Joy and Happiness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:41

The subject of this evening's talk is joy and happiness. This is not science fiction.

The vocabulary of the Buddha's teachings, as you know, revolves largely around the word *dukkha*. This is the pleasure of being in a Theravadan center. But the Four Noble Truths could just as well have been expressed in terms of happiness. The Buddha could have said: there is unhappiness, the cause of unhappiness is wanting, real happiness is possible, and the way to real happiness is the Eightfold Path.

I want to suggest that joy and happiness are essential parts of our path. Despite the talk of *dukkha*, these elements are truly essential as we progress and develop. Don't worry if you're not completely there today in your practice. These are elements that take a while to mature.

It was a little like Bhante's talk on Nirvana, the Third Noble Truth. We may not have full realization today, but it's helpful to know that's where this is all headed. That's where we're going. Because as Yogi Berra said, if you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere else. So we want to be sure where we wind up.

It's very helpful to start noticing these qualities when they arise and then cultivate them as a conscious part of our practice path. In the overall scheme of the Buddha's teachings, the cultivation of joy and happiness certainly falls into the four right efforts that Winnie discussed early in the retreat. In two of the right efforts, the instructions are to maintain and increase wholesome states of mind, and joy and happiness are certainly in that territory.

I think there is a deep longing for these states among meditators and the world in general. One of our friends and colleagues in California is James Baraz, who many of you know wrote a book called *Awakening Joy*. The book received promotion from Oprah Winfrey's magazine, *O*, and in the six months after it was mentioned, attendance at James's class, both in person and online, reached 2,900 people around the world who were interested in developing joy as part of their meditation practice.

We want to develop the ability to see joy when it arises just as easily as we can see difficulties, the hindrances, and afflictive emotions. Sometimes when we're early in our practice phase or struggling with the hindrances in particular, the mind is almost looking out for them and more apt to notice them. These quiet moments of happiness, joy, or peace can slide by unnoticed.

We want to develop a kind of mindfulness that isn't biased either toward the afflictive or toward the uplifting, but that can really see exactly what's happening in either direction. As the mind comes to completeness, it needs to see joy as easily as it sees difficulty.

When we start to open up to this, this attention on the positive begins to redress an imbalance in the mind, because so often the mind inclines toward what's wrong or what's lacking. The bent of the mind shaped by craving inclines to see what's lacking or what's off, and it doesn't often take into account the positive states that are present. So we need to give equal weight to seeing the wholesome. As the Buddha said, what one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind.

There are many words in Pali, in the Buddha's teachings, that point to this whole range of beautiful qualities of mind. I'll mention some of the ones I'm familiar with.

There's the term *mudita*, empathetic joy, which Winnie devoted a whole talk to a couple of weeks ago. The term *sukha*, which I would translate as happiness. It sounds a little bit like sugar, and *sukha* has this sweet quality in the mind, just like sugar does.

Ananda means bliss. It was frequently used in Buddhist names. Of course, you know the Buddha's attendant was Ananda. My first preceptor in Thailand was called Panyananda, which means the bliss of wisdom. When I took a monk's name the next time I ordained, I asked to call myself Sunyatananda, and my preceptor agreed, which means the bliss of emptiness. You see this in many Buddhist names—it's very common.

Piti, which we discussed in the seven factors, is usually translated as rapture. *Pamoja* could well be translated as joy—it might be the best word to translate as joy. I think Bhante mentioned this in one of his talks.

Somanasa, which I would translate as gladness of mind. And *santuti*—I like that word, *santuti*. It sounds like it comes from an Italian gelato factory, and it means contentment.

All these words are part of the Buddha's teachings, part of the development of the path. They're particularly emphasized in one sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Upanissa Sutta, sometimes called the Sutta on Transcendent Dependent Origination.

This sutta describes the unfolding of the path as an unfolding of joy, beginning with suffering, leading to faith, and then joy, and then the joy leading on to states of concentration, insight, and liberation. It's a beautifully positive description of the path to awakening.

Venerable Analayo, who will be coming here in March to teach with Joseph, is one of the foremost Buddhist scholars writing in the English language. He's a German monk who ordained in Sri Lanka. He has a wonderful book called *Satipatthana*, which is a long commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta. He's very familiar with the whole range of the Pali suttas. He's also learned Chinese in order to study their counterparts in ancient Chinese texts—a wonderful monk and a scholar of great renown.

He put it this way: "The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." The entire scheme of our training is a progressive refinement of joy. That's what we're

doing here, culminating, of course, in liberation, which the Buddha described by saying, "Nibbana is the highest happiness"—from the Dhammapada.

It's very helpful to be able to not only recognize the quality of joy when we find it, but also to bring it in at times, to have practices that develop this quality and bring it in during times of difficulty. Because if we know how to do that, this quality of joy can be a tremendous ally on the path. Let's face it, we all hit times that are difficult, and we can use some uplift.

This came really clear to me when I was practicing in Burma several years ago. I'd been a monk in Thailand in the eighties, and then I went back and ordained again in Burma around 2005 because I wanted to practice with Paok Sayadaw, this concentration master I've mentioned a few times. He has a monastery in Burma about two hundred miles southeast of Rangoon.

I arrived there at the start of the rains retreat, which should have been a clue, but I didn't quite get it. I got there one afternoon, met with Sayadaw about five p.m., and said I'd like to practice for six weeks, and if he was willing, I'd really like to ordain. I told him I'd been a monk before, and he said okay.

So the next morning I was driven into town, bought my robes and bowl and belt—the whole gear. That afternoon, about one o'clock, my head was shaved. I went through the ordination ceremony, took the precepts, and I was a monk again. It was very quick.

The rains retreat opened that day. This is a period when for three months the monks settle in one place because it's the rainy season. In the olden days, they weren't supposed to walk through the fields and disturb the crops that were growing, especially the rice.

I started to practice, and Paok Sayadaw's practice was quite demanding. I wanted to study concentration with him, so I had one object and one object only—the small area underneath my nose where I could feel the breath. That was the only object I was allowed for the six weeks. It wasn't time to investigate interesting sights or sounds, much less the nature of awareness. I had to come back to this point in every sit, in every walk, at every meal for six weeks. It was a very narrow focus, which itself is a challenge.

They weren't kidding about the rains. The rain started pretty much the next day and went on uninterrupted for about the next three weeks, during which time it rained three inches a day and I didn't see the sun.

I was eating one meal a day at the monastery. Breakfast didn't quite work for my timing because the schedule was pretty full. So I was eating one meal a day. The monastery is vegetarian, which I appreciated because I'm vegetarian. But there wasn't a lot of protein. So it was basically stir-fried vegetables and white rice. On that diet, I was losing about half a pound a day of weight. And you can tell I don't have a lot to give up in the first place.

The practice was demanding and the schedule was demanding. The shortest sitting during the day was an

hour and a half.

I settled into that schedule, practicing hour after hour, not seeing the sun, losing weight steadily, surviving on minimal food. The bugs in my kuti were amazing—I saw the biggest spider I'd ever encountered right outside my window.

After about three weeks of this demanding routine, I wasn't making tremendous progress in the practice. I grew quite discouraged, and my spirits began sinking really low. It's funny now, but at the time it wasn't amusing at all.

Fortunately, I had brought a small piece of art that I kept on my altar—a photograph of the Dalai Lama with quotes from Shantideva about the bodhisattva's way of life. Facing this beautiful image of His Holiness, I decided to ask for guidance.

"Your Holiness," I said to the photograph, "I'm having a really difficult time. I need some counsel. What advice can you offer me?" I genuinely supplicated to his image.

Quite immediately, a transmission came. It arrived in his voice—that distinctive Indian-accented English—and the message was crystal clear: "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then the transmission ended.

I figured I'd better follow this guidance from such a revered figure. Whenever I could remember, I would call to mind that advice: stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. Sometimes it worked beautifully. When I could recall what cheerful actually felt like, it truly uplifted my spirits and allowed me to continue with my retreat.

I've continued remembering and practicing this wisdom during difficult periods. After all, what's the point of being anything other than cheerful, optimistic, and confident? There really is no point.

The Dalai Lama himself embodies this beautiful standard for happiness. He carries on his shoulders the weight of the entire Tibetan nation—a people who lost a million of their seven million during the Cultural Revolution, whose monks and nuns still cannot freely practice dharma as they wish, who face ongoing arrests and persecution. Nonetheless, he radiates this amazing joy and happiness.

At a gathering of scientists in Dharamsala, where he loves bridging the scientific and Buddhist worlds, one scientist asked him over tea in a casual setting: "What was the happiest time of your life?" I thought he might say it was in the Potala Palace as a young monk, studying and practicing freely before the occupation. Instead, he simply said, "I think right now."

What a beautiful response—the happiest time of his life is right now.

I want to explore some of the different ways we can cultivate this sense of joy and happiness in our practice. One of the most powerful is mudita, which Winnie discussed—sympathetic joy or appreciative

joy. This is the practice of taking happiness in another's happiness.

Among all the formal Buddhist practices I know, mudita is the most joyful and upbeat. It's a wonderful ally. If you develop a good relationship with what we call "the happy person"—the one with the smile on their face—bringing them in as an ally can be genuinely uplifting.

Sometimes you can feel that spontaneous spark of delight in someone else's happiness. One morning the phone rang at my house. It was a friend I hadn't heard from in a while. When I asked how she was, she responded with tremendous enthusiasm: "I'm wonderful!" Without thinking, I immediately replied, "I'm wonderful too!" That was pure mudita—her happiness simply touched something in me.

There's a beautiful standard phrase in this practice: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." It's a lovely way to tune into another's joy.

We can appreciate this profound line from Shantideva, the great Indian philosopher: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy."

Whatever suffering there is in this world comes from wanting only myself to be happy. This practice of mudita serves as a reliable guide to discovering more happiness in ourselves.

This truth became vivid to me several years ago when Carol and I taught a weekend retreat on mudita. We teach many metta retreats here, but I'd never taught or participated in a mudita retreat before. We offered a weekend to explore this practice together.

I didn't have high expectations. Weekend retreats are perhaps the most challenging of all retreats—you begin with the opening day, and the next day is already the closing. There's no time to settle into that spacious in-between place. Yet I was genuinely surprised by how much participants received from the practice. I remember someone approaching us at the end, saying with wonder, "I haven't felt this happy in years." This from just two days of mudita practice.

I've since worked with practitioners who have engaged in intensive mudita practice for ten days at a stretch, and I've done this myself. It proves to be a profoundly uplifting practice.

There are other forms of joy available to us as well. Most of us here live as laypeople in the world, with access to various sense pleasures. In daily life, we watch movies, enjoy foods of our choosing, listen to music, share intimate relations, appreciate art, painting, and sculpture. This represents a natural part of lay life, and these activities do generate a certain kind of joy in the moment. We cannot avoid this fact if we observe our experience closely.

Of course, as sophisticated meditators, we understand that such pleasures are temporary and dependent on conditions. Yet they do uplift us. Consider how your lay life would feel without any sense pleasures—it might resemble the opening day of a retreat here, which offers a crash course in renunciation and often proves somewhat difficult.

It's worth noting that we laypeople structure our lives to include a certain amount of joy from sense pleasures. This doesn't contradict the Buddha's teachings. In fact, one of the terms for householders in the Buddha's language was "one who enjoys sense pleasures." This describes who we are as laypeople. If you wish to eliminate all sense pleasures from your life, ordination might be more appropriate, as monastic life provides much greater support for the practice of renunciation.

Here on retreat, our access to sense pleasures is naturally limited, yet simple pleasures throughout the day still offer brief moments of delight. I think of rising and enjoying a hot shower—when sitting retreat, I love feeling that warmth on my body. After walking on a chilly autumn afternoon, you come inside for a warm cup of tea or hot bowl of soup, feeling the warmth pervade your being with such delight.

You step outside and witness the beauty of autumn leaves, still present after several weeks, or notice how the sky opens into brilliant blue on a morning like today after days of clouds. Perhaps the most precious moment comes at day's end—after the final sitting and chanting, you lie down in bed. Isn't that delicious? That feeling of settling completely. The problem, of course, is that it doesn't last long. You fall asleep and then wake up again. But it remains pleasant while present.

In the retreat environment, our heightened sensitivity makes all these pleasures more vivid than even fine food and experiences typically strike us in daily life. As the Buddha expressed it: "Robes, alms food, a hut, and a straw seat will seem rich and luxurious to one who has renounced." This describes what we enjoy here—the heightening of our senses toward appreciation through simplicity of being.

Another great pleasure available to all of us is the joy of nature. This became particularly clear during my first monastic period in Thailand. After ordaining and spending time in Bangkok securing my long-term visa and learning the fundamentals of bhikkhu life, I traveled north, just outside Chiang Mai, to practice in a fairly remote monastery built at the bottom of a river gorge. It was quite beautiful.

I appreciated that the practice conditions were roughly equal for men and women—monks lived on one side of the river, nuns on the other, with individual huts lining both banks. High cliffs rose on either side, lined with trees, truly out in the countryside.

I had a sweet little hut called a kuti situated on the riverbank. Each morning, the sun would finally crest the cliff and shine down, illuminating beautiful scenery. My hut sat quite alone, creating ideal conditions for meditation in the profound quiet.

Yet difficulties existed there as well. I spoke no Thai, and the teacher spoke no English. During my three months there, I didn't have a single interview or hear one dharma talk. This was before MP3 players, so I couldn't even smuggle in Dharma Seed contraband. I was truly on my own.

The teacher would occasionally come up to my kuti. I don't know if he was checking to make sure I was okay or what, but he'd look in the window, and I'd either be sitting or walking. Honestly, there wasn't much else to do. So he'd look in my window, see me sitting, and he'd just say "Dii, dii," which means "good,

good" in Thai. That was the transmission, the seal of approval.

Or he'd come up and I'd be walking. For some reason, I was walking on the bare ground wearing sandals. I can't imagine why. And he would point to my feet and tell me to take off the sandals so I'd walk barefoot, get more sensation, more contact with the ground. So that was about the extent of my instruction for those three months.

There wasn't another Western monk there that I could talk with, so I really didn't have any conversation for those three months. That was challenging. I was really on my own in that setting.

One of the things that sustained me, that kept my spirits up, was the beauty of that nature—the sunshine, the river, the cliffs, the trees. The most striking thing was on my path, the path I would walk from my kuti to the front of the monastery for my morning meal every day. I would pass this huge old mango tree, and it was mango season in the spring. The mangoes were ripening on the tree and falling on the ground, and there would be this delicious, fresh fragrance of ripe mangoes when I walked by that tree.

The only thing that was a little frustrating is I couldn't eat them. As a monk, you can't eat anything that hasn't been put in your hands by someone else. So these mangoes would fall on the ground because they were ripe, and then they would rot, and I would just have to smell them and watch them. But even the smell was a delight, I must say.

So taking time to appreciate the beauty—as I know you all are doing, I hear it from you in interviews—taking the time to appreciate it. This is from Ajahn Sumedho: "Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism, one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower, you should contemplate its decay. Or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse. That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty."

This is the joy of appreciative joy, being able to appreciate the beauty in the things around us. So this appreciation of nature, appreciation of the beauty of natural things—one source that we have a lot of access to here for joy.

There's also a real joy in virtue, in maintaining our conduct well. When we're careful with our sila in life, we live through a few years of maintaining good sila, and as we look back, we find we don't have to have regrets about the actions we've done. Because we don't have regret or remorse or guilt, the mind can really settle in meditation in a lovely way. We feel one level of an inner kind of purity from that care with our conduct.

The Buddha had a special word for this. He called it enjoying the bliss of blamelessness. He said that of the other kinds of pleasures that one can have in lay life—enjoying a degree of self-sufficiency, a livelihood, and freedom from debt—these are not one-sixteenth the value of the bliss of blamelessness. He spoke of

this very highly.

So one may wonder, to what extent can this be developed? Again, this was an interview with the Dalai Lama. He was being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, and I just want to say how much I appreciate Oprah's work at bringing real spirituality to a very broad audience. I don't know of anyone else in this country who does it the way that she does it.

So she was interviewing the Dalai Lama personally for an article in O Magazine. She started by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

No major mistakes, Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

I have to believe that part of the reason for the Dalai Lama's success in meditation is his carefulness with his conduct—that bliss of blamelessness.

There's the joy in generosity. Carol talked about this the other night, and I could feel that joy as she described the work that she does in Burma every winter, being able to support nunneries, monasteries, schools for orphans, and so on. I also feel this joy in generosity when you all are serving Bhante his lunch every day. It's just a delight to watch the people line up and he goes through with great stillness, and you all take such care in offering the food that he needs, the portions that he would enjoy. I really appreciate the presence on both sides of that moment. I don't think I'm the only one who has shed a tear in watching that transaction happen. It's very touching for me sometimes.

You do get to see this a lot in Asia, particularly around monastics. When I was going to practice in Burma that time I told you about with Pauk Sayadaw, one of my students wanted to support my trip and support

the monastery, and she gave me a few hundred dollars to give away while I was there in the best way that I could see fit.

So I got to the monastery—I was still a layperson—and one morning before I ordained as a monk, I went to see the steward, the lay steward of the monastery who handles the money. I said, "I have some money I'd like to offer to the monastery on behalf of this student. What I'd like to do is pay for a lunch to sponsor for the entire monastery."

At this time in the monastery, there were 750 people practicing. There were 450 monks, about 150 nuns, and 100 laypeople practicing there at the time. I said, "I have a few hundred dollars. Would that cover a lunch for everyone?"

The steward said, "Well, I'm really sorry to tell you this, but all the lunches are spoken for for the next three months."

I was amazed because this is one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth. And yet, every main meal for three months had already been donated by some Burmese people.

So we decided that her money would sponsor special breakfasts, breakfasts that would have especially good food for everyone in the monastery. Then every day I would come down to lunch and they would have a big white board, which is a lot like our meal dana board, and the white board would say who was sponsoring the lunch that day. It would say it in Burmese and it would say it in English. So as I walked by, I could read where my meal was coming from that day.

Generally it was more than one person. Often it would be a family or it looked like quite a lot of a village who would sponsor the lunch because it was a lot of people. So they would often be sitting off to one side. They would come to the monastery wearing their nicest clothes. The whole family or clan or maybe village would all sit together and watch the monks and the nuns and the laypeople file through and be served from these huge pots until all the people had gotten their lunch.

What was so beautiful were the big smiles on the faces of the donors that day. They would sit off to one side and they would watch Pauk Sayadaw being fed from their offering. They would watch the other senior monks and nuns be fed from their generosity. And it brought them so much joy. It was so clear on their faces. It was really a delight to see.

In our own meditation practice, there's a joy of being with the truth, even if it's difficult. I hear this in interviews from people that even when practice is working in a difficult place, there's a joy of learning how to be with it, of learning how to open to this new place in ourselves, this new place in our practice. Even if it's a little bit difficult, there's, I would say, a joy of understanding what these states mean, how mindfulness helps to liberate them, and how the whole path unfolds, even based on the difficulties.

When my mind touches into some of these core issues of personality, of character—and these may be

things like, in my case, fear, or for other people, vigilance or rage—as the retreat goes on, we find that we can touch these places, and the mind has the steadiness to be there with them. It may be for the first time in our life we can touch these deep feelings and the mind can stay steady in the middle of that and not need to escape either through fleeing the room or going off into fantasy or flights of papañca. But the mind can really stay and hold it.

That's the key to freeing ourselves. This contact with steadiness with these difficult areas in our mind.

And if you look closely, I'll bet you'll find a joy in that experience where we wouldn't expect to find it at all.

This is from a poet named Michael Lunig:

"When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it. Let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it. Let a bird lean in the hole and sing a simple song like a tiny bell and let it ring."

So as we stay steady with these difficult facets of heart and mind, the studying continues to deepen and we find that the experience starts to open into places of real peace and stillness. And this is the factor of concentration that's developing.

One of the things that kept me coming back on meditation retreats is I would keep touching these levels of peace at what felt like more and more profound places in me. And I thought, wow, if this much peace is possible, if this much stillness is possible, what else might there be in this mind? And I wanted to come back and explore that because being there was so satisfying. Having a period when the dukkha did not arise was so satisfying that I wanted to sort of plumb that depth. Finding that I could live without being assaulted by the hindrances of liking and disliking, of wanting and pushing away was so freeing, so delicious.

There's also a lot of joy in the practice of gratitude. I know Winnie mentioned this also, and I wanted to talk a little more about this quality of gratitude. Sometimes I think that there should be a fifth Brahmavihara and that it should be gratitude, but I'm going to try and convince you that it actually belongs under one of the ones we already know.

So gratitude, as I understand it, is about appreciating what's already in our own life—appreciating the blessings that are in our life. And I connect this with doing mudita practice for oneself.

Some strains of Buddhist teaching say that we're not allowed to do mudita practice for ourself, that that gets too self-centered, and that mudita is only valid for another person. But I don't see it that way, and I don't understand it that way, and I think there's a textual reference for seeing it the other way as well.

For those of you who were here for the practice of loving kindness for all beings that I led about a week ago, we did a little chant about abiding, pervading the quarters with a mind imbued with the Brahma Viharas. So I'd like to read this chant a little bit on the subject of mudita, which is being translated by

gladness.

"I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with gladness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above and below, around and everywhere, and to all as to myself, I will abide, pervading the all-encompassing world, with a mind imbued with gladness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will."

This passage comes from a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, so it is the words of the Buddha. And as you can tell, we are pervading the world with mudita "to all as to oneself." So very clearly in this sutta passage, the Buddha is encouraging us to direct mudita to ourself as well as to all other sentient beings.

So I encourage you to play with this. You can use the same phrase, "may my happiness and good fortune continue," or if that seems a little striving, you could use another phrase, something like, "may I appreciate the blessings in my life."

So gratitude is such a beautiful state of mind. Because we're appreciating what we have, we don't slip into desiring something else. And because we're appreciating what we have, we don't slide into aversion to what's here now. So it's a state that avoids both desire and aversion.

And this came through really nicely in a story of one of our friends, a wise practitioner, who was talking to her granddaughter on Christmas Day. Her granddaughter was like five or six years old at this time and was living in a different city. So our friend called her granddaughter, and the granddaughter had gotten presents that day. And so our friend said, "Well, when you get presents, do you feel thankful for what you have, or does it make you want more?"

And feel the wisdom starting to slip in?

And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, I want more."

And our friend said, "That's too bad."

And the little girl picked up on it and said, "What do you mean?"

And our friend said, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, you feel good. And when you're wanting more, it doesn't feel as good."

And little girl said, "Oh Nana, you're right."

So this is kind of the magic of gratitude. All of us here have many things to be grateful for.

I'm going to come back to this in a minute, but I want to tell a story about another friend of ours who was working in a refugee camp in Thailand. I guess this was in the 1990s. And refugees were coming into Thailand from Laos and Cambodia because those countries were still in a lot of turmoil and they could find some safety in Thailand. So he was working near the Thai border with these refugees, and they had

often come from very poor parts of the country, often living up in the hills without modern conveniences.

And many of them had been given visas to move to the West. In fact, a lot of these people settled in California. I think Fresno has a lot of Lao and Cambodian refugees. So they were in the refugee camps to prepare them for this transition to the West.

So they were learning about things like dollar bills and quarters and washing machines and toasters and bus timetables—all of these things that they didn't have in their lives in those countries. And so as a way of getting to know people and getting them to talk about their lives, one of the questions our friend would ask them in classrooms was, "What are the most important things in life?"

So he told me there was this one teenage girl, a refugee, and when he asked her, "What are the most important things in life?" she answered, "The most important things are fire, rice, and water." I think that gives a flavor of what her life was like.

In this country, we more or less take those things for granted or their equivalents. In our situations, I think most of us take those things for granted. Of course, many people in this country don't have ample supplies of heat or food or shelter either. But most of us have the opportunity when we go home to stay sheltered, to stay warm, to stay dry, and we can be really grateful for that. Many people in the world don't have that opportunity.

We have ample food most of the time. I appreciate being here on retreat. We have really good food, really good ample food a lot of the time. I was just reflecting on the range of foods that we've eaten in this retreat—how many came from the Native Americans. Europeans may not be aware of this, but Native Americans provided through their agriculture many of the food staples that we eat in this country and now, of course, that are in Europe also.

So some of them that we owe to the native people are corn, maple syrup, squash, potatoes, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, beans, tomatoes, strawberries, peanuts, avocados, and sunflowers—all brought to us from Native Americans. So we generally have access to these choices of foods, but many people don't. Many people around the world and people in this country don't. So we can feel grateful for this.

All of us, in fact, are enjoying what the Tibetans call a precious human birth. And the precious human birth means that we have been born as a human being and have the chance to make our life meaningful. And in fact, all of you are making your lives meaningful. We're born as human beings. Our mind and bodies are in reasonably good shape. We're at a time when a Buddha has appeared in this world. We're at a place and a time when the Dharma is flourishing, when there are practitioners who are following the teachings, when we have heard and understood the teachings, and we have the interest and the time to follow and practice the teachings.

This set of circumstances doesn't occur for a whole lot of people on this planet. And yet all of us have this opportunity, and it's a huge thing to be grateful for. Bottom line, when we think of things to be grateful

for, we can always remember the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. And I've heard this in interviews a lot as we come to this part of the retreat when some people are leaving and reflecting back on their experience—a lot of gratitude for the triple gem: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

It's wonderful to practice and cultivate this state of gratitude. The Buddha said, "Three persons are rare in this world. One is a Buddha, and another is a person who is grateful." It's good company to be in.

One retreat I was sitting here, it was in the colder part of the three-month course. And I had arrived from California where the weather was sunny and relatively warm. And I came in—I think it was November—and the rain started and it started to get cold, you know, some frosty mornings. And I was developing some aversion to the weather. I went in for an interview with Joseph and he said, "Don't waste your time on that. That leads nowhere."

So I thought, I better work with this. And so I started a gratitude list. And I just decided to write down every single thing I could think of in my life that I was grateful for. And then every morning when I got up, I would read through that list as a way to kind of set my tone for the day. It was very helpful because it just kept reminding me how many things I had to be thankful for. And it's a wonderful antidote to any kind of aversion—to remind myself of that.

One other kind of nice gratitude practice: I was teaching a group of senior students a few years ago in California, and two of them decided to start this practice where every night, just before they went to bed, they would send an email to the other telling them one thing they'd been grateful for that day. And so we called them gratitude buddies and they had the commitment—just one thing, but every day. And so they just did that steadily.

And they said it really changed their outlook on their life to realize they had something to appreciate every single day. Keeping that up as a practice and appreciating the other person's gratefulness really made a difference. When we talked about it in the senior students group, a bunch more people started doing it. The gratitude buddies practice actually spread for a while.

One of the things I often reflect on with gratitude is the presence in my life of the path of the Dharma. Have you reflected ever, or recently, on what your life was like before you found a path, before you found this path? I know what my life was like. I felt kind of lost. I felt like I was just bouncing around life, going up, going down, not understanding why, feeling at the mercy of the winds—I don't know what winds, but some winds. I didn't have any ideas where happiness came from or why I was suffering. I felt lost and adrift.

Then finding that there is a reliable path to happiness, to a stable kind of happiness, was like an amazing revelation to me. I just knew I was willing to do anything it took to walk that path and find a stable kind of happiness in my life. When I reflect back on how I got connected to this practice and to IMS, it seems like kind of a fluke. I was in a spiritual bookstore in California one day. I'd been doing a little meditation, but I

saw a poster for a retreat with Joseph and Sharon and Jack that was happening in New Mexico. I said, "I want to go to that." This was 1976.

That was my connection to them as teachers. I went to the retreat and learned about IMS. About six months later, I came here and did a long period of retreat, then came on staff. That poster totally turned my life around. I made a connection that I don't know how I would have made otherwise to what is, to me, the best force in life that I've ever found.

So it seems kind of mysterious at times. How did I happen upon that poster that day? But then I also feel like there was almost a sense of destiny about it. I don't know if you felt that about your path, but I just feel something was leading me to this place. I felt so ready. I know I've heard many of you say when you first heard the teachings, you felt like you were coming home. There's just some force that has guided us here.

I think about another Native American saying, this one from the Chippewa Nation: "Sometimes I go around pitying myself while all the time I'm being carried across the vast sky by great winds." There are these great winds carrying all of us. As we keep adding our good intentions, moment after moment, these winds pick up force and they keep carrying us down this path, which is so wholesome, so completely wholesome.

This sutta, the Upanisa Sutta that describes the unfolding of the path to liberation in terms of joy, goes a little like this: It starts with suffering, which is where the first chain of dependent origination ended. But then it goes on to a different track, and from suffering it moves into faith. This is a little jarring at first, but it's true, isn't it? Didn't you develop your faith by learning to work with your suffering? Understanding suffering is the avenue to faith, to believing in the practice.

Faith brings about a kind of gladness. Carol talked about this as the gladness or brightness in the mind when this quality of faith or *saddhā* develops. This quality of joy leads into rapture, which is *pīti*, this energizing, alert enjoyment of being in the moment. *Pīti* leads into, as it does in the seven factors, calm or tranquility. The delight expresses itself in this settledness that we feel as calm.

In the Upanisa Sutta, the next step is happiness, *sukha*. Following the experience of calm is this quality of happiness or *sukha*. The factors then get more tranquilizing—concentration, insight, liberation, and so forth. What's interesting to me about this is that *sukha*, which I'll call happiness, is a deeper development than joy. Joy is more momentary, uplifting, beautiful, essential. We have so many avenues to get to it. But as joy rises, it needs to pass through tranquility to settle and steady itself before it lands into happiness.

Happiness or *sukha* is this quality of joy that's been matured or ripened or mellowed with calm. Because of that calm, it can settle in a more stable way into our being, into our hearts and minds. It brings with it a real quality of contentment as the mind finds it can settle into itself without having to look outside for anything else. This is that word *santuṭṭhi*, contentment. Of it, the Buddha said—this is also from the

Dhammapada—"Contentment is the greatest wealth."

The greatest wealth.

So this kind of happiness, which has some stability to it, brings a real sense of satisfaction. And as it settles, we get the feeling that, yes, it's impermanent to some extent. It does come and go. But we start to trust that life can throw us curves and we'll still go up and down, but we can settle back into this kind of contented happiness. It forms more or less a reliable baseline for us, even though we're bounced around by the comings and goings of life.

If we have that, we have some basic confidence in being able to work with life, in being able to work with our heart and mind, being able to work with others, being able to work with the world at large.

I love this poem from Rumi. When Rumi says "you," he usually means the divine, the way he understands that. But this captures the spirit for me of when this deep happiness is present:

Come to the orchard in spring.
There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers.
If you do not come, these do not matter.
If you do come, these do not matter.

This is also a poem to this happiness. If happiness doesn't come, these other things don't matter. And if happiness does come, these other things don't matter either. This is that stable foundation.

Of course the path doesn't stop at this happiness, but it continues to evolve. One of the teachers whom I respect deeply put it this way: "The main cause of freedom is happiness." So it is this great supportive condition for the final fruition of the path.

And as the Buddha said in the simile of the Heartwood, the goal of our practice is not just *sila*. It's not just gain or a good reputation. It's not just concentration or the wellbeing that brings about, happiness being a part of that. And it's not just insight. But he said, "It is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end." The unshakable deliverance of mind.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Come to the orchard in spring.
There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers.
If you do not come, these do not matter.
If you do come, these do not matter.

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