Cultivating Joy: Beyond Suffering to Muditā and Daily Happiness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 17:16

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa.
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Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So being spring, or April anyway, I thought we would have a go at joy. The first thing I did was to look up all the synonyms we have: pleasure, enjoyment, happiness, gladness, delight, thrill, exaltation, elation, bliss, ecstasy, rapture, and absorption. That's not bad, is it? And it's all good. It's not as though the Buddha asked us to be miserable all the time, even though most of the teaching is about getting rid of suffering. He was asked, how does he feel when he teaches and somebody doesn't accept the teaching? He said he feels all right with it. It's calm. But when somebody does accept his teaching, he feels happy, feels joyful.

Now, it's an interesting thing that all my teachers never introduced us into the practice of joy. It's very strange. *Metta*, *metta* all the time. Compassion a little bit, but joy never. I'm thinking they did it because of the problem of indulgence. And I think that's what goes wrong, of course. All these beautiful mental states to which we are heir corrupt as soon as we try to hold on to them or want more of them. So it's a case of recognising that nothing is repeatable and that when it's gone, it's gone and there's no point in hankering after it. So that, for instance, if you take a morsel of food which you delight in, once you've swallowed it and the aftertaste is gone, that's it. Let go.

Now, this fear, this fear of indulgence actually destroys joy. And I noticed it in the monastic life more than in lay people. At the monastery, Kanduboda, there would be occasions when people would come with special foods to celebrate a birthday, a marriage and so on. And one of the things that is quite lovely is buffalo curd, *miikiri*. And it was handed out, you see, and you put loads of sugar with it, or kittle juice, a bit like maple juice. And it's wonderful. And we're all eating it, you see. And there was a monk sat next to me who was the picture of the ascetic, very gaunt, and his cheeks were like this. And as we got around, while we were eating, he was glaring, as it were, at this curd. And as we came to the finish, he leant forward quite slowly, lifted it up slowly, and then basically shovelled it down his throat. And I've always presumed he was just so afraid of indulgence. So that's no good, is it?

There was another case, too. There was my teacher, Sayadaw Ujanaka. About ten years ago, he taught at a place called Beatenberg, which is in Interlaken, those beautiful lakes in Switzerland. And from it, on a

beautiful day, you can see these three great mountains: the Eiger, the Mönch and the Jungfrau. During the retreat, the weather was miserable, rainy, cloudy. And one day it all opened up and it's a glorious sight. The white peaks against this deep blue sky. So everybody on the retreat went out onto the balcony and outside to have a look, you see. Well, he gave them hell, didn't he? He upset a lot of people. He told them they were useless meditators. They were just indulging and he was wasting his time and all sorts. So I don't think he was invited again.

And I remember whenever I would say something like, "Isn't that a beautiful flower?" he would say, "Ah, yes, but it fades, it dies." A bit of a killjoy, really. But his intention, of course, was to awaken me to the problem of indulgence. And that seed of indulgence is always there, right to the bitter end. Mara is always right there, just waiting for the moment to creep up on us.

So it's a case of just recognising these two things: if we begin to see what the consequences of indulgence are, then we'll make ourselves afraid to enjoy something. But actually, if, for instance, you have a biscuit, right, and you finish the biscuit, the last bit goes down, flavour's gone. And then you get this: "I think I'll have another one." So as soon as that comes, oh well, that's greed. So you have to sit down and wait for that to exhaust itself. Now, once you've done that, you've exhausted the karmic consequence of the greed that arose while you were eating that biscuit. I think it's as simple as that.

I know somebody who got into the habit of eating biscuits just before they went to bed. And he was getting rather afraid of it. So instead he turned to music. And that's a skilful thing. If you find that an indulgence feels a little bit overwhelming, then put your attention on some other joyful thing that you like to do.

So there we are. There's the fear. The fear of indulgence undermines, destroys enjoyment of joy. And to become indulgent with our joys, wanting more of this, more of the same, is just the old suffering.

Now the question is, why is it we remember mostly at the end of the day the painful parts and hardly any of the joys? Well, I suppose the reason is because painful things hurt. But unfortunately, it does shadow out the joys of the day. So we have to make a special effort to remember the joys of the day. Instead of obsessing about our failures and our upsets, we can contemplate the successes and joys of the day.

Now, the interesting thing is, the more you make yourself aware of the joys of the day, the more you bend that way and the more you see what is actually undermining your joy. And this, of course, creates even greater joy. So we try to rid ourselves of behaviours which undermine our joy and over time, our joy grows. And of course, this is done with a certain affectionate awareness. And this is towards ourselves, being kind to ourselves, gentle to ourselves and seeking what lifts the heart. Music, nature, friendship and so on.

Now, this word *mudita*, which is one of the four Brahma-viharas - remember, so love, compassion, joy, and peacefulness, equanimity, are the four great mental states. These we can develop indefinitely. And it's often translated as appreciative joy, reciprocal joy. And what this does, of course, is it undermines envy

and jealousy. And I define those two as saying that envy is wanting what the other person has and jealousy is wanting what the other person has and hating them for having it in the first place.

Now, it's interesting in the East, if you make a donation to a cause, if you make a donation to, say, a monastery, all the names are posted up with exactly how much you gave. So it starts off with, I don't know, maybe a thousand pounds and it goes all the way down to a couple of shillings. That's an old word, isn't it? And it's done because in the East, it's understood that people will rejoice in the good karma that you have gained by your offering.

Now, when it came to Bill Gates giving his millions away, I wonder what our response was. When he got all that money, he should be able to give something away, the one percenters. Did we say, "Oh, good on Bill, may he receive many blessings"? He's got enough blessings. So here we have that reciprocal joy of actually being joyful in somebody else's successes and joys.

And I think it comes as a revelation that we can actually be more joyful for others than for ourselves. And this is not strange, of course, to parents who rejoice in the successes of their offspring. I remember once I must have been about maybe twelve years old because my sister's eleven years younger than me. And I got back from school and I sat opposite my mother and she held Maria, you see, and encouraged her to walk towards me. And of course, when she did, I mean, it was joy. It was wonderful to see this little toddler making her way. So this development of being joyful for other people in the joys of other people and the successes of other people is really heart-lifting.

And joy is also a restorative. Somebody's called it restorative joy. So there you are down in the dumps, and you think to yourself, well, how can I lift my heart? How can I bring joy into my heart? Whatever level, it doesn't always have to be amazing, ecstatic joy. It's just feeling happy, generally happy. So that's when you meet up with a friend or you watch a good film and so on.

In the monastic life, of course, the daily routine tends to be the same. Even when there's a feast day, the only difference is you turn up for a better meal and then you go back and it's just the same. So it can move you towards a sense of apathy, a sense of laziness and all that. And it was then that I realised the amazing power of a long, mindful cup of tea. No doubt about it.

If we just list all those things - this is not an exhaustive list, but the sensual joys that we get that lift the heart, relations of happiness, the religious joys of feast days. Now, the ethical joys are really what the Buddha points to. As far as he's concerned, virtue, goodness equals happiness. And in chapter 20 of the Dhammapada, a lot of the verses are devoted to being happy. This is what he says: "Oh, how happily we live without hate among those with hate! Among people who hate, we live without hate. Oh, how happily we live without misery among those in misery! Among people in misery, we live without misery. Oh, how happily we live without ambition among those with ambition! Among people with ambition, we live without ambition."

Now, just a note on that ambition. There's nothing wrong with us offering our talents for the benefit of the company, people and so on. But of course, it becomes corrupt when we start thinking about money and power.

So the whole idea, really, if we want to develop joy, is to bend that way. What have we talked about? We've talked about the enemies of joy. We realise how corruptive indulgence is, how it becomes an obsession, how it's what they call feeding the dragon. And because of that, we can't allow ourselves to enjoy something. And then, of course, there's the indulgence itself, which becomes a trap in itself. That's feeding the dragon. And the way we do it is by becoming more aware of our daily joys and just bending life towards that way, just as we do with *metta*. Then we have this reciprocal joy, undermining envy and jealousy and really being happy for other people's happiness. And finally, to use joy to lift the heart when we feel a bit down in the dumps.

So here are some exercises. You have to make a resolution, you see. If at the end of today you sit and you think now, how happy was I today? And all you can remember is the miseries. Then you have to make a determination that tomorrow you'll actually acknowledge when you're happy, any level of happiness, any level of joy. It could just be contentment. And just to acknowledge it and doing that, of course, you remember it by the end of the day.

The other thing you might try to do is to contemplate every evening for about a week, maybe five, ten minutes, and just go back in your life and just think of all the joys you've had. All the joys you've had. And by the end of the week, you'll have a big smile on your face.

And the other thing is the practice of joy, which is like *metta*. So you go through all the categories, but the blessings are, may you be joyful, may you be ever more joyful. Now, those are the ones that are regularly used. I like to add, may you attain the sublime peace of *Nibbana*. Now, the problem with Nibbana is that there's no emotions in Nibbana. So it's not that sort of happiness. In fact, that's what Sariputta said. He says it's the very absence of emotions, which is the bliss of Nibbana. That's a bit difficult for us, but at least we can make that intention because, according to the Buddha, this is the highest of all happinesses.

So may you be joyful. May you be ever more joyful. May you attain the sublime peace of *Nibbana*. I think peace rather than bliss. I've sometimes used bliss. Peace gives you, I think, a slightly better feel for it. And as I say, at the end of this hour, that's what I'll be doing. I'll be doing joyful meditation instead of *metta*.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your development of joy, you will be joyful sooner rather than later.

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