

Brahmavihāras: Appreciative Joy (1 of 5)

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Gil Fronsdal

This Monday morning I begin a new theme for the week. This is the third of the four *brahmavihāras* – four divine abidings – that of *muditā*. *Muditā* is often translated into English as either sympathetic joy or appreciative joy. Because those two-word translations require some explanation, sometimes I prefer a single English word to translate *muditā*. And that's the word 'rejoice.' I think the word 'rejoice' captures more of the sense that there's something particular that we're celebrating and really appreciating. Rejoicing is a little bit more of an active, energized appreciation and gratitude in something that's worth delighting about, or something that's really worth celebrating.

I live a block away from the local high school here. And when high school is in session, I sometimes walk by the campus as the students are leaving at the end of the day. One of the great delights is when I see a couple of them or a small group talking. They seem so happy, engaged, and active. Certainly there must be something very important that they're talking about because there's this joy. Maybe it's just getting out of school and seeing their friends. I feel so happy seeing them. I feel delighted. I feel a certain kind of appreciative joy.

But it's almost like I don't have to actively appreciate them. It's just a joyful thing to see the joy of other people, to experience it, and know that it's happening. So part of a mindful life is not only being mindful of the present moment, but using that capacity for present moment awareness to start being aware in a more useful way, rather than some of the selective ways we can be on automatic pilot.

We know that some people have a negativity bias, where they tend to notice what's wrong with themselves or the world. And there's a strong tendency in that direction. There's a danger bias, where people have a strong tendency to look for where the danger is – worried, afraid of things, and very cautious. There's also a lust bias, where they're looking for: "What can I get? What can I have that brings me pleasure, joy, or satisfaction – some kind of pleasure?" Or looking for what's nice – "What can I have?" There's also an anger or hostility bias that some people have. Or an aversion bias, looking for what's wrong again, and doing it with a little bit of hostility. It's particularly painful when it's directed towards oneself.

So people have these blinders on. We'll have this very selective orientation. And if we're not aware of that, then present moment awareness becomes the support for that selective bias in our awareness of what we're oriented towards. And it's very hard to see it because it's sometimes so ingrained and habituated. We just think it's normal or natural that we're the way we are.

Anyway, the point is that present moment awareness is not always used for a good purpose because of this tendency. So one of the things with a mindful life is to live a little bit deliberately – with intentionality, with a sense of purpose. And one purpose is to open up beyond the selectivity, to open up wider, and take in more of what the experience is, in a way that maybe actually is more realistic.

For many people, one of the ways is to appreciate what's happening. To spend a little bit of time looking and being grateful, appreciative, and delighted by the things that are happening, that bring gratitude and delight – "delight-able" things. It can be overdone, for sure. And there are people whose selectivity bias is a little too romantically focused on how everything is wonderful and good. So that has its own corrective.

It isn't so much that we're trying to have a new bias, but trying to open up, expand, and break down the selectivity in the ways we are. So we have a wider field of what's happening. If we do that really well, chances are, we

won't be so consumed with our fantasies, memories, and predictions about the future. And we'll start appreciating more just being present here.

It turns out that there's actually a higher percentage of things that are working and going well in the present moment, than our selectivity bias will often pick out and look at. I've had various things go wrong with my body. I had surgery last week and a year ago. Different kinds of things have happened, and I'm getting older. Different things are aching, hurting, and doing this and that. It's just part of the aging process. I could get preoccupied with these things happening in my body, and be upset, or worried. Or spend my whole day searching and reading about every possible nuance of what's going on – spending my days concerned about it.

I can also appreciate that even though I have things in my body I have to take care of, some high percentage – 99.9% – or even higher, of what it takes to make this body operate relatively harmoniously, is working. It's working very well. I don't even know everything that goes on – all the hormones, chemicals, and neurons – and all the things that are needed to ensure this complicated event of having a body. It's remarkable! It's mostly working. I'm still able to speak. What a complicated thing it is to speak words, know what they mean, and string them together. Wow! We shouldn't take this for granted.

I'm spending time now with some people who have senility. The words and the sentences are not there. The memory is not there. It is so easy to have a selectivity bias that excludes things, and takes things for granted. So part of the sense of giving purpose to mindfulness – to a mindful life – is to begin appreciating things more.

And this can give birth to *muditā* – this delight, appreciation, and rejoicing in others. I think that this idea of rejoicing in the success and good fortune of other people is one of the really great joys of this practice.

Partly it's a joy because it's an antidote to the idea of being self-preoccupied or self-concerned in such a way that we set up a tension between self and other – where we have jealousy, envy or, "Not that person!" Or, "I want that." Or having a feeling of inadequacy. But to be able to be genuinely relaxed with an open and appreciative delight in the good fortune of other people – like I am delighted seeing these high school students leaving their campus. This is one of the great gifts of this mindful life.

But don't take it by chance that it might come along. Don't take any of the *brahmavihāras* as just a chance occurrence that you should feel this way. But actually spend time cultivating and developing them, looking for them, and recognizing them when they arise.

So begin spending more time in these states, or in activities of appreciation. As you appreciate things, I encourage you to allow yourself to feel gladness, joy, delight, or a kind of pleasure in that. Let it fill you. Take the time to let it fill you.

Now, some people might complain that what I'm talking about might be selfish and self-absorbed – just about myself, and how I feel. There's certainly a danger of that. But I think for most of us, it's the opposite – that what's selfish, self-concerned, or conceited are all the preoccupations that go into the selectivity bias we have for our attention. Most of the ways we think about ourselves may be a little too much about me, myself and mine – "What's in it for me?" Or "How am I? – I'm not doing well enough." Or "I'm unworthy." Or "I have to get more," or "Get out of the way because I want to have that, not you." There are all kinds of things about self.

These are the things that cause harm in our society, in our world. Appreciation doesn't cause much harm in our society. If we offer too much of it to others, they might get a little annoyed. But I think that appreciation for others, having delight and rejoicing in others, and sharing their joy in a nice, balanced, open way isn't selfish. Don't worry that it's leaving too much out, or not realistic.

I would venture to suggest that for many people, it's the normal way to see the world as not realistic. But by expanding our field of appreciation, rather than stepping into something unrealistic, we're actually discovering a more realistic way of being in the world – a way that doesn't deny the difficulties or the challenges. But may create a very different context for experiencing them – being with them in a way where we don't become oppressed by the challenges. We don't get limited by the challenges that we have. We take them in stride and hold them more lightly.

And not very far away is our capacity to breathe, to relax, to be present here. And also just to appreciate this life. Wow, what a great thing! There is much more joy available for us than most people recognize. And if we learn to appreciate more, then we'll be able to be givers of joy, to provide the gift of joy to others. That is what I think is the great heart of *muditā*, of rejoicing. To know how to do this well is to give the gift of joy to others – the gift of appreciation.

So that was an introductory talk on this topic of *muditā*. I would encourage you – if you're at all inclined to do this over the next 24 hours – spend some time, more time than you normally would, trying to be present for what can be appreciated. Especially appreciate it in the present moment. Then if you have some friends, talk to them about what you're discovering. Have a conversation about appreciation of what's here, as an alternative to our selectivity bias for what is not right. And may you delight in this exploration. Thank you.