of those naturally occurring qualities, those seeds planted in formal practice, that the Dali Lama referred to as our “spiritual birthright.”

What is an Antidote

Sometimes mudita is described as the antidote to the constricted states of envy and jealousy. How does an antidote work? Well it counteracts something. We see this word antidote in medicine all the time. So we cultivate mudita to counteract and to overwhelm jealousy, envy, judging, and the impulse to demean others.

We also practice mudita in order to cultivate new habits of mind that will replace unskillful habits. Cultivating wholesome mind states creates spaciousness in the mind so vast that there is nothing for negativity to cling to.

Benefits of Mudita

With the cultivation of joy in this way—joy in the joy of others—we begin to find the ability to take delight in things, ourselves, especially in the small overlooked joys in life, those that cost nothing and are with us every day. If we find more joy and less boredom in our own lives, how much easier it is to find delight in the joy of others

Near Neighbor

We also can begin to understand the difference between true joy and that adrenalin rush or elation that comes from excitement. This kind of agitated excitement is referred to as the near neighbor of true joy. There is nothing wrong with it, but it is not to be mistaken for the joy that comes from deep within like an artesian spring.

Elation is called a near neighbor because it can feel very much like real joy, but the subtle difference is that this kind of excitement is not spacious and does not bring calm. True joy and true sympathetic joy quiet the mind and help us to focus more easily.

Unconditional Joy

Taking joy in the joy of others has the double benefit of enabling us to let go of constricted mind states and to receive joy as well. We share another's joy and at the same time rouse joy in ourselves. It's kind of a two for one deal.

During this difficult time in the world, the practice of mudita is especially important. The Buddha told his students that when we experience joy we actually have a responsibility to share it. Joy is not just for ourselves alone. We can often have the idea that, when the world is in distress, we need to be grim in solidarity, but how does more grimness help? I think of the civil rights movement. People reported that what attracted them to the movement was the joy of the other protestors.

The following verse is from the Buddhists texts:

Live in joy
in love
Even among those who hate

Live in joy
in health
Even among the afflicted

Live in joy
in peace
Even among the troubled

Look within
Be still
Free from fear and attachment
Know the sweet joy of the way

Mudita is an unconditional joy. Just like an artesian spring, it flows up from within us. When that joy is experienced in ourselves and in others, it becomes selfless joy. It does not belong to any one person; it is just the joy that is available to everyone.