

Brahmavihāras: Appreciative Joy (5 of 5)

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Now we come to the fifth and final talk on *muditā*. I like to call it rejoicing or 'rejoicement,' sympathetic joy or appreciative joy. And with all these *brahmavihāras* – these four divine abodes of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – I think it's very useful and important to see them as an expression, a manifestation, or a consequence of inner freedom.

A metaphor for inner freedom is an open heart – the doors of the heart are open. If there's a lock on the door, then the heart is not open. In some ways, that protects us from the suffering of others. These difficulties of the world – we don't take it in, we keep everything away. But it's at a tremendous cost. Because any way in which the doors of the heart are locked, they also lock us from our capacity for joy and happiness, for love and kindness.

If those doors can be wide open, what we discover is that we will take in and experience the suffering of the world. But it'll flow right through, almost as if the heart is just a door. And to have that door wide open – everything goes through in a wonderful way. We do experience the suffering of the world more acutely. But with a door open, we don't suffer because of it. We're not a victim of it – what's happening in the world – but we do experience it.

The ability to experience the suffering of the world more is the very way of being that allows us to experience joy and happiness more. It's just a symptom of the open door. So with a door wide open, we experience suffering, and we can have compassion. If we experience the joys of the world, we can feel joy and delight. In Buddhism, this is very important, because our natural capacity for being ethical and virtuous – living a good life – is very much connected to our capacity to be happy.

The more happy we are in this deep, dharmic way – not because we won the lottery, but because we're really settled, at home, and not in conflict with ourselves – the more natural it is to live an ethical life. To live a life that's wholesome and supportive for the world. So rather than thinking that cultivating happiness and well-being is a selfish thing to do, it's really a vehicle in Buddhism for living a selfless life – a life that's beneficial for the world, and supportive for others.

And so, cultivating happiness for oneself can be seen as part of the path to living for the welfare and happiness of others. It's also the path to greater and greater freedom. *Muditā* is seen as a practice that's freeing. It frees us from having envy. It frees us from having a closed heart. There's a certain kind of freedom from fear that comes with sympathetic joy, appreciative joy.

This ability to live with an open heart is to have a heart that is not closed in any way. It's not closing down, not locking itself up, in the way that envy, jealousy, fear, and discontent might feel. And so this movement towards freedom. As we develop this sympathetic joy more and more, something keeps opening in us.

Joy is an opening. It's like the oil on the hinges of a door perhaps. It just keeps opening and opening. And it's more and more freeing. This is important because in Buddhism, freedom is the reference point for how we live our lives. It's a reference point for how we keep growing and developing, how we expand. We're expanding freedom. We're out to further and further dimensions of the heart, mind, and body – how we live. But we have to have some real feeling for what it's like in the heart, mind, or inner life, for there to be freedom – for there to be an absence of clinging and contraction.

And to begin getting that feeling, getting that sense of knowing what it is, and experientially knowing for oneself, "This is what it is." At first, it might be like a door opens a little bit. But now we know that the door can be opened. We didn't even know it was a door before, because it was always closed. And then we start seeing, "Oh, this is a door; it's open. Let's see what we can do to open it more and more."

The *brahmavihāras* are all ways that we can keep opening. And so, with sympathetic joy – 'rejoicement' – to not do it blindly, naively, or sentimentally. But to do it maturely and powerfully as a way to greater and greater freedom. And the more inner freedom that we have, the more we'll rejoice. The more we'll delight and appreciate what should be appreciated. And the more that we delight and appreciate what can be appreciated, then the more we'll become free. This wonderful reciprocity or mutuality of these two movements.

So to go through a day and appreciate. Not because it's a duty or an obligation. Not because we have to be sentimental or have rose-colored glasses on. Not at all. It turns out there's a lot to appreciate without the rose-colored glasses. There's lots of things.

We can appreciate that it's a new morning for those where it's morning. We can appreciate the fact that there's electricity for those who have electricity. And we can appreciate the fact that there's candles when there's no electricity.

In the collection of year-end photographs which we gathered together to give to a relative, there's a picture of my younger son doing his homework in candlelight. It's such a beautiful and delightful picture to see. There's probably half a dozen to a dozen candles around him. He's working on his homework during the power outages that happened.

Things are more delightful and 'appreciatable' than we give ourselves credit for many times. And can you appreciate others? Other people really thrive in appreciation. Appreciate them realistically. But in doing so, can you become freer?

And when you don't appreciate – when you're grumpy or critical of others – can you recognize as mindfulness practitioners how you are not free? What is closed in you? Is the movement more towards contraction and being closed than to opening and expansion?

As *muditā* becomes stronger and stronger, the freedom of *muditā* is expressed or discovered in what's called, "breaking down the barriers." These barriers are the ways in which we have walls between ourselves and other people. So, if we have someone as our enemy, we might have big walls. But to break down the walls, so we can be able to appreciate them as well.

Not to deny that they're difficult, not to condone how they are, or be naive about how to take care of ourselves with them. But everyone is more than just the ways that they're difficult.

So to break down barriers is to have this broad, open ability to love and experience *muditā*. To experience joy and appreciation for everyone that you encounter. And there's no limits. There's no barriers between one category of people and another. You don't just appreciate your family or your friends. You appreciate the people who are neutral in your life, the people you pass on the streets and just vaguely know. You appreciate the people who are difficult in your life.

And in classic Buddhist language, you find some sympathetic joy and appreciation, even for your enemies. They're still called your enemies for good reason, because you have to be careful around them perhaps. But still, to open up. It's such a good thing to do. And what you will probably find is that some of the difficult people in your life – some of your enemies, some people who there's hostility with – sometimes their hostility lessens. And when we are no longer hostile and defensive, we can actually open our hearts and appreciate other people as well.

So this movement towards freedom, breaking down the barriers, and having an open door to the whole world. This is the direction of Buddhist practice – to greater and greater freedom. And as we become fully free, we become a force of love, kindness and goodwill for the world. What a great thing to do, especially on this day of the 25th of December. Joy to the world!

To bring that joy to the world. To be inspired to really be a force of good and joy for the welfare and happiness of all.

And finally I want to paraphrase a passage I think I've read recently that when a person becomes free, liberated, emancipated, and comes to the destruction of suffering, the end of their own suffering – this person then, naturally, without intending it even, creates love and respect, conduces to social cohesion, to non-dispute, to concord, and to unity.

May our capacity for appreciation and joy of others – may it be for concord, unity, social cohesion, respect, and love. And may that be how we go forward into this coming year. Thank you all.