Day 20 Muditā Practice (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 44:10

Today we'll continue exploring the mudita practice, the practice of sympathetic or empathetic joy. I'll review a little bit of an overview of the quality and talk about the practice, probably reviewing some of what Sally said yesterday, and then talk a little about where the practice heads. Then we'll do a little bit of practice together.

I like the translation "sympathetic joy." Sometimes it's called empathetic joy, but sympathetic joy reminds me of the phrase "sympathetic vibration" in music. This refers to how if you have two strings close to each other on an instrument, when you pluck one of them, the vibration from that string will affect the string next to it. There will be some overtones, a resonance that happens in one string near the other as that vibration occurs. That's how I understand this exploration of sympathetic joy. When we experience or see or connect with the happiness or joy of another, when our heart is open and soft, it will resonate in sympathy with that and experience a kind of joy.

But it does take a heart that is soft. It takes a heart that is available to be resonated with. And that is part of the challenge with the mudita practice. It's said—I can't remember exactly where, I've heard this many times from teachers, but I think it's actually said in some of the texts, perhaps in the Visuddhimagga—that mudita is one of the most challenging of the Brahma Viharas to develop. They say it's easier to feel compassion for strangers than it is to feel joy for a dear friend, because of how our minds work around this quality.

As I started exploring the metta practice in my early years of practice, I began to understand that my mind had a particular view around happiness—happiness, delight, joy. If some of my friends were experiencing happiness, it meant there was less for me. It was like a zero-sum game: there's only so much happiness to go around. In actively wishing happiness for others, it felt like I was wishing the opposite for myself. This was part of my challenge in working with it.

But as I began to touch into the quality itself and to feel and connect with that resonance, I began to understand more of what the Dalai Lama said. It's a rather famous quote. A number of years ago he said, "It's good to take joy in the happiness of others, because then you increase your chances for happiness six billion to one." And that's more what it's actually like—when we can delight in the happiness of others, we have greater chances for happiness ourselves. When we're not feeling the far enemies of mudita—envy, jealousy—when our heart is not constricted around it, then we can experience this delight in the delight of others.

Sometimes, for myself at least, the formal practice of mudita was not the first place I felt mudita. I really

felt it first in mindfulness practice, as I began to be more open to how I was in my experience. At one point I was on retreat with a dear friend, and I was doing walking meditation in the upper walking room here. I came to the window and looked out into the courtyard, just seeing people walk by. My friend walked by, and I could see that they were walking with real mindfulness, a lot of calmness and peace. I was just filled with joy. It's like, "Wow, that's what they mean by mudita. That is so cool." I told my friend at the end of the retreat, "You were my first experience of mudita." It was just so clear what it was.

So sometimes mindfulness can be our first doorway to experiencing this quality. For some it may come through the mudita practice itself. It's a beautiful emotion when we can touch into it, and it has no element of stinginess about it.

In choosing beings to practice with, one of the places I discovered for myself a very easy doorway for mudita is babies—just seeing their delight in small accomplishments. A toddler learning how to walk, navigating something a little rough on the playground. One of my friends described how her child, as a toddler, would try to walk over this little lump on the playground and fall over. She'd get up and try it again, and try it again. Finally she walked over it without falling down and just burst into peals of laughter. Just hearing that story made me feel mudita.

We can, I think, more easily recognize that the delight of babies does not take away from our own happiness. So this may be a good place to start, to connect with that quality.

Sally talked a little bit about the phrases, and we'll touch on that again. But I also want to mention that in the mudita practice, using the phrases, connecting with the being, and wishing for their happiness to continue—this is the orientation. In Brahma Vihara practice, when we're doing compassion practice, we orient to struggles. When we bring a friend to mind, we orient to the struggles in their life. With mudita, we orient differently.

we can explore how our heart responds in relationship to the suffering of another being. In compassion practice, we choose somebody and orient around whatever struggles they have. In mudita practice, we orient around their joys and delights, wishing that their happiness, their success, will continue, will grow, will not abate.

In this practice, there can be quite a bit of contraction. This is nothing to berate yourself about. I think I mentioned when I first talked about metta how the practice is like a washing machine—metta being like the soap that pulls the dirt out of the clothes into the water. It draws essentially its opposite to it. Another teacher described the metta practice, or the brahma-vihara practice, as being like running a magnet over our heart. A magnet pulls the opposite out and brings it into consciousness. So it's to be expected that we don't necessarily have an easy time of it.

Temple mentioned this morning that with the phrases, we orient to the intention, the wish. "May your happiness continue. May your success grow." We orient around that as a wish, as an intention. We may or

may not feel that appreciative resonance at first. But first we orient around the phrase, we say the phrase, we understand its meaning and connect to just the wish, just this intention that this come to pass.

The Buddha talked about how wherever we incline the mind becomes its inclination. Whatever we ponder becomes the inclination of the mind. This includes all of the hindrances and all of our conditioned patterns, but it also includes when we incline the mind towards love and compassion and joy—it increases the possibility for those states to arise. So we are working with intention here in this practice, and we may not feel it at first. As I said, for me this was pretty dry in the formal practice, but I did begin touching into it in the mindfulness practice, which then helped inform the possibility of feeling it in the formal practice of mudita.

In this practice, as with the other brahma-viharas, we shift in categories. We start with a happy being, one for whom it's pretty easy, one who is experiencing happiness that we know we can connect with. I think babies are a great place to start. Then we shift to ourselves, to benefactor, neutral person, difficult person, just as with the other brahma-viharas. Today in the guided meditation we're going to keep it simple—we'll stay with an easy being, a happy being, and ourselves. But I want to speak a little about this so you can experiment over the next days, if you wish, making some forays into dear friend, neutral person, and difficult person.

With a dear friend, the challenge can be feelings of jealousy or resentment. When we connect to happiness that somebody close to us is experiencing, the question can arise: "Why not me? Why is that good thing not happening to me?" So that's a piece of the purification—noticing how the heart constricts or holds a view, a belief that somehow their happiness is excluding me.

With a neutral person, we may not know the specific nature of their happiness, but we can know that all beings share certain joys. We wish for them any happiness they're experiencing around connection and love and care, moments when their suffering falls away and they have a moment of delight, simple pleasures of being in nature. These are human delights and joys that we can imagine a neutral person engaging with. And if you're picking a neutral person from this retreat, you can appreciate that they have found the Dharma, that they are committed to cultivating those qualities of heart and mind. These are things we can appreciate about each other and about ourselves.

As Nyanaponica points out, in this wishing for joy and happiness, we're not wishing for somebody to be happy in harming other beings. If somebody thinks they are happy in harming others, we're not wishing for that kind of happiness to continue. We are wishing for a true happiness. Nyanaponica says, "Let us teach real joy. Many have unlearned it. Life, though full of woe, holds also sources of joy and happiness unknown to most. Let us teach people to seek and find real joy within themselves and to rejoice in the joy of others."

When doing mudita for ourselves, we can connect with that goodness, that beauty, and may find at times that taste Temple was talking about—just that contentment, perhaps a little bit of contentment with being

with just this breath. Feeling that contentment, we can appreciate it. I think often in our mindfulness practice, we feel almost guilty about feeling good. Don't. Appreciate it. We can have appreciative joy for our own goodness and our own beautiful qualities as they arise.

The joy, the delight that arise in our practice.

And then the difficult person. As I said a few minutes ago, with a person who's difficult it can sometimes be hard to get past things that they've done to us. But again, we can potentially connect to, first of all, recognizing that the difficult things arising in a difficult relationship are about dukkha. Probably on both sides of the relationship there's some misunderstanding or some clinging happening.

So we can know that that person is potentially engaging in unskillful action. We see in our own minds how unskillful action arises as a result of conditions. And so we may be able to kind of set that aside. It's not that we're condoning anything anybody has done unskillfully. But we are acknowledging that we're all a bundle of both wholesome and unwholesome. We are not wishing for them to be happy based on cruelty or based on anything unskillful they're doing. We're wishing for a true joy, for the delights and joy to continue based on genuine happiness.

One challenge that can arise with the difficult person—and I'm mentioning this because we have a couple of days now where we're not going to have the Brahma Vihara practice in the hall, and as you practice over the next couple days you might want to explore mudita practice for the neutral and difficult person—is that sometimes, wishing them to be successful and happy, wishing for their happiness to continue, we may have the wish for them to be truly happy and have that kind of true joy so that they will stop bothering us. So that their mind will not be in that place where I'm in conflict with it. And that's not true mudita. That's the kind of mudita that wants something for me in return.

So just be on the lookout for that. It's like, "Oh yeah, I could wish that political leader to be very happy so that they stop doing these things." Well, maybe that's not true mudita practice.

In working with difficulty, as you come up against it, the first thing to do is just try to connect to the intention. Recognizing, again, we're not going to be able to feel this quality all the time. So just trying to connect with: Can I simply say the phrase and understand the meaning? That's all I need to do here.

I have seen at times in my own practice that even this is too hard. Saying the phrase, understanding the meaning, my heart just gets tighter and tighter. And so then it can make sense to drop back to an easier being, to another place. Go back to a child that makes it easy to evoke the quality. Or turn to compassion for yourself. Or turn to the vipassana practice to hold the challenge.

So let's practice for a little while. Again, the proximate cause is where we begin. Let's first start by settling in, finding a comfortable posture and checking into how your heart feels. How is the heart in this moment? However it is, is fine. How is the heart in this moment?

Letting yourself perhaps breathe through that area, seeing if there can be an inclination towards softening. Exploring the possibility of a soft heart.

And then beginning with whatever being is easiest for you to appreciate their success, their good fortune. Whatever phrase feels most connecting to you: "I'm happy that you're happy." Or if that feels like not quite an accurate reflection of what's actually going on: "May I be happy that you're happy." "May your happiness continue." "May your joys increase." "May you have happiness in abundance."

I also find it helpful in the mudita practice to give yourself time to feel into this, the way intention practice works. We express the intention and then we check in: How has that intention landed in the heart? It's like dropping a pebble into a smooth pond. There will be little ripples from the pebble, so think of dropping these phrases into our hearts. "May your happiness continue." And see how the heart ripples, resonates in sympathy, perhaps, with that phrase. Taking that time to feel into it. Connecting with the being. And if it's yourself you're working with, perhaps just your sense of yourself right now.

Connecting with the being, expressing this wish: May you enjoy happiness and abundance. How does that land in your heart to make that wish?

Continue for the next few minutes to wish joy, happiness, and abundance to this being. If it feels appropriate, you might switch to yourself if you haven't been doing that yet, or if you have been working with yourself, bring in another being for whom it's relatively easy to connect with their happiness, their success, and abundance.

Sometimes using imagination helps—imagining this being being happy can support a little spark of that quality. Or for yourself, remembering a time, if you're not in that place right in this moment, remembering an experience of joy can sometimes spark the quality.

Connecting to the being, saying the phrase, understanding its meaning, and checking in: How does that land as you drop that wish or phrase into your heart?

Now I'd like to invite you to, as we did last week, imagine yourself together with this being, with both of you wishing together: May we both enjoy happiness and abundance. May our joy continue. This is just a reminder that mudita is not exclusive.

How is it to feel that wishing together?

For the last minute or so, imagine the two of you together wishing abundance and happiness for all beings: May all beings without exception enjoy abundance and happiness.

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