

Brahmavihāras: Appreciative Joy (4 of 5)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

The most classic *Theravāda* discussion about the practice of *brahmavihāras* – these four divine homes for our hearts and minds – discusses how we can use ourselves as an example for how to understand the well-being of others. To cultivate loving-kindness for oneself is not meant to be selfish and self-focused. It's really meant to be a preparation to be able to do loving-kindness towards the world around us.

The description says that, by having oneself as an example, "This is what it's like to have love. This is what it's like to receive kindness from someone." Then there's more embodiment and more sense of understanding of how to connect to and understand others, and do it for them as well.

So the same thing with *muditā*, appreciative joy – sometimes it's hard to do it for oneself. But to the degree to which we can have some sense of recognizing in ourselves something to affirm, "Yes, that's good. That's good about ourselves. Yes, even if 99% of ourselves is not so good, maybe that 1% is appropriate to affirm." The 10%, 55%, or whatever it is that's good in oneself – to affirm it, celebrate it, enjoy it, and appreciate it.

It's so sad to not feel some appreciation or joy in ourselves because we're kept hostage by what is not so good about ourselves. Of course, everyone has their shortcomings. Everyone has something that they could find that is their psychological warts, their foibles. It just comes with being human, of course. But it's sad to focus so much on that, that we deny, ignore, or push aside that part of us that is actually good, happy, or wholesome.

Sometimes it's actually really appropriate to not hold what's good in captivity by what is not so good. But spend some time appreciating the wholesome and the good in ourselves. And so to feel joy in ourselves, to discover appreciation – what we can appreciate in life – to be grateful.

Nowadays, there's a practice of writing down what you were grateful for every day. And use this to review it. And I haven't done the writing exercise. But I've certainly thought about it at the end of the day – what I appreciate and am grateful for in the day. It's such a wonderful thing to do. I just feel so buoyed, delighted, and lightened by it. Sometimes it's hard not to smile, thinking about it.

What I find surprising is that I feel more joy at the end of the day thinking about it than I did while it was happening. Somehow I was busy living my life, taking things for granted, or just too involved in things to really appreciate the goodness of it. So to have that practice of appreciation and gratitude at the end of the day. And to include appreciation and gratitude for what there is to be grateful for in oneself.

We don't make this a selfish practice. We can think that we're doing this partly so that we are more able to offer affirmation, appreciation, gratitude, and rejoicing for others. That is really one of the great gifts of life: this ability to really step forward and rejoice, and to be happy and delighted in the success, good fortune, and happiness of other people.

I said earlier it's very commonly believed that *muditā* is the hardest *brahmavihāra* because of envy, jealousy, fear of opening up and sharing that joy with other people, and feeling bad about oneself if we compare ourselves to others who are happier than we are.

All these complications come in. People get mean and bitter sometimes around the success of other people. But this *muditā* is just one of the greatest delights because it's really a dropping away of self-preoccupation, selfishness – and opening up.

So to experience one's own well-being, joy, and self-appreciation as a means to really dissolve or let go of self-concern. To really step forward and have a reference point or an ability inside of ourselves to just open up. And

to not exactly lose ourselves, but close to it, in the delight and joy of others. To rejoice, "Oh, this is great!" It's a happiness. It's joy that involves no loss. It involves no need – no neediness, no cost. It involves no asserting ourselves onto people. And having no agenda of what we want from others. Or what's needed to happen.

It's not an exchange – "If I really congratulate and appreciate them, rejoice in them, then they better do it for me." It's just very simple. We don't lose anything by this kind of rejoicing. If anything, we gain in our ability to open and share.

It's a wonderful contagion of joy. Other people's joy, well-being, or success is contagious. It affects us. And in doing that, it's kind of a secondary joy. It's a derived joy because the original one is there with the other person. And we have this secondary continuation of it. It's a wonderful thing to let joy be contagious or continue to have a life that's beyond itself, and goes on to another person.

When we rejoice in other people's joy, if anybody is around us or is in the aftermath of how we are – really affirming the joy and well-being of others – maybe there's tertiary joy. They appreciate the after-effects of that, and how we are as well.

This wonderful, cost-free exchange – contagion of joy and well-being – I think of it as a form of love. Maybe joy given is love. Or a form of love is giving joy. *Muditā* is not giving that is assertive. It's not like giving anything material. It's no cost for us if we spontaneously feel this delight and joy. And we express and affirm it in such a way – in words, deeds, and thought – so that other people can understand that we feel that way.

It's a way of expressing love – our love of others. And *muditā* rejoices. The rejoicing of *muditā* is like the opposite of regrets, the opposite of hopelessness. It's also the opposite of hope, in a certain kind of way, in that hope is more about how things will be in the future. *Muditā* is more of a celebration of what's here in the present.

So, recognizing the goodness that's here, recognizing what can be appreciated here and now. As we practice, as we develop greater capacity to center on ourselves, to be in the present, and be grounded deep inside to where our goodness is – our lack of hostility, meanness, greed, and fear – then we have a reference point for how other people have that capacity as well.

Sometimes you can tune into people more and more deeply. They say that the more deeply a person has matured in this practice, the more free they are. The more able they are to recognize the freedom of others. If you're a person who is not free, you can't see it. You don't have any idea what it is. It's invisible to you when you see it in others, when you're with people who have some degree of freedom.

In some way, it's also true for a deep sense of inner well-being, joy, and harmony – if we don't have it for ourselves, it's harder to feel and sense it in others. But once we begin to feel it in ourselves, then feeling it in others becomes a reinforcement for it to grow in ourselves. The freedom of others reinforces our own freedom. The joy of others reinforces our own joy and delight – if we have a reference point inside where we can feel it, and know it within ourselves.

I'm saying this as an encouragement to do your practice. Boy, what a great thing it is to really do the work – to show up in the present moment, to not be distracted, to be here – really present. It's slow, deep work. It's worthwhile work.

As we center and settle ourselves in this deeper and deeper place of maturity, freedom, and joy, we begin recognizing it more and more in the world. And then our affirmation and celebration of it supports and grows it in the world. And it grows it in ourselves. It becomes this wonderful circle of joy, rejoicing, celebration, deep appreciation, and deep respect.

So that even when we're with someone who is suffering a lot – or even if we're suffering a lot – there is access to see that there's more than suffering going on. And, who knows, when someone you meet is suffering tremendously, maybe one of the greatest gifts you can give them is your capacity to tune in to their goodness – to the place inside of them, where something is alive – a little flame is alive of well-being, joy, and peace.

And because you recognize it, maybe then, you can be a mirror for that flame in them. So that flame can grow and develop, and they can experience joy and peace in the midst of their great challenges.

So *muditā*. There is the practice of *muditā* that we did a little bit in the guided meditation. You could start with yourself. Or start with someone who it's really easy to have *muditā* for – a benefactor or an uncomplicated

friend. To do the practice of *muditā* is to begin to stretch that *muditā* until you can even feel it for people who are hostile to you. It's not only people in great suffering where you can find a little light that you can celebrate and appreciate. You can even discover how to do it and open your heart to people who are hostile to you.

Occasionally you find that that's the medicine that quiets the hostility. They understand that you appreciate something about them – not their behavior, not what they say – but maybe you can tune into something in them that's worth respecting, valuing, appreciating, and having some *muditā* for.

May it be that we become catalysts for the growth of joy and appreciation for all beings. Thank you.