

Brahmavihāras: Appreciative Joy (3 of 5)

December 23, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

muditā, sādhu, joy, intent, appreciative, sympathetic, fortune, rejoice, happiness, aspiration, intentionality, open heart, non-fear, Path of Freedom

Gil Fronsdal

This is the third talk on appreciative joy, *muditā*. All these *brahmaviharās* come along with an intent, a sense of purpose, or an inspiration to really orient ourselves around these qualities. And rather than just appreciating them when they happen to appear, but to make them a practice and an orientation for our lives. It's possible to choose them individually and spend a week, like we are now, with any one of them.

It's also possible that the primary intent or purpose is keeping the heart open. Or to say it a different way, to really stay present, attentive, and aware, to receive and register fully the experience of our life. As if, in our present moment as we go through our lives – now, *this* is the most important time. *This* is the most important thing – regardless of what it is.

Because this is the only time when you'll be conscious – this moment. Your lived experience is so valuable. And rather than judging the present moment by what you're doing or what you're not doing. Or there's more important things someplace else, and you just want to get to the place in time where something wonderful is going to be. It's shortchanging ourselves, because another whole half of what's going on is that we're conscious, aware, present, and alive in this moment.

And there is a way of appreciating that. Really being present for everything. Being openhearted towards everything is also a way of being present and open to ourselves and to the preciousness of this lived moment here. So with that intent – to live with an open heart. Then as we go through the day, one or another of these *brahmaviharās* might get awakened or evoked.

When we feel friendliness towards people and want what's for their welfare, then it's *mettā*, loving-kindness. When people are suffering, we feel for their suffering in our open heart. We care for them, and want the suffering to end. They have our sympathy. And when things are going well, then we have *muditā*.

We celebrate with them. We rejoice. We're happy for them and share in their happiness. And in a sense, their good fortune is giving us a gift to feel the 'Yes' – the joy and happiness. Our happiness and joy in their success and good fortune is a gift to them – a mutual giving of joy. And what a great world it would be if we had that mutual circle of joy and delight for each other.

Muditā also comes with a sense of intent or purpose. In doing *muditā* practice classically, the intention is captured in a certain phrase. My favorite one is from a text that's from about 1500 years ago, called the *Path of Freedom* – not the *Path of Purification*.

A footnote here – when I was young, I wanted to be an archaeologist, and dig in the grounds of old ruins and find things of long ago. And that's nice. But now I read these Buddhist texts that were composed 1500, 2000, and 2500 years ago. Some of them were written during the time of the civilizations I wanted to explore.

Now I don't find the stones, ruins, and material objects from those times, but rather these beautiful expressions of inner development and cultivation – how these people in the ancient world developed their hearts and minds, what they valued, and how they understood themselves from the inside out. Something you can't really see so much from the archaeological stones that might be found. What I said is a little bit simplistic perhaps, if you're an archaeologist. But still, this idea of the "archaeology of the soul" is found.

In this ancient, 1500-year-old text, the expression of intentionality around *muditā* is said this way: *Sādhu. Sādhu* is the Pali word for 'excellent.' So "*Sādhu, Sādhu, Sādhu* – may this goodness, may this fortune continue for a long time!" So this idea of excellent *Sādhu!* I think it's like the English "Yes, yes." And that's just a happy exclamation of joy and affirmation of something.

And may this continue for a long time. This long time for me is very important, because you're celebrating something that's worthwhile having for a long time. If it's simply some kind of pleasure – like that someone has a chance to go to an amusement park, and they are really delighted by all the wonderful things there. Well, after a few years of living in an amusement park, it's not going to be an ongoing source of happiness for a long time. It's a bit conditioned about the excitement of the moment of being there.

But there are some happinesses and joys which are sustainable. That nourish and support us, and are worthwhile having for a long time. And to really affirm that, to celebrate and enjoy that: "May what's good in you, may what's good here, continue for a long time."

The same text talks about this movement of openhearted affirmation of *sādhu*, of 'Yes,' as being an antidote for fear. Or it's a movement of non-fear.

Certainly we can reflect how many times the unwillingness to appreciate others or to celebrate and really enjoy and affirm what's happening is that socially the implications are challenging. Will they take advantage of us? Or it's embarrassing for us to do that. Or it's inappropriate. And there's fear there. But to discover this way of living an intentional, purposeful life of mindfulness that's really here. With time, we also learn how to be safe here. How not to pick up, react, judge, and take in so much of what goes on in the world.

It's easier then to feel non-fear. Standing on our own two feet – not leaning in, not expecting anything, and not pulling back. Maybe this is the wrong term in the modern United States – this idea of "stand your ground." But stand your ground with your arms wide open. And you're certainly a safe person for people. And: "Yes, yes, how wonderful! May this continue for a long time."

So in this more classical period of *Theravādan* Buddhism then, as one does *muditā* practice, one repeats this phrase, "May this success continue. May this good fortune go on for people." Something like that.

There's an intent of support, hope, and aspiration for this person to keep experiencing it. When I do it, it's not so much that this particular good fortune continues, but rather this capacity they had that led to it. This inner, deeper place that makes it possible for them to feel joy, happiness, and well-being: "May that place stay awake. May that place still operate in them, and be supported and recognized."

And so part of *muditā* practice is having this intention, motivation, or aspiration for this goodness and good fortune to continue – for the happiness of others to continue.

But that also makes appreciative joy a little bit more complicated. It's wonderful to do this, but it also is a little more complicated, more cognitive. Something more has to wake up in the mind to have that wish. In the teachings of the Buddha, he talks about the practice of *muditā* without any reference to establishing a clear intention or aspiration that could be encapsulated in a phrase. But rather, it's just feeling joy and rejoicing in the good fortune of others. So you don't have to even be in the person's presence. They don't have to know that you're wishing that to continue. It's simpler. It comes from a simpler place inside.

It's just that we're open, available, and ready to say, "Ah, yes, this is wonderful! How nice. This is good." We don't even say those words. But there's a resonance. There's a way in which our heart – our inner life – in being open, present, and not preoccupied with our thoughts, that we experience. We are affected in a nice way by the good things we see in the world – the good things people are doing, and the success and happiness they have. There's a feeling of abundance that happens – "Yes, this is great!"

This kind of movement of feeling joy, in things around us that are joy-producing, requires the mind to not be crowded. A crowded mind cannot feel much love – cannot feel much joy and delight in the world around us. And so part of the function of meditation and mindfulness is to not crowd the mind with thoughts, ideas, reactions, judgments, and commentary, which – more often than not – are not about the present moment. But learn to quiet that enough. So it's not so crowded or fast – one thought after the other, like we're just jumping around from one to the next.

It also requires that the mind is not so scattered, random or purposeless, like we're giving over to the mind to just jump around and do whatever it wants. It's like kids who have free rein of the house, because the parents are gone. To cultivate a life of purpose and intent in Buddhism is to begin cutting through or stabilizing the crowded, scattered, agitated mind. So that some of the most wonderful parts of who we are have a chance to be there for us.

One of the wonderful parts of our lives is appreciative joy – our capacity to say, "Sādhu, Sādhu, Sādhu – Yes, this is wonderful. Yes, I rejoice in this. Yes, may this good fortune continue for you for a long time."

So, a life of intent. For this day, you might see if you can have a little more sense of intent, purpose, or heightened value in living the day with *muditā*, appreciative joy. Ready to rejoice and notice what's worth appreciating. Appreciating what can be appreciated. And to remind you, you might tie a string around your finger or put a sticky note someplace where you would see it all the time and write: "Rejoice" or "Appreciative Joy." And have conversations with people about this.

May you spend a day with appreciation, even in the midst of whatever challenges you have – not instead of. Thank you and I wish you well.