Muditā: Cultivating Sympathetic Joy

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21:29

Some of you who read my tip will know the basic content, but I thought I would speak to that particular tip I did on joy, sympathetic joy. I just don't remember any instructions by my teachers to develop joy, or compassion for that matter, or even equanimity. None of the Burmese Sayadaws taught me that at all. It was always about *mettā*.

Now, of course, there is a certain reason for that, perhaps because once we've established mettā it's obviously easier for us to respond to other people's suffering and their joy, and to be equanimous within ourselves even though we are surrounded by suffering. The joy doesn't move out into excitement or indulgence. So mettā really is the base. Once that's established, we can presume the other illimitables will arise.

What we mean by illimitable is that these qualities can be developed indefinitely. It's just up to us. You can go up to the highest absorption, if you wish, with them. It's also known as the *Brahma Vihāra*. Just to remind you, Brahma was the chief god of the Vedic system, and so what this is saying is that this is one of the most beautiful heart states we can experience. Actually, you can develop any virtue illimitably. It's just that these are the four social virtues, as we can call them.

It's important for us to balance the compassion, especially now when we can see that the world is beginning to crash. We can have terrible forebodings of what's going to happen economically, politically, and so on. Somehow you have to be careful if you are listening to the news. I know some people just don't listen to the news anymore. It's just too depressing, too upsetting. But if you are, you have to balance it a bit with joy and happiness.

Sometimes on retreat—and I'm going to lead a retreat soon—I'll often say at the end of the day, we do a meditation on joy. And I say, bring to mind moments of the day when you felt joyful. One or two people tell me afterwards that they can't remember any. The reason for that, of course, is that we're not paying attention to it. That's understandable, because unless you're feeling ecstatic joy or big joy, you don't notice the little moments when you feel content, fairly content, when you feel fairly happy, nothing particularly exciting. In fact, we don't want excitement. Not paying attention to it means that we're not clicking on. And when we do start paying attention to these moments of joy, then they grow because of that attention.

Remember, an act of attention is an act of intention. It's an empowering act. Your awareness, your attention, notices what's happening. And when it's a full attention, it fills up your whole consciousness, and in that way it grows. So we have to train ourselves, in periods where we're feeling downcast, to pay attention when any bit of joy comes up. Ah, there's a bit of joy. Fancy that.

Of course, we have to make the distinction between joy and excitement. Excitement is that bit of indulgence where we become attached to a certain joy, which is understandable, but it unfortunately causes consequences. An obvious one is grief at loss, the fear of loss, the anxiety of loss. But joy is very cool. It doesn't have that. It's the difference on your Christmas cake between marzipan and icing. The icing's too much. You should always take it off. It's very bad for you. But the marzipan's fantastic, even though it's only got a bit of sugar—well, compared to icing. So that's your distinction.

Joy is quiet. It's pleasant, at times a very pleasant mental state, even to the point of absorption. It's always accompanied with calmness. This is the point. Always calm. There's always a sense of equanimity there. It doesn't demand that you keep it going. When it goes, it just goes, and that's fine. And it's always appropriate to the joyful situation you're in. We can feel joy for ourselves when we've succeeded at something, and that's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. And when we're with somebody who is joyful, we respond with that joy, and it's appropriate to the situation. You've only got to think of parents when they rejoice in their children's successes. It's very natural to do so.

One of the reasons we're not really aware of the little joys that pass through us during the day, the little happinesses, the little contentments, is that we're much more aware of the horrible things that might happen, perceived dangers. I suppose it's all got to do with our evolution. That's what they say anyway. But the fact is that unless we pay attention to these little joys, they won't grow. Simple as that. They won't grow.

I like to quote the mystical romantic poet William Blake on this. He always has a lovely verse. He who binds himself to a joy—I'm sure you know it—he who binds himself to a joy does the wingèd life destroy. But he who kisses a joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise. So eternity here can be understood as the ever-present moment. It's not a matter of time as such.

It also has the positive effect of undermining envy and jealousy. I personally always thought of envy as something when you want what somebody else has. Sometimes it can even be a compliment if you actually don't want it. So if you say, well, I envy your new car, and there's no desire for that car in you, that's fine. That's one way we use it. But envy normally is wanting what the other person has. And jealousy is wanting what they have and also hating them for having what they have. So there's a bit of hatred in there. But I think it also involves, sometimes, a fear of losing what you have to a rival. In a relationship that can happen, and jealousy comes up.

As it says in the actual discourses, there's a lovely line: Envy is abandoned by one who develops sympathetic joy. So that's something to really work on if we find ourselves being envious and jealous. And it has the effect, therefore, of lessening any resentment or selfishness. It undermines that sort of rivalry, especially at work, where you have colleagues or workpeople whom you see are doing better than you. It can get pretty nasty.

I had an occasion with that myself actually. I was offered a promotion, and the funny thing was that it

wasn't really a promotion to do with my department. I was in the general education department in an FE college. What had happened was, after the great and honourable Mrs. Thatcher brought in her new rules, there was a huge amount of unemployment in Birmingham. It rose from six to sixteen percent in six months—I remember this. And I had the idea that as an FE college with all our trainings, we could get some of them in. So I started this programme for them. Now, of course, the people who wanted the promotion were the engineers, were the electricians. They didn't expect me, teaching sociology or something. At the time, I was teaching English to immigrants. So there was this real rivalry there. It was quite horrible. And one man took great exception to me. Anyway, I left and became a monk. So they were all right in the end.

There's an important point here about the body and mind. In Buddhism, the body and mind are two different energies. They're not the same. When you die, it's the mental body that rises out of the physical body. And what the body does is act like a sounding board. The heart resonates against the body. You may actually have the experience, when you are absorbed into an emotion, feeling it and seeing what its characteristics are, where they actually separate, and you can see that the body makes everything worse. Whatever you're suffering from—say depression—it's the body that feels the heaviness. It's the body that makes it really quite difficult to bear. So there is that combination.

This means, according to what I've read—I don't understand the chemistry at all—but basically our cells have receptors for various types of hormones. If you've got depressive hormones constantly coming into the body, those receptors grow at the expense of those receptors that receive the chemicals that make you happy, like dopamine, endorphins, all those things. The receptors are less. I'm not so sure you'd be particularly aware of that, because when you feel depressed, you'd feel heavily depressed. But when you feel joy, you wouldn't know that actually you could feel more joyful if you hadn't developed depression so much. I know this is a very contorted way of talking about this, but I'm trying to get across that there's actually a physical reason for practising joy.

In whatever way you can raise it—walking in nature, in a park or whatever, meeting friends—anything that lifts the heart has a direct effect upon the body. We know that because bad mental states can actually make you physically ill. But it's good to remind ourselves of that. So there's lots of reasons there for developing joy.

We may as well end this talk with the actual practice. If we just sit quietly for a moment, and then we'll repeat these phrases and go through the process that we do when we practise it with mettā.

Make sure that you're sitting comfortably. It doesn't have to be as if you're sitting in vipassanā. Make sure you're comfortable. That's the important thing. And then just drawing ourselves inwardly, recognising the mental state we're in, and just resting with that for a moment.

In the same way that we do with mettā, bring somebody to mind who raises joy when you see them. It can even be a comedian, somebody who brings a sense of joy into the heart. It's good to have a smile on the

face. It doesn't have to be a great big Cheshire smile. But a smile does release all the endorphins or whatever. Just feel that on your face, a gentle smile. You're bringing somebody to mind who makes you joyful when you see them.

The blessings are: May you be joyful. May you be ever more joyful. And if you wish: May you enjoy the sublime happiness of *Nibbāna*. So: May you be joyful. May you be ever more joyful. May you experience the sublime happiness of Nibbāna.

We can bring somebody who's helped us in our lives and offer them the blessings of joy. And all those who are near and dear to us. Friends, people at work, whomever we wish. Choosing a neutral person, someone we see but don't know. Turning that joy towards ourselves. We can even bring someone to mind that we're having difficulties with—not big difficulties, but difficult. Radiating outwardly to each other. May we, our present spiritual companions, and our neighbours and neighbourhood, all the people in our country, all the peoples of Europe, all people on earth. And finally, to all beings in all directions.

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