Brahmavihāra Day 19: Muditā (Appreciative Joy)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 46:29

Today we continue with Muditā, Appreciative Joy.

I know Greg yesterday introduced it well, beginning with the so-called easy person—someone whose happiness or success you can easily connect with without it tweaking your deepest inner jealousy. That's meant to be the easiest person.

Since we only have four days for this and for equanimity, I've got to move things along. And as Greg probably said, and I'll say again, technically in the way it's taught, we don't include ourselves in the formal muditā practice. Since it's happiness in the happiness of others, that's why, I think. Or maybe they just assumed that we would naturally be happy with our own happiness without it being a grasping thing. But all of us in teaching this have found that's not always so true for us in these cultures. Sometimes, sure, we're happy for the things we have, but with a lot of grasping and fear that it's going to go away. Or sometimes—I don't know how it is for you—but sometimes I know I overlook little things that I could really appreciate or be grateful for.

Ajahn Sumedho, in different writings of his, has a way of talking about just beginning to tune the heart, the mind, into this sense of appreciative joy in a way that is completely not traditional in terms of how it's taught. He talks about thinking of muditā as appreciating the loveliness and beauty in our own experience, in things around us. So he includes appreciating nature, appreciating the beauty of nature. And I've actually found, since we're in a place where it's quite lovely at different times, that this is a really nice way into this sense of non-personal, non-clinging, non-jealous appreciation.

For me, I don't get too envious of nature. It's beautiful. I don't think I wish I could be as cute as the deer. You just kind of appreciate it. I'm not thinking, "I wish people looked at me like they look at that flower." If that's happening, you pretty much know, okay, there's definitely a kilesa distorting the perception at this moment. It's not too hard to find.

So I'm just dropping that in. I'm not going to guide us in that, but I want to mention it. When you're walking around here, especially after my talk on craving, and you have a sense of "this is beautiful," and then you start thinking, "Oh, but if I really like it, is it craving?"—all of that—if we start to feel what this non-clinging appreciative joy is, both in the formal practice and in walking around, it's something we can really tap into all over the place.

I've found this to be one of the beautiful qualities, one of the boundless states when our mind is really open. It's a wonderful thing to tap into in just little ways going through the day, going through a difficult day, or walking through a city. It could just be a beautiful church that you walk by. Take a moment to appreciate the architecture. You don't have to go into some big story. Or small things that happen in our own lives that we can consciously be grateful for.

I mentioned the part about nature so you can get a sense of the non-personal quality to that appreciation, that appreciative joy. And now what I'm going to suggest is this: let's start by taking some moments to tune into your own self and life and consciously go through a few things you could be grateful for.

Gratitude, as I think I mentioned—and again this is from Ajahn Sumedho—gratitude and contentment are very supportive states of mind for awakening. And that's really sweet, because we're open, we're present, we're receptive. And you can't force it.

I do quite a bit of gratitude practice, especially when I'm in grumpy mind at the end of the day. I don't know if that ever happens to any of you here. You hit the bed and you're like, "Thank God that day is over and tomorrow will be new. I have not had one useful, mindful moment this day." Should you ever have a thought like that—maybe it's only me—whether you're in bed or you just take a moment, I've really done this a lot: just tune in. What is there I could be grateful for? And grumpy mind finds this very phony at first.

It's like this with muditā as well. It can just be little things. When we're choosing someone to tune into their happiness, it doesn't have to be that they just won the Nobel Prize. It could be that they love to garden and they're able to work in the garden. Something as simple as that, that you can appreciate their happiness, their joy.

So let's just take a few moments. Just let yourself come back into presence.

Let my words fall in gently, but be more with yourself than with my words.

Take a breath and, the usual—relax into presence, mind and body. Before we begin with the easy person, just tune into yourself. Very simply, don't try to make yourself feel "I should be grateful." It's not that.

I'll narrate what my mind does with this practice. In the beginning, as I said, it feels a little forced. And soon it starts to come in. It just starts with something: I'm grateful I had enough to eat today. I'm grateful that I'm healthy enough to be here practicing. I'm grateful that in this lifetime I met the Dharma and I was interested enough to hear it. I'm grateful that I have some friends. I'm grateful at this moment I'm not living in a combat zone under threat of imminent violence and attack. I'm grateful I have clean water to drink whenever I want it. I'm grateful for the beauty of the world, that I can be here on this sunny day.

Just see whatever comes up in your own particular stories—not to hold on to, but just to open to the small and the large joys, happiness, success that come. It's a kind of recalibrating the habit of perception so we

don't just notice what's wrong. Take some time with that if it seems connecting for you.

When you're ready, or if gratitude doesn't connect, bring up where you started with mudita yesterday—a friend that you can easily see and appreciate something successful or happiness-producing for them, and tune into that. May your happiness and good fortune continue. May your happiness never end. I'm happy for your happiness, for your success.

So for some minutes now, be with yourself and then with this easy-to-see happy friend.

When you feel ready, you might include the benefactor—the same one you've been using is fine. We're not trying to force any feeling at all. Just get a sense of the being you've been using and tune in to some aspect that's fortunate for them, successful or happiness-producing. As I said, it doesn't have to be a big thing. That's our avenue into connecting. Just as with karuna the suffering is the avenue into connecting, but in that moment of connection, the awareness spreads out and includes the whole sense of the person.

So explore this benefactor. If you'd like to stay with the easy friend or yourself, of course that's fine. Use the same phrases as an expression, a carrier for the connecting, the appreciating of their happiness: I'm happy in your happiness. I rejoice in your success. May your happiness and good fortune continue.

As with all our meditation, other states of mind and heart will arise. Greg talked about the near and far enemies, so particularly envy, longing, comparison can come. Of course they will. When they come, notice it without judgment. See if you can reconnect with the sense of the benefactor, some happy aspect, successful aspect. If the envy is too strong, then take a vipassana moment and bring kind attention to it—envy is like this. Then as it lessens a bit, return gently to the mudita.

If you'd like, bring in a different friend—not the easy first one. Perhaps the one you've been using for karuna, for metta, or another friend who comes to mind. Just to begin to get some flexibility. Again, tune into some successful, happy aspect of their life at this time. And if you get lost, go back to where it's more connected for you.

Be with this friend for a few minutes: I rejoice in your happiness, in your success and good fortune. May your good fortune continue. I am happy with you and your good fortune.

Now, if you'd like, explore connecting with the neutral person you've been using. Because we don't know so much about this person, we don't know what happiness or success they're enjoying. So perhaps just imagine them being happy.

Or some small thing you've seen about them. Maybe you've seen them walking their dog, and you can be happy for them that they have a dog.

This is where the Buddha said that just as we all share times of suffering, we all share times of happiness and joy in our lives. Not in equal measure, of course. But just some small happiness. See if you can experiment, explore, connecting with the sense of the neutral person for you in this way.

And as always, giving it patience and time. If energy just drops away, if you get lost in thought, put it down. Return to connect with the friend where it's easy to see their happiness, or the benefactor, and reestablish a sense of appreciative joy. Take your time. And if you want to explore neutral again, do so. But there's no urgency. Just simply a way to explore for ourselves this beautiful quality, this natural quality of our heart and mind when we're not lost in confusion and fear.

May your happiness and good fortune continue.

May all beings know happiness and the causes of happiness.

May our practice be a cause for the happiness of beings.

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