Morning Instructions: Practice of Muditā

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 43:40

Today is a lucky day for us because we start the practice of muditā. As I mentioned early on, the Brahmaviharas allow the heart to respond to all the different circumstances and conditions in life, our own and those of others. Mettā lays the general foundation as an attitude of caring and goodwill, a wish for all beings to be happy. When that open heart touches suffering, it naturally evokes compassion, described as the trembling of the heart in response to suffering. But when that open heart encounters joy or happiness in ourselves or another, it responds with this quality that is muditā—sometimes translated as sympathetic joy, sometimes altruistic joy, sometimes simply joy. This is a wonderful companion to have with us on the journey.

Today we get to enjoy the joy of others. We get to enjoy the joy of ourselves. It's interesting that yesterday was compassion day and it was gray and rainy. Today is muditā day and nature is cooperating—it's bright and partly sunny. We let that sunshine come in and resonate with us this morning.

In the practice of muditā, we are encouraged to look at the things that are going really well in our life and in the lives of others that we bring to mind. In doing so, we're reminded that happiness is as much an integral part of life as suffering is, as difficulty is. We start to understand that all beings have a mix of difficulty and enjoyment in life.

It's often said that positive things in our life slide away from us like Teflon, while the difficult things stick in our mind like Velcro. There's some truth to this. Out of a wish for protection, we tend to focus our perception on the difficulties, the threats, the challenges, the things that might go wrong. But in doing that, our thought mechanism becomes biased. It inclines to see the problems.

The practice of muditā helps put the needle back in the center. The Buddha came from the center. He wasn't inclined to see the world predominantly one way or the other. He talked about suffering. He talked about the end of suffering. Both are possibilities. In our lives, in our perceptions, we should have our minds in the middle where we're open to seeing suffering and we also see the happiness, the joy, the possibility of ending suffering in our experience and in the experience of those around us.

This practice of muditā is wonderful because it connects us to this thread of joy that runs through all the lives of sentient beings. When we start to look, we can find happiness in all sentient beings' experiences. I remember one of my early teachers went into a hospital where a student was in a hospital bed inside a breathing machine, without even real contact with fresh air. He asked her how she was doing and she said, "I'm fine. I love it when the sunlight comes in through the window and falls on my face."

Even in the midst of what looked like really difficult circumstances, there are moments where the pain lifts or where joy comes in. We can tune into those experiences for any being that we turn our attention to. When we open to that, we find that muditā has a beautifully uplifting quality for our hearts.

As compassion is a really useful practice when pain is present, muditā is a really helpful practice when you want to pick your mood up a little bit. When you're going along and things seem down or a little flat, and you feel it would be helpful to have a little uplift of energy, a little positive outlook on things, the practice of muditā is our way into that. Apart from enlightenment, this is the happiest practice I know of in Buddhism. I hope you'll enjoy this foray today.

There are a few different phrases you can use for sympathetic joy. They're in your study guide if you want to review them. I'll suggest some during the meditation. The phrase that I've used for many years is: "May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase. May they never end." I like this because it points to the happiness, but it also points to the possibility of its growing. As practitioners, we know that's possible.

Another phrase is: "I appreciate your happiness and good fortune." We just tune in to what's going well for the person, and we notice, "I appreciate that. It's great that that's happening for you." Another way to say this is: "I appreciate the blessings in your life."

The simplest one is: "I'm happy that you're happy." It's a nice sentiment to have, and we can feel that a lot. When we're with somebody who is in a happy place, it's contagious. We resonate.

That's why it's called sympathetic. We resonate with each other's happiness.

Now, if you read some of the ancient commentaries, they'll say things like, "Oh, but you can do mudita for other people, but you can't do it for yourself. That would be too selfish." So some of the ancient commentaries say, "Oh, don't do mudita for yourself." That's incorrect understanding. The Buddha never said that. When he talked about practicing mudita, he said, "to all as to myself." So mudita is for all beings.

When we get to ourselves, you might want to find a phrase that resonates. It could be something like, "I appreciate the blessings in my life." That's kind of unimpeachable. Sometimes, depending on our current situation, if we say, "May my happiness and good fortune continue," that might sound like we're cultivating greed. So if it rubs you the wrong way, "I appreciate the blessings of my life" is fine. But see what works for you. I'll repeat these phrases again as we start the meditation.

We always start the brahmaviharas where it's easy. In mudita practice, the easy person is someone you know who's happy or going through a particular space of happiness in their life—someone whose good fortune is really apparent when you bring them in. So you can start to think about that now, and we'll settle into the meditation.

Beginning again, just bring your attention into the present moment. Coming into your experience of the

body with its alertness and relaxation. Bringing your attention into the heart center, the center of the chest, the seat of a lot of our emotional life.

As you connect with your heart center, just feeling the broadness of awareness. It includes everyone in the room. It expands to outside and nature. All those beings. It doesn't have a clear ending. So we feel that all sentient beings can be included in our awareness.

We remember the foundation of our brahmavihara practice as wishing that all beings be well and free from suffering. Expressing that with just the reminder: May all beings be well, happy, and peaceful.

Now bringing in someone who for you represents a happy person—someone in your circle of acquaintances whom you know well enough to know that things are going well in their life. As you bring them in, you might see them with a smile on their face. Remember a time that you've been together. As you connect with them, remember all the things you like about them. That foundation of goodwill and appreciation.

As you connect with your happy person, bring to mind all the things in their life that are going well or that they enjoy. Could be big things—home, relationship, family, livelihood. Could be small things. Hummingbirds are coming back and they like to put out food. They're going to see a play they've wanted to see. They bought a dress they really like. All the things that make this person happy.

As you connect with all the sources of happiness in this person's life, beginning to express your connection to them with a phrase of mudita. "May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase. May they never end." Or, "I appreciate your happiness and good fortune." Or, "I appreciate the blessings in your life." Or, "I'm happy that you're happy."

You can play with these phrases, find your own. Again in this practice we just use one phrase, though there may be multiple clauses. So repeating to your happy person the phrase that expresses your gladness at their happiness.

From time to time coming back with your attention into the heart center. Feeling in the body the effect of the meditation.

And noticing whatever emotion is there in response to the mudita wish. Again, we don't try to force any particular feeling in relation to the happy person. We're simply inclined toward seeing the happiness in their life. Repeat the phrase, staying open to whatever emotion might arise from that.

Now let go of the connection to the happy person and bring in the connection to yourself. Feel your body and mood in sitting here. Bring up an image of yourself somewhere you've been content, happy, enjoying things. As you connect with yourself, bring to mind all the things that are going well in your life now—all the different sources of happiness that are in your life. Big things, little things, silly things you might not even tell anybody else, like you enjoyed lunch yesterday.

All of us here have so much to be thankful for, including our refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Warm, dry, and fed. Express this appreciation for the happiness in your life by directing the mudita phrase to yourself: "May my happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase. May they never end." Or "I appreciate the blessings in my life," or "I appreciate my happiness and good fortune." Continue to connect with the sources of happiness and send the mudita phrase to yourself.

Now let go of the focus on yourself and bring to mind either your benefactor or good friend—whichever you feel inclined to, the person you've been using for these few days. Feel their presence with you. You might see an image of them, you might say their name. Remember what you like about them. Hold them with friendly eyes. Then bring to mind all the things you know of that are going well in their life currently—all their sources of happiness, big ones and little ones. As they come to mind, repeat your phrase of mudita for this person, your friend or benefactor: "May your happiness and good fortune continue," or "I'm happy that you're happy."

As you go through the day today, make your practice primarily rooted in the practice of metta and loving-kindness for self, benefactor, and friend as we've been doing. This will lay the stable foundation for the opening of the heart. But throughout the day, as you come upon instances of joy in yourself or in these other people, you might turn to the mudita reflection for a short period of time and see how that feels. It's a good practice to make friends with. It's really a wonderful ally on the journey of bringing about the uplifting of the heart.

Tomorrow we will move into loving-kindness for all beings. So we'll begin to move in a spacious direction beginning tomorrow.

It might be worth saying just a little bit about the near and far enemies with mudita. The near enemy—and this is in the study guide—is elation, something like elation or over-exuberance. What I think of it as is when you start to feel joy and there's an element of grasping that comes in, and you start to spin out with thoughts about it. "Oh, now that I'm this happy, I'll be able to do this in my life," things like that. So I think of elation as getting a little attached and whipping up the positive feelings through thinking about them.

The far enemy is envy. This especially comes up with friends. We bring in a friend, we're looking at what's going well in their life, and we think, "Hmm, might be going a little too well for them. Why is my life not going quite that well? If they have that much happiness, they must be stealing some of mine." Whatever. The comparing mind comes in. Conceit can come in.

But we just notice that. Let the envy or elation be. Try to come back into balance. If the envy feels quite strong, we might go back to someone we don't have that kind of comparing mind toward. Return to metta or return to mudita for someone else. So just be on the lookout for those particular hindrances with the mudita practice.

And again, if you have a moment during the day to do a little metta practice for a neutral person and a difficult person, then that kind of paves the way conceptually for all beings.

Once you've found that you can extend loving-kindness to neutral and difficult people, then you understand it's possible to extend it to all beings. That's the logic in the progression. But you don't need to spend a lot of time with those two categories initially.

When choosing a difficult person for practice, I'd recommend picking someone where there's some irritation or mild conflict, rather than the most difficult person in your life. Start with manageable challenges and gradually work your way deeper as your practice stabilizes.

The beauty of mudita practice is that it opens our hearts to genuine celebration of others' happiness and success. When we can truly rejoice in another's joy without the interference of comparison or envy, we discover a wellspring of happiness that doesn't depend on our own circumstances. This sympathetic joy becomes a gift we can offer freely, enriching both our own lives and our relationships with others.

As you continue developing these heart practices, remember that they work together synergistically. Metta provides the foundation of unconditional friendliness, while mudita adds the sparkle of shared celebration. Together, they help us move through the world with greater openness, warmth, and genuine connection to the happiness that surrounds us.

May your practice of mudita bring you great joy, and may you find countless opportunities to celebrate the good fortune and happiness of all beings.

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