# Practicing Muditā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:26

And why are we doing this? Really, essentially, how does this practice of muditā, of appreciative joy, fit into the whole mandala of our spiritual path, of our spiritual practice?

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in his book called *The Good Heart*, wrote that the purpose, in his view, of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness. He goes on to say that all of us humans are equal in this—that we all desire happiness and to abandon suffering, and that we all share equally in the right to fulfill this aspiration. An aspiration, not incredibly greedy desire. An aspiration for happiness.

I say that because it's one way of looking at the point of our spiritual path, and to try to move out of any lingering sense someone might have had that somehow this cultivation of joy, of happiness, is a little bit dubious side aspect to practice. Maybe it's nice when you hit into some good feeling, but it's not really part of the big picture. There's something a little off with looking for happiness. That's why I chose this particular quotation.

Of course, the big point of our understanding and what we come to understand through our whole lifetime of practice is what exactly that word happiness is really referring to, and that's the subject of many talks. But the Dalai Lama, again in *The Good Heart*, goes on to say that in terms of fulfilling our desire for happiness, when we first think of happiness, often we think of sense pleasure—happiness of pleasant sense experience—which is certainly a kind of happiness that comes and goes. It's not what we're talking about in terms of spiritual aspiration.

He goes on, though, to point out in his very simple and down-to-earth way that while the happiness of sense pleasures can fleetingly bring us happiness, mental happiness and mental unhappiness is generally so much stronger, has such a stronger effect on us than physical sense pleasure. Just giving the simple example: if you're in a really beautiful, lovely place—say it's a holiday you've planned for months, for years—and when you're there, you're in a really upset frame of mind. You and your partner have a giant fight, or you're grief-stricken over something that happened, or you're just anxious about your children the whole time. You could be in the best place in the world and not be able to enjoy it at all because of the mental states that we're experiencing and caught in.

Conversely, when our inner heart, our mind, is in a balanced frame—when we're happy, when we're content, when we're at ease, when we're not afflicted by these suffering mental states—then even when we're in a difficult situation, we're much more able to flow with the difficulties with ease. We still know it's difficult, but there's much more spaciousness, much more ease, much more balance within that difficult situation when our heart and mind is in a calm, contented, happy place.

These difficult states of heart and mind—what the Tibetans call afflictive emotions, that when they're present we feel afflicted—such as greed, anger, jealousy, pride, hatred, violence. You can run down the list. There's nothing too esoteric, and we're familiar with all of them. As strong as they are, and as much discomfort, as caught as we get when these afflictive emotions are present in our heart and mind, we can be so caught—as in that example I gave of being in some beautiful place and being completely miserable. It seems often as if we're the victims, as if there's nothing we can do but just be assaulted by these afflictive emotions, these states of heart.

But what all spiritual paths, and this one too, show us—and hope to help us open to, to really learn to trust—is that as strong as these afflictive emotions are, they are not the purest or strongest or most natural state of our heart and mind. So many of us—I don't mean to speak for you, so if it doesn't apply, let it go—but we give so much credence, so much energy, so much belief to the power of these afflictive emotions. It just seems like that's how things are.

I don't know how it is for you, but how do you feel when you hear me, or you read someone say, that actually the natural state of our heart and mind is one of peace that manifests as compassion or appreciative joy? That this is more our natural state, and these afflictive emotions are more like visitors—yeah, like visitors that never went away, visitors that live here.

The Dalai Lama says the more we accommodate these afflictive emotions, the stronger they grow. Really, a lot of our practice—our muditā practice here, but all our spiritual practices—is seeing for ourselves that this is not the natural state of our heart and mind, and we don't have to just give up and feel like victims. Learning to really trust that because we know it for ourselves, not because anybody else said it.

Pema Chödrön, an American nun in the Tibetan tradition who writes very pithy, helpful books, says: "Pointing directly at your own heart, you find Buddha. Maybe the reason there are dharma talks and books is just to encourage us to understand this simple teaching. All the wisdom about how we cause ourselves to suffer, and all the wisdom about how joyful and vast and uncomplicated our minds-hearts are"—mind-heart being the same word—"these two things, the understanding of what we might call neurosis and the wisdom of unconditioned, unbiased truth, can only be found in our own experience."

In a nutshell, that's how I look at what our spiritual practice is about. This cultivation of joy, of appreciative joy, of connected joy, is one way of accessing, learning to more deeply experience and trust the fact that vastness, that openness, that potential for connected joy is a more natural aspect of our experience than envy and jealousy.

I'll say the same thing in another way. This is a very famous quotation from the Buddha. He said: "Luminous is this mind-heart, brightly shining..."

but it is covered, it is hidden, by the attachments that visit it. This the uninstructed people do not understand, and so for them there is no cultivation of the mind, of the heart. Uninstructed people don't

understand that the brightly luminous mind is covered by these visiting attachments.

Luminous is this mind, heart, brightly shining, and it is untouched, unstained by the visiting states of mind. This the noble follower of the way really understands. And so for them there is cultivation of the heart, of the mind.

That's what our practices are, whether it's empathetic joy or metta or vipassana—cultivation of the heart, cultivation of the mind, really learning to see through, not to be so diverted by the visiting afflictive emotions, to be able to trust and recognize the luminous, vast quality of heart and mind. Sometimes all we get is a teeny, teeny little glimmer. Sometimes not even that. But what's amazing, in my experience—take for example being on a retreat, since that's where we are—I could slog through a day, a day and a half, we'll just keep it short like that, it could be longer. Slog, nothing, my mind just saying the phrases, nothing's happening. And then there's a little glimmer, say, of touching joy. It may be when I'm sitting saying the phrases, maybe outside, it may be drinking tea. It just comes unexpected, because you can't make it happen. It may not last long, but the effect it has in the mind stream, in the heart, in the sense of trust—as a teacher of mine said, a spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies. There's some way we know in our heart when we're touching the truth, and it keeps us going. It's lucky that it's that ratio. It keeps us going through the hard stuff.

Let me say the same thing another way. This is from Dan Goleman's book *Social Intelligence*. He's quoting a scientist from Harvard, Jerome Kagan, who makes a simple point about human nature: that the sum total of goodness vastly outweighs that of meanness. It's a quotation now: "Although humans inherit a biological bias that permits them to feel anger, jealousy, selfishness and envy and to be rude, aggressive or violent," Kagan notes, "humans also inherit an even stronger biological bias for kindness, compassion, love, cooperation, and nurture, especially toward those in need." This built-in ethical sense, he adds, is a biological feature of our species. So that's a more scientific way of looking at it—two ways of coming at the same thing.

Now, how mudita, or the four Brahma Viharas, which are states of mind, states of heart—like I mentioned last night—loving-kindness or friendliness, compassion, sympathetic appreciative joy, equanimity... These four are called boundless or limitless states because they have the potential, when we're really experiencing them, to include all beings. A real moment, say, of loving-kindness, friendliness, is the sense of simply connecting with another person without judgment, without bias, without saying, "I like this, that can go, you're okay, you're not." It's just a moment of open connectedness, non-separation. And it's not some unusual esoteric thing. It's a natural thing that we all experience.

We've used the example of just seeing a small, happy child—you naturally feel connected. You naturally feel, if they're happy, appreciative joy. Metta turned towards happiness or joy takes the tone of appreciative joy. That same connectedness turned towards the suffering aspect takes the tone of compassion, which is connectedness with suffering. Equanimity is the wisdom, a kind of radiant calm of

heart and mind that really can be with things as they are, knowing we can't always control the results. It gives the vastness. It's what allows us to really appreciate joy while knowing there's also suffering in the world. How do we hold both? That's kind of a tricky thing sometimes. Equanimity gives us that vastness.

I'm mentioning the four because from the state of the luminous nature of mind and heart, or the vastness that Pema Chödrön speaks of, the simplicity—when in any particular moment our heart and mind isn't all caught up, identified, fighting with these afflictive emotions, when those don't happen to be covering—the natural, unpremeditated response, the way we would respond in a situation, would really come out of probably one of these four Brahma Viharas. If we see someone in need or someone in danger, the natural response of the open heart and mind is to do something, just to respond. If we see someone here and they're crying and we know the space is okay, you leave them alone in their silence. But compassion still feels. Compassionate response could be to leave someone alone, but it's done out of that sense of connectedness. You see what I mean? It's not how it looks, it's the intention inside.

So these states of heart and mind are really natural when we're not all caught up with afflictive emotions. And the formal practice, in this case of appreciative joy, is actually a way to help us stabilize, to recognize more frequently the different ways that state of heart and mind can manifest, to notice what in our particular psyche gets in the way—because I'm sure you've noticed what gets in the way today—to see that still we can come back and connect with that joy, to really strengthen that habit of mind, to actually see that more than we realize, we have a choice where we might let our heart and mind dwell.

Remember what Guy said last night? It's one of my favorite quotations too, from the Buddha: "Whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of her mind." So I don't know about you, but when I watch my mind in my daily life,

Where does it go? What is it frequently thinking and pondering upon? Well, just look and see for yourself. And then it's no big surprise what the habits of my mind are.

So here we're really making a conscious choice to come more into the true home of our heart, to learn to recognize, to learn to come back, to learn to trust, to have faith from your own experience—not from what I said.

Someone said today in one of the groups, which I'd have to agree, that culturally, the messages we get consciously and subliminally don't necessarily always support appreciative joy or compassion or kindness. I mean, some do, but there's a lot that don't. It's really incumbent on us. I feel that part of our path is learning with honesty, with clarity, without judgment: What is the inclination of my mind? Where do I go for refuge in my mind and heart, just left to my own devices? Really look and see. And then see, is that the choice I want to make? Then we learn that we do have a choice.

I read this on the BBC online in August from Nanjing, China. It's called "About the Rising Sun Anger Release Bar"—a bar that lets customers smash glasses, rant, and even hit specially trained workers. The

owner, Mr. Wu, was inspired to open the bar by his experiences as a migrant worker. Most of his customers, he said, were women working in the service or entertainment industries. The bar employs twenty men who have been given protective gear and physical training to prepare them for the job. The clients can ask the men to dress as the character they wish to attack.

Now, this is a true story. They interviewed people on the street, and very much as it would be here, there were mixed opinions. One woman said, "The idea of beating someone dressed as my boss seems attractive. We get no place to vent anger." Then another man said, no, violence is not the answer—you need to adjust your lifestyle or seek psychological treatment. Just that, you know, places like that could even come into being, and some of us could think, well, that's a good thing to do. That's one of the ways the culture does not support us to really have this deep trust, this deep knowing. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, happiness is available—please help yourself. That's what we're learning here, how to help ourselves.

What we start to see, hopefully, through these practices—today, specifically through the appreciative joy practice, and similarly through all the four Brahmaviharas—is that how in our heart and mind we respond to a particular situation is what allows for the possibility of ease, contentment, and happiness, or for the kind of suffering that comes from being really caught up and divided in our mind.

In terms of the perception of suffering—if somebody's in pain or suffering—how in our heart and mind we respond to that matters deeply. If we respond with fear, with "it's too much, I can't take it in," with pity, with blame, or any of the understandable reactions, that is a distancing response. It really creates a sense of separation. We can either get angry or feel isolated or in despair, overwhelmed with the suffering. But compassion, which is just the connectedness of heart with the suffering, just seeing it as it is, takes away that sense of division, of separation. Compassion is one of the beautiful states of heart and mind because there's a connectedness in the suffering.

Similarly, with mudita, how our heart and mind respond in a moment to the perception of another being's happiness, joy, or success can create either a sense of separation, of isolation, of actual affliction in our heart and mind—or it can open us to the happiness of non-separation, of connectedness. Obviously, envy and jealousy on one side, or appreciative joy on the other.

This is an interview I heard on NPR a couple of years ago. I imagine those of you from Massachusetts might remember when the Red Sox won the World Series. We were here in the fall. Even though I've lived here a long time, it's not really the high point of my life, I have to say. But I got it—that it was the high point of many people's lives that fall.

After the World Series was over, they interviewed this Red Sox fan, and this is what he said: "This was the best moment of my life." And the joy—this is a quotation—"was not in the winning. It was in the sorrow and misery in the Yankee fans' eyes." This was said with full-hearted joy, I have to say.

Then they interviewed a Yankee fan who said, "This was the worst moment of my life." And the

interviewer said, "Come on, the Yankees win a lot. Don't the Red Sox deserve to win sometime?" And the guy said, "Sure, when I'm dead."

So that's one way of responding. We laugh—it's funny, and it can kind of pump you up. But if you really look at how that guy feels, saying "I'm so happy at the misery in their eyes"—that's not really appreciative joy. It's going to, at some point, bring in some suffering.

When we're doing this formal practice of sympathetic joy, appreciative joy—bringing up a sense or an image of a person, repeating the simple phrase "may your happiness continue"—it's very simple, almost simplistic, actually. And just to say a couple of things: it's not a magic wish. It's not that somehow magically, if I say often enough "may your happiness never leave you," your happiness will never leave you.

This is where equanimity comes in. We actually know your happiness will leave you, because nobody gets nothing but happiness, just like nobody gets nothing but suffering. This is really why they're boundless. Appreciative joy is boundless because it is said that all beings experience some aspect of happiness, of joy, however small. Compassion also is boundless because all beings experience some aspects of suffering.

So we're not saying "may your happiness continue" as a magical wish. It's not a clinging. What it really is, is a way of expressing our inner climate, of inclining our heart and mind toward "Oh, I'm so happy that you're happy." That's another way of saying it. The one we're using—"may your happiness continue"—is more classical. But if that one leads your inner climate into wanting, if when you say that phrase what you feel arising in your heart and mind is some kind of clinging or wanting or pushing, then switch the phrase.

Because the phrase is really just to keep strengthening, or coming back to, that possibility that when I see someone else light up with happiness, my first thought won't be "why them and not me?" There's actually the potential for "Wow, they look happy," and I don't have to self-reference at all. It doesn't have anything to do with how I am. They're just happy. It's a possibility. It's a lovely possibility when it happens. You go, "Oh, wow, where did that come from?"

So each moment we're saying the phrase, it doesn't necessarily mean we feel that joy, but we're inclining the heart, inclining the mind in that direction. And even the saying of it is an expression of intention—the intention to have a thought, intention to say something, intention to act. So just to say the thought "may your happiness continue" is shifting the inner climate.

And every time that we do it during these days, it's like Sharon likes to say: it's like planting a seed. We're not in control of what conditions come or how soon that seed will sprout. The more that we can just leave it alone—plant the seed and leave it alone, plant the seed and leave it alone—the inner climate really does start to shift in its intention and in its habit. And that's really what we're doing in this practice, how it works.

As some people said in one of the groups, it works a lot below the level of our conscious observation. Our

tendency—many of us who are kind of scientifically brought up—is to want to say it and get the result right away. "Okay, I've been here for 24 hours. Where's this joy? Where's this gratitude? How many times have I said that phrase? Come on!" We have such a small view, and such a short attention span. "Okay, now or never, I'm on to the next thing."

But there's stuff happening beneath the surface. Like someone said at another retreat they had done—I think it was a loving-kindness retreat—where it didn't really feel like much was going on during the retreat at all. They went home and really noticed something had shifted. That's been my personal experience often. We like to know. We like to be able to chart it, to write it down, to have something to measure against. But that needing to know just gets in our way. Just plant the seed.

May your happiness continue, and let it be. Do it again, and let it be. It's a challenge for some of us. It's a challenge for me—I'm a very impatient person. But as we begin to experience that maybe joy is more of a potential than we realized, it becomes a little easier to trust.

So, just to say a few other things about the practice of mudita. I guess you know by now, though I don't know if we've said it explicitly, that appreciative joy—when we're wishing someone happiness—first involves appreciation of a happiness or success they're experiencing that's wholesome. It's not as though they're doing something that's harming other beings and they're happy about it, and we feel happy for their happiness. That's not really what we're talking about. It doesn't feel good. It's interesting because if you do pick something like that with someone and you start to try and feel happy, it doesn't have that pureness, the simplicity of our vastness of heart and mind. It has some kind of... it doesn't quite feel right.

It's also a kind of joy that has this purity because it doesn't have clinging in it. All of these Brahma Viharas—the beautiful quality of them and the vastness of them, the limitlessness—is possible because there's no clinging, there's no wanting. Ultimately it's not about what am I getting from this. It's not about me at all. Even though we start with "may I, may you, may I feel joy at your happiness," as I think we've said, it moves in the direction of being less about me and you, and the joy is just there. There's no separation. That not-clinging is what moves into the wisdom of the freedom of heart and mind altogether in practice. The true liberation of heart, the Buddha said, is this liberation of mind through non-clinging. Mudita and the other Brahma Viharas are all expressions of the heart, the mind of non-clinging.

If there's really some clinging in it—and a lot of times there will be; this is why we're practicing, this is what we're learning to purify—you'll start to see that it feels different. It doesn't have that purity of appreciation, of contentment, of ease. There's a little too much "me needing something" going on in it. And while at first that can feel like happiness, when you really look closely, it isn't.

So in terms of appreciative joy, what is called the—they use all this warlike language in the commentaries from the Buddhist texts—a state of heart and mind that's close to and sometimes confused with appreciative joy: you could say it's joy with clinging. So it may be that you're happy at someone's happiness. Say a partner—my partner, thank God, finally they're happy. I don't have to listen to their

whining anymore. I'm so happy that you're happy. There's some real joy in that, and there's a little bit of something else. At first it can be hard to tease out the difference. But just here, sitting here over and over and over, you'll feel when you hit that pure appreciative joy. Oh, I'm really just so happy for you. It's very different.

Another so-called near enemy of appreciative joy—and this I did not understand until I had practiced it intensively myself—is a kind of exuberant, really high energy. I don't know if any of you have experienced that today. It hasn't maybe been enough time, but I think as Sally was saying when she was practicing mudita and she just felt like skipping around, that's an example of how the energy gets really... oh, wow! You know, like I said, when I was walking and doing mudita, I felt like I was walking like this up and down the path. I was a little curious what people were thinking because everyone else was schlumping around being mindful, and I'm like, "Oh yeah, may your happiness continue!" That kind of energy comes up.

And when it's not really connected, it starts to feel good. Then instead of funneling the energy back into connecting with the person and the expression of joy, we just kind of get into liking the joy. Wow, this is good. I could sing. I could go out in the woods and just sing to the birds. I could just go out... and you're dancing and singing around. And suddenly that high energy—what goes up must come down. You crash. You drag back into the hall. You're depressed. "I was so happy, and now I have no energy. What I need is a good nap." So that's just a way we get caught. It's also a kind of attached joy.

We're attached to the feeling, but it's all about me feeling gratified by the feeling. Again, it has a different flavor. So just experiment. Notice that.

The so-called far enemy—well, that's obvious: the opposite, envy and jealousy. If we're feeling envy, we don't feel appreciative joy. They're opposites because they don't exist in the same mind moment.

Part of how this practice works is that it brings up the habits of our mind that get in the way. This is one reason we try to start with someone easy—someone whose happiness you can easily see, but also someone you can genuinely be glad is happy. As I said, you don't start with the place where you're going to be most envious, because that makes it too hard. We need to learn what it feels like, learn how to incline and direct our heart and mind to appreciating someone's happiness where it's easy. Then we can tackle the big ones that are really causing us a lot of suffering. It may not seem like we're doing the real work, but it really, really helps to start with little things.

I use different examples a lot. When I think of a friend who is often quite happy—I have a good friend who loves to sing and play the guitar. In fact, you have to sit on him to stop him from singing and playing the guitar at any opportunity. Old James Taylor songs, old Beatles songs—kumbaya if you're not watching out. Obviously, I don't love to sing and play the guitar myself. But I don't have to. I just have to tune in to his happiness, and I feel really happy. It doesn't threaten me that he sings and plays the guitar. Now, if my life revolved around trying to be a good guitar player and I really stunk at it, then every time he played, it

might bring up envy. That might not be the easy one. But if you look, it's really not that hard to find lots of little things about almost anyone you know that makes them happy, and then use that.

This same friend loves to watch Pete Sampras play tennis—well, he used to, since Sampras retired, but he has old tapes. Just last night he said, "I have this old Pete Sampras tape we could watch." He gets really happy. So that's accessible.

Back to the Red Sox game. That guy who was gloating over the sorrow of the others—he could have just been simply happy at winning. The Yankee fan who lost and said, "They only deserve to win when I'm dead"—if he could have looked and thought, wow, look how happy those Red Sox fans are, and actually felt happy for them. That's an option. It's an option. It changes the whole landscape of how we live our life. And we can start in really little ways. It transforms our suffering reactions to experience. That's really what it's about—not having to be victims of these afflictive states of mind and heart.

I imagine if that Yankee fan heard me say, "Why don't you just look in the Red Sox fans' eyes and see how happy they are, and you could be happy too," he would not respond, "Oh yeah, why didn't I think of that? Thank you for your suggestion." Probably not. But we can do that.

How much does it increase our chances of contentment? It opens us to a vastness that actually lets us be more present with all aspects of life. It's not that we're ignoring suffering, but sometimes there's so much suffering in our own lives, in those we're close to, in the world. Just listen to the news—it's easy to feel like you're drowning in it, just overwhelmed. Learning how to open our heart, to actually gladden the heart and mind, to turn to the channel of joy as a way of strengthening and opening—it allows us to be present for all aspects of life.

If we shut down to pain, we shut down to joy. But vice versa too: if we shut down to joy, we also shut down to connection with suffering. We can't shut down selectively, and we can't open selectively.

So you might find, as we really cultivate this avenue, strengthen this intention of connectedness, of openness to other people's happiness, that openness starts to transfer. You might see someone who's looking sad, and instead of thinking, "Oh, I'm only doing mudita now, I can't look at you," the openness will naturally extend to them. You might be quite surprised.

Another thing that can be very subtle or very gross, and is pretty common to all of us—in fact, it's one of the habits of mind that the Buddha said was among the last to go before you're completely awakened—the Pali word is *mana*. It's often translated as conceit, but it manifests as this simple comparing of ourselves with others. Have any of you noticed your mind doing that at all today? Just that constant assessment: they're better than me, they're worse than me, or we're the same.

If you start to look at it, just notice without any judgment, because it's simply what our minds do. Notice when it's happening. And it can be about really big things. Somebody's happy and right away, "Oh, they're happy"—and it goes right back to "they're happier than me." Appreciative joy is going to be hard to come

by because they're happier than me, and right away we're back to "poor me, what's the matter with me?"

Or when you see someone unhappy and you think, "Well, I'm doing better than they are"—that's definitely not compassion. That's separation. Or, "Well, we're about the same. I guess it's okay. I guess I'm all right." It's all of it very me-centered, isn't it? It's all about me from that point of view. And it's endless—this constant assessing and reassessing.

My friend Sharon, who teaches retreats, once mentioned that she noticed how her mind, sitting a retreat, couldn't help but suss out everybody she saw, as if making a kind of list of who was better than her, who wasn't as good as her, and who was about even with her—about whatever particular quality your mind picks. Pick anything. Pick how somebody's dressed. Pick what their hair's like. Pick how they sit in the hall. Pick the kind of car they drive. Pick the job they have. Pick how they eat, how much they eat, what socks they wear. I mean, it gets really insane on a long retreat. You should see this stuff.

But the energy that the mind puts into it is just the same whether it's about socks or about what you're doing with your life. And she said, so you do that—you make this whole arrangement: they sit better than me, I sit better than them. You have it all figured out. You know where everybody is. Then somebody new comes in and you have to reshuffle the whole thing because you've got to figure out where they go, and it shifts everything around.

Just play with it. Just notice. Can you walk through the dining room at lunch and see if any comparison happens to arise in your mind? And if you can laugh at it, that's great, because that puts some space around it.

But you see how this leads to restlessness, a kind of real unsettledness, a fear, a sense that there's only so much happiness available in the world, and if you have more, I have less. That's the big thing that gets in the way of appreciative joy. And it's so strange because it's exactly the reverse. What's so great about appreciative joy is this: you're happy now, and I can be happy too. I don't even have to have something good happening in my own life.

I can be happy about something happening in your life. It really does increase our chances of happiness.

So you might just notice—I just drop it in there—the sense of comparing, the sense of scarcity, versus the limitless nature of joy. Just notice when your mind throws that up: "Oh, I don't have to believe that." Reconnect with the sense of someone's happiness and offer that wish and see what happens in the climate, in your inner climate, in your mind and heart.

This mudita is one of various ways to consciously bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy. And it's really an essential aspect of the whole mandala of our spiritual practice. It's true, the Buddha talked a lot about aspects of suffering and freeing our heart and mind from suffering, and the need to understand how we suffer in order to be free from it. We need to see that. A lot of our path is opening to that. But it's just as important to open to the beauty, to the joy, because otherwise we drown in the suffering and it's an

imbalanced perception.

You get into what I call a dukkha phase—dukkha is the Pali word often translated as suffering—where all you see is difficult endings of things, dying, everything's wrong. I remember it would be like that. I'd walk in a room and there's a beautiful plant, and I'd go, "Oh, what's the difference? It's just going to die, you know?" A couple gets together and I'd think, "May they be happy, because you know it's not going to last."

That's a little imbalanced, right? It's not so helpful. Yes, everything will die. The plant will die. But right now it's not dead. Right now it's beautiful. Can I appreciate that even more, knowing it will die?

Sometimes, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, we have to consciously bring up into our hearts and minds seeds of joy. And it can be a very little seed of joy to balance this overwhelming feeling when you're drowning in suffering—of the world, of your own, in a really difficult time in your life.

I've noticed for myself this tendency of the mind to go all one way or all the other. If I'm hearing about suffering or I'm in a hard place, the mind just gets consumed by that, as if you can't enjoy anything. Or if it's someone else's suffering and I actually have a moment of joy, I'm cheating. I'm abandoning them. I'm not helping them. I should just be really dismal. But it's not like that. Actually, the opening to these seeds of joy gives our heart and mind the courage, the strength, the vastness to be more present with ourselves and with others when things are difficult.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks about this from his experience during the Vietnamese War. He went back and forth between the two sides, trying to be a reconciler, which of course meant both sides didn't trust him. And when he was out of Vietnam giving some talks during the war, he wasn't allowed to go back again. For him, that was a lot of suffering. He describes one time when a good friend of his died of a heart attack. He couldn't sleep for a few nights. There was so much pain in his heart, and he just couldn't get around it. He had to get up the next day and give a speech, and he just couldn't deal. So what he did was to consciously bring up seeds of joy, just simple things. And that helped to balance his perception and balance his heart.

These are examples he gives. He says, "Most of us ask the question, 'What is wrong?' We forget to ask, 'What is right?' There are many things that are not wrong. When you focus your attention only on what is wrong, you can make the situation worse. So it is wise to meditate on your capacity to enjoy peace, happiness, and joy, your capacity to be in touch with what is not wrong, what is refreshing, healing, and wonderful in the present moment. During the war, we were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the country, but we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage. I would mention these herbs to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them."

Just something that simple can help to open us out of the kind of funnel we can get into of despair. Each of us has moments of difficulty. When we're not able to deal with them, we ask our seeds of joy to come up. In this way, we counterbalance the suffering.

So this formal mudita practice is just one way to help us begin to look into that possibility.

And as Ajahn Sumedho said, you can also think of mudita as the importance of being able to appreciate beauty and goodness in the things around us. So that's what Thich Nhat Hanh was calling up as seeds of joy—just the beauty of nature. You can call it forth for yourself. It's something we don't do that much: a conscious memory of wholesome, good things that you've done. Just simple, kind or generous or moral, ethical actions from your past.

We think of that as egotistical, but actually just bringing up a past goodness is like a present moment experience of that past goodness, and it's a kind of joy. It's a kind of happiness. It can really have quite an effect on us—especially when we can't think of anything good we've ever done—to really bring that up. Pay attention to goodness that others do.

I have a whole bunch of stories, but I just want to end with one example of this—from someone in a place of great, really great mental suffering, who was able to reach out to little things to help balance it.

This is from Good Morning America. The woman telling the story is named Lisa Beamer. She was the wife of Todd Beamer—I don't know if you remember his name, but he was on one of the planes on 9/11. He was on the plane that they brought down in Pennsylvania. His name became kind of well known. They said he's one of the guys who said, "Let's roll," and helped to bring down that plane.

So this was after 9/11, and she was on Good Morning America talking about missing her husband and their daughter. And then she told this story:

"I had a very special teacher in high school many years ago whose husband suddenly died of a heart attack. About a week after his death, this teacher shared some of her insight with a classroom of students. As the late afternoon sunlight came streaming in through the classroom windows, the class was nearly over. She sat down on her desk, and with a gentle look on her face, she paused and said, 'Class is over. I would like to share with all of you a thought that is unrelated to class, but which I feel is very important.

'Each of us is put here on earth to learn, share, love, appreciate, and give of ourselves. None of us knows when this fantastic experience will end. It can be taken away at any moment. Perhaps this is the power's way of telling us that we must make the most out of every single day.'

She went on, speaking to the students—and Lisa Beamer was one of those students:

'So I would like you all to make me a promise. On your way to school or on your way home, find something beautiful to notice. It doesn't have to be something you see. It could be a scent—perhaps the scent of freshly baked bread coming out of someone's house. Or it could be the sound of the breeze slightly rustling the leaves in the trees. Or the way the morning light catches one autumn leaf as it falls gently to the ground. Please look for these things and cherish them. Although it may sound trite to some, these things are the stuff of life—the little things you're put on earth to enjoy, the things we most often take for

granted.'

The class was completely quiet. We all picked up our books and filed out of the room silently. That afternoon, I noticed more things on my way home from school than I had that whole semester. Every once in a while, I think of that teacher and remember what an impression she made on all of us. And I try to appreciate all of those things that sometimes we all overlook."

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