The Practice of Joy and Gratitude

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:17

The talk tonight is on practicing joy and gratitude.

Someone once asked a Zen master, "What's the purpose of a lifetime of practice?" And the Zen master answered, "An appropriate response."

When I first heard that quotation, I was very disappointed, because I thought Zen masters were supposed to be a lot more dramatic than that. This seemed to me kind of a wimpy response. I thought the purpose of a lifetime of Zen practice was so that when you were close to dying, you could sit in the full lotus, spontaneously compose a beautiful haiku, and then pass out. And that would be the measure of a real Zen master. So this "appropriate response"—I thought that's a little weak.

But the more I thought about it, the more I thought that is a great answer. Because what it means is that moment after moment, when we meet the changing conditions of life, the right thing comes out of our hearts and minds and actions. And it takes a lifetime of practice in order to be able to make that possible. So I thought this was really a pretty wise and practical answer for us to think about.

In our tradition, there's a roadmap that shows the appropriate response for us to the changing conditions of life. This roadmap is called the Brahmaviharas—the divine abidings, which include metta, which we've been practicing, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity as the other three.

So I want to explain a little about how that roadmap works. We've been practicing metta, which cultivates this quality of openheartedness and caring. We practice it with ourselves, we practice it with others, so that eventually when we encounter someone, we can tune into how is life for you. I hope things are well for you. I hope your body is well. I hope your heart is well. I hope there's happiness in your life. We can develop this as a habit so that our heart approaches new people with this friendly wish, the wish for their welfare.

Then when that open heart, which is connected to people's well-being, meets someone who's suffering, the natural response that comes out of it is compassion. Compassion can be defined as the trembling of the open heart in response to suffering.

When that open heart meets someone who is having a lot of happiness in their life, then the natural response to that is called appreciative joy, the third of the Brahmaviharas. So their happiness becomes contagious when our heart is open and their happiness picks us up. This is the quality that I want to talk about primarily tonight, this quality of appreciative joy which is known in Pali as mudita.

The fourth of the Brahmaviharas is equanimity and its function is to support the other three so that the mind can stay in balance as it encounters the whole range of joys and sorrows in our life and in the lives of everyone we meet and as we hear about the events of the world. Without equanimity, our mind can collapse with the grief of the world, or it can get too exuberant, can get overexcited with transitory happiness. So equanimity keeps our mind steady as we see all the variations of joy and sorrow that can come.

Together, these show us a way that the awakened heart can relate to the world and give us a roadmap of a clear mind and clear heart's way of responding to the changes in life.

I want to focus particularly on this third quality of appreciative joy or mudita. I won't talk a lot about the practice tonight. I want to focus on the spirit of this quality. Of all the Brahmaviharas, this has the potential for being the happiest. It can become a very upbeat practice because it focuses on happiness. It arises due to happiness. And in cultivating it, we tune the mind into happiness, the happiness that already exists. It can be in our life. It can be in someone else's life.

I was calling a friend whom I hadn't talked to for a while on the phone, somebody who lives on the other side of the country. And she answered the phone and I said, "How are you?" And without a moment's hesitation, she said, "I'm wonderful." And hearing the happiness in her voice, without a moment's thought, I said back, "I'm wonderful too." And that's kind of the flavor of this appreciative joy. Her happiness triggered my happiness.

So with the practice of this appreciative joy, you have a double hit of happiness. The other person's happiness can ignite your happiness. And then they combine.

Sometimes it's called sympathetic joy because we resonate in sympathy with someone. I like this term. It reminds me of the sitar, the Indian musical instrument. If you've ever seen a sitar up close, it's got—the model I had, had seven main strings which are running across large frets down the neck. And then underneath that there are twelve what are called sympathetic strings. They're smaller. These sympathetic strings resonate when a frequency of one of the plucked strings, the top strings, is close to it.

Then it harmonizes with it. It's triggered by it. And it's these sympathetic strings that give all those rich, singing, metallic overtones to the sound of the sitar. These are called sympathetic strings because they resonate in sympathy with the main strings. And that's what this experience of appreciative joy or sympathetic joy is like. When we feel the resonance of happiness and our heart is open, we can resonate with it. And it strikes that happiness in us.

The Dalai Lama said this is a really good practice to become familiar with, because if you can be happy with somebody else's happiness, your chances of happiness go up by six billion to one. Those are good odds.

This is from Shantideva, who was a teacher and writer in India about the 8th century A.D.: "Whatever joy

there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

So there is a long tradition of this kind of practice and this approach as a way to our own happiness. It's a very helpful thing to develop as part of your overall meditation practice, just as the loving-kindness practice is that we've been doing. You discover that joy is actually an integral part of the Buddhist path, an essential part. I'll talk more later in this talk about exactly how that works.

But sometimes Buddhism is portrayed as focusing so much on suffering that you think the Buddha has forgotten about joy. In fact, that's just not true. There are many words in the Buddha's language that point to this factor and the role that it plays in the overall path.

This practice of turning the mind to joy can be very helpful. It comes under what the Buddha talked about as the four right efforts. One of the right efforts that he pointed to was keeping the mind in a positive or wholesome state of being. The development of joy is one of the ways to carry out that right effort.

I think there's also a real thirst in our culture today, maybe in our whole world today, for the presence of this quality in our lives. It seems to be something that's lacking in the modern world, something that we long for and that the world itself really needs. It needs this quality of joy for us to feel good about the work that we're doing, the family that we're in, the way we're living. It changes everything.

A friend of ours has been offering classes in the Bay Area on developing this factor of joy. I think he's in about his third or fourth class series now. Each one of them has lasted about six months. The last time he offered the series in the fall, he had some people present teaching the classes in Berkeley. He had some people sign up by email. In all, he had 450 people signed up for the course. This time around, he has 685. And the people who are doing it say that they really love it, that it is making a real difference in their life.

The most important element in this practice is to notice the qualities of contentment and joy and happiness when they arise. As we get familiar with them, then the mind knows them better and knows how to go there and knows how to access them more and more easily. So the first instruction is really just to notice joy when it comes.

And then if you are interested in carrying on the practice of mudita, which is another practice just like metta, you can develop it as a way of bringing that noticing in more and more regularly. And this is a very helpful thing to do too, because in a way, this paying particular attention to the appearance of happiness is a way just to offset the mind's normal inclination, which is to dwell on the negative.

So often, if you look at the content of your thoughts as you're sitting in meditation, they will focus on what's difficult in life: regret or resentment about the past, hope and fear about the future. So often our thoughts go between those areas, and those have the tendency to make us feel burdened and weighted and foster the perception of difficulty and pain in our life. So this deliberate noticing of happiness is a way to correct that balance.

As I said in my first talk, in the mind of the Buddha, there is no bias toward the negative. The mind of the Buddha is as interested and as open to what's beautiful and positive as it is to what's difficult. So we want to find that balance in our own minds also. And the practice of joy can be a very good way to do that.

This is a quotation from the Buddha: "What one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind." So we develop our own habits of mind. We wear grooves in our mind based upon our habitual thought patterns. If they habitually run to the negative, then what naturally comes up is the negative. If they run to the positive, then what comes up is the positive.

The effect of the practice of turning the mind to happiness can be quite striking. Toward the end of the fall last year, Carol and I taught a weekend here on the practice of mudita, appreciative joy. Part of the reason I wanted to do it was that I hadn't taught it before as a whole retreat, and I thought it'd be interesting to see what happened.

Now, a two-day retreat—if you think back to the first two days you were here—I sort of think of as just time enough to get through a little bit of sleepiness. But people came just for those two days. Because their time was short, I think they really dove in.

At the end of that weekend, we asked the group: What was your experience like? How was it practicing this way for two days? I remember one woman said to the group that after these two days of practice, she felt happier than she had felt in years—just after two days of reminding ourselves of happiness. I was quite taken by the effects of that weekend on the people who were practicing.

Since that time, I've been doing quite a lot of this practice in my own meditation, and I've noticed that my mind just naturally now turns more and more to what is positive, to what is happy in my experience and in others' experience.

If you're interested in playing with this practice a little bit, there's a phrase for mudita just the way there is for metta. The phrase we often recommend is simply: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." As you connect with a friend or a benefactor, you just bring to mind the things that are going well in their life, and the phrase you send them is: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." This keeps the mind turning back to these positive things in their life or in your life.

This quality of mudita—joy or happiness—can be a great ally when things get difficult. A couple of years ago, I went to Burma to practice with a meditation master there whom I'd heard of and was very interested in his technique. He's a concentration master and a vipassana master. I spent six weeks at his monastery. His name is Pauk Sayadaw, and he's in the southeast of Burma.

While I was there, it was the start of the annual rains retreat when many Burmese people take robes and enter into a three-month practice period. I asked him if I could perhaps take robes also, and he allowed me to do that. So I ordained for the second time as a monk at the beginning of that six-week practice period, and I approached it with tremendous enthusiasm and eagerness. Ever since I had been a monk

twenty-some years ago in Thailand, I'd had a wish to take robes again. I had the opportunity and did so. I was very happy to be ordained and to start practicing.

Then very soon in my time there, I encountered a lot of difficulties, particularly with the external situation. The day I started was basically the start of the monsoon season in that part of Burma. Here I was wearing the robes again for the first time in twenty-some years, and I'd sort of forgotten how to tie them. If you don't know how to tie your robes, they fall off one shoulder or the other. I'd be going down to the food-serving hall, holding my umbrella in one hand and my bowl in the other. I'd fill my bowl and then walk back to my hut—my kuti—with the umbrella in one hand and the full bowl in the other, the robe sliding off my shoulder, mud spattering around my feet, and the Burmese laypeople standing by, watching how this new Western monk was going to cope with their culture and the customs of being ordained there. That was one of my challenges.

Another challenge was that the schedule was more demanding than I was used to. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half; the longest sitting was two hours. That was a stretch for me. I was used to hour-long sittings the way we do here, so being told to sit for an hour and a half was not easy. There was a fair amount of body pain that I was experiencing.

I had interviews with the teacher every day in which I had to report how long I was able to stay with the breath continuously, so I was being checked in a very precise and quantitative way. To reach the teacher's cottage, I had to go out again with my umbrella, through the rain, and walk up a very big hill to his cottage. All of these things were starting to weigh on me.

Then there was the food. In the monastery, for me it was one meal a day—all vegetarian, which I really appreciated because I'd been a vegetarian for many years and was grateful to find a monastery with vegetarian food. But it was quite simple: basically white rice and stir-fried vegetables for one meal a day. There's only so much white rice and stir-fried vegetables I could eat at my one meal. Although I enjoyed the taste of the food, I found myself gradually getting thinner and thinner. In the course of six weeks, I ended up losing about half a pound a day while I was there.

All this was going on, and the rain just kept coming down, bucketing down, because the monsoon winds were blowing off the Indian Ocean and slamming into the southeast coast of Burma. We were getting about three inches of rain a day, and it continued for about two weeks without any letup.

I was starting to wonder why I had gone there. I imagine you can relate to that feeling and question.

One day I was feeling particularly discouraged. I'd carried with me, for inspiration—because I love him—a photograph of the Dalai Lama, and it was sitting on my little altar in my cottage. I turned to this picture of His Holiness and said, "Your Holiness, I'm in a hard place right now. Do you have any advice for me?"

And quite amazingly, immediately, his voice came into my head with his lovely Indian-accented English. And he said, "Remain cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support."

That was all he said. So I had to take that as my meditation instruction: remain optimistic, cheerful, and confident. But how to do that? I found that if I could remember what being cheerful felt like, I could sometimes put myself into that frame of mind. And when I did, it brightened things up tremendously. Sometimes I couldn't access that feeling, and then I would just work with the breath. But when I could find that place in me that knows the quality of cheerfulness and confidence, it was tremendously helpful.

Looking at the Dalai Lama, you see an incredibly happy person. He's someone I often reflect upon when I want to be reminded of what that quality is. He's been meeting over the last ten years with groups of scientists through the Mind and Life Institute, bringing together understandings from Buddhism and the neurosciences, the discoveries they're making in studying the brain and how it operates.

During one of these meetings in Dharamsala, about twenty scientists were visiting His Holiness at his home. In a break in the proceedings, one of the Western scientists went up and, making casual conversation, asked him, "Your Holiness, what was the happiest time in your life?"

That's a very interesting question to ask someone who is a refugee in exile from his homeland, someone who has been in exile now for almost fifty years. I expected the Dalai Lama would say something like, "Oh, it was when I was living in the Potala Palace, installed as the Dalai Lama, when all the people in Tibet were able to support the practice of the Dharma." Or perhaps, "Oh, it was when I was a small child living with my family in a small village in eastern Tibet."

But he didn't say either of those things. When asked about the happiest time in his life, he said, "I think right now."

That's so beautiful because he doesn't get lost in nostalgia. Here and now—that's the place for happiness. This practice of turning the mind to joy helps us discover that happiness can be alive here and now for us. Just as the metta meditation is a meditation on happiness, on the sources and causes of happiness, so is the mudita practice. As we tune to what's happy in our life and others' lives, we start understanding what makes for happiness.

In the Buddha's teachings, there are several different levels of happiness possible to us. One is the happiness of sense pleasures. As lay people, we have access to a wide range of pleasurable experiences, particularly of the five physical senses. We can have pleasant food, pleasant sounds through music and recordings, pleasant sights through many media or works of art, pleasant touch through massage or sexuality, pleasant tastes and drinks. All the options in the lay life are open to us.

If we start to look at our experience, we find that having something pleasurable at one of the senses does pick us up. It is a kind of happiness. An important part of the Buddha's teaching is that it's temporary, often quite brief, and the satisfaction it can bring is limited. But it is a real kind of happiness.

You can see how a world that doesn't understand the happiness of meditation and the inner journey becomes very fixated on these kinds of happiness—how the happiness of sense pleasures becomes, in a

way, the be-all and end-all. The quest for more money to buy more of them becomes a driving force in most cultures. And of course, one of the big areas of pleasure, especially for men, is the area of sexuality.

When I started to reflect on this, I noticed that I have a very different relationship to sexuality now than I did when I was in my twenties. Looking back to my life then, as a young man, I can see that in some ways I was kind of obsessed with sexuality—every day there was something important going on in my mind on that topic, thinking about it, feeling into it, seeking it, seeking for that satisfaction. In a way, it kind of dominated me back then.

For me, one of the great pleasures about growing up and growing up in the Dharma is that that force has become much less powerful. Part of it is simply to do with age, and I think part of it is to do with greater understanding. Now when I feel into the area of sexuality, there's much more spaciousness and a much greater sense of relief that the urgency is not so pressing. It almost feels like coming out of a fever—no longer being so captivated by the compelling nature of that wanting. Because when I was younger, especially in my twenties, the compelling nature of that wanting led me to do really stupid things.

It led me to do things that hurt other people and that then ended up hurting myself.

And it was just a great blessing to come into the Dharma and hear about the precepts—to understand that one needed to have right conduct around sexuality which was non-harming. As soon as I heard that and understood that and started to practice that, a lot of the harm went out of my sexual relationships. But nonetheless, the fever was still quite strong.

What I see looking back now is that I didn't quite understand its source or its roots. Really, as I see it now, it is this deep and pervasive biological urge. I'll speak particularly for men because I know that area better—this force that was strong, compelling, dominating. But when I was under its influence so strongly, I couldn't see the universal quality of it. I thought it was my personal choice. I thought I had a personal interest in this area, like I was discovering it for myself and like nobody else knew about it. It wasn't quite like that, but I took it very individually.

Now, looking back, I can just see: wow, that's a big movement through at least the male half of the species in order for the species to propagate itself. And I was simply at the effect of it for all those years, not really understanding the conditioned nature, but very enthralled by it. So now I can understand better the huge force of conditioning that was just living through me as a male human—just a movement that goes through all of us as men.

I wish I could speak on sexuality for women, but I don't understand it yet. So I'm still learning in that area, and I'll wait for Carol to solve that one.

At any rate, it's just to acknowledge the power that this has and the power that sense pleasures in general have. The Buddha referred to this many, many times, and often when he used the word sense pleasures in his discourses, this is really code language for sexuality. He pointed to this as the strongest sort of force

that at least men were subject to. And I think as a layperson thinking about making the move into a monastic life, for men it's the biggest single area of renunciation, the biggest single area that makes it difficult to commit to a monastic life for the whole of one's life.

Then in addition to these major sense pleasures, there are just the simple pleasures that we can experience every day. And I really encourage you while you're on retreat here to start to tune into these because there are generally many, many moments of these that unfold over the course of every day.

The simple thing like the joy of waking up and being able to have a hot shower. It feels so good just to wake up into that warmth and encompassing nature. To come down to the dining room in the morning and have a warm cup of tea if you're feeling cold and warm your hands around that warm mug. To wake up and be able to see the beauty of what the snowstorm left—the ice on all the trees and on every pine needle out there. Seeing the blue sky after so many days of rain. I wasn't sure it was going to come back, but it came back again.

And then that wonderful feeling—one of the most delicious moments of every retreat day—lying down to go to sleep. Sometimes I wait for that moment many, many hours. And then it comes: lie down. The only trouble is it's so short, because often on retreat I lie down, I have about two minutes of consciousness, and the next thing I know my alarm's going off for the morning and it's time to start again. The Groundhog Day scenario: it's six o'clock, it's time to go again. The day happens over and over.

And because we're in a renunciate kind of lifestyle here, and our lives are so simple, all these pleasures get heightened. The Buddha talked about this too. He said that robes, alms food, a hut, and a straw seat will seem rich and luxurious to one who has renounced. I really find that true here. Some of my favorite meals in all my life have been a simple tea here with fruit, some peanuts, and a cup of tea. I just remember how rich the taste of an orange has been at times when I've been so present with it.

One of the other areas of happiness that the Buddha talked about quite a bit is the happiness of having wholesome conduct—of what's called virtue. When we're careful with our interactions with one another, we're mindful of the precepts, we don't harm other people, we don't harm other beings, we can look back on our conduct and feel really good about the way we've lived, even if it's for a period of time. We can feel that we've really related to the world in a way that hasn't harmed other beings.

In a way, what we're doing when we're practicing with this non-harming is we're giving others the gift of fearlessness. Not killing, not harming, not stealing, not lying, not engaging in sexual misconduct. The Buddha said there are many pleasures in lay life, but they don't add up to one-sixteenth of this, which he called the greatest pleasure in lay life. He said it is the bliss of blamelessness—the joy of knowing that we haven't been harming others. A great delight.

Again, the Dalai Lama is pretty amazing in this way. A few years ago, Oprah Winfrey did an interview with him. This seems a little bit of an unlikely pairing, but I really appreciate how Oprah has brought so

many wholesome ideas and very spiritual people into the mainstream through her TV show and through her magazine. This is an interview for her magazine, O.

So she started off by asking the Dalai Lama a personal question. She said, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

And this was his reply: "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said.

"An insect," Oprah repeated, processing this unexpected answer. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued with characteristic honesty: "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. That's a great life to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama explained, "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 mountain retreat, I don't lag too far behind."

So that's the bliss of blamelessness carried to a beautiful, beautiful quality.

Another reliable source of joy is nature. We're so fortunate in a situation like this to be surrounded by it—just to be able to walk outside, open our eyes, and feel that delight, that beauty.

Shortly after I was ordained in Thailand the first time I was a monk, I went to practice at a remote monastery about forty miles outside of Chiang Mai, right out in the countryside. It was a small monastery and quite isolated. I did a three-month retreat there, and the conditions were not easy. There was a teacher, but he didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Thai. So for my three months of practice, which was as intensive as this retreat, maybe a little more intensive, I didn't have any dharma talks and I didn't have any interviews. I was very much on my own. There was nobody there that I could have a conversation with, that I could feel free to speak English with.

The teacher would come up and check on me from time to time. Sometimes he'd bring visitors up to see the Western monk and watch him meditate. I usually would be meditating when they came up. So the Ajahn and the visitor would look in through the windows of my kuti, and I'd be just sitting there quietly,

and I could hear my Ajahn go, "Dee, dee," which means "good, good," meaning, "Oh, he's meditating. That's good. He's not wasting his time."

But as I say, it was quite isolated. And I think what really sustained me in that situation was the beauty of the nature.

This monastery was laid out along a river that ran through a deep mountain gorge. The women's kutis—the nuns—were on one side of the river and the monks' kutis were on the other. The Thai people are so generous and hospitable, they gave me the best kuti in the monastery. It was the one furthest upstream and quite separated from all the others. So I was at the base of this canyon with a river running right by my kuti, well protected from any interference, very much on my own.

But because it was so isolated, the nourishment that I got, the support I got, really was from the beauty of the nature—the cliffs, the trees, the stream. And there was one mango tree that I would walk underneath as I went to the front of the monastery for my meals. I was there in mango season, so the ripe mangoes were falling off the tree onto the path, filling the air with that beautiful smell.

Unfortunately, the monks' discipline is that we cannot pick up food that has fallen as fruit from a tree. The only food that bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are allowed to take is that which is handed to them by another person. So while all these mangoes were falling on the ground and I was smelling that delightful fragrance, I couldn't touch them. I couldn't taste them. But I could enjoy the smell and remember how good they were.

This access to nature is always an inspiration to practice. Somebody who's very good at expressing that, of course, is the poet Mary Oliver. This is the opening of one of her recent poems called "Messenger":

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast, there the blue plums,
here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old?
Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young and still not half perfect?
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.

So that can be our work too.

Sitting still and learning to be astonished with the nature within and the nature without.

One of the other great sources of joy in meditation practice is the joy of peace—of stillness, of concentration. These states come to us spontaneously in our practice where we feel the mind really collecting into the present moment, where we feel that full and complete attention to just what is in this moment. This is such a gift.

As you start to experience that more, as it opens up to you, begin to explore the qualities of this state of mind—the concentrated, very present mind. One of the things that is most striking is the absence of the afflictive emotions or the hindrances, if you're familiar with that terminology. For some period of time, these constant movements of wanting and not wanting, of hope and fear, of regret and resentment, have just stopped with that fullness of attention in this moment.

When those hindrances aren't arising, there's an incredible joy in that release. The Buddha said that being even momentarily free of these forces is like how someone feels after they've been released from prison or after they've regained health after a long illness. There's a very deep relief and joy in that process.

The Buddha actually described peace as the highest happiness. Peace is the highest happiness. That's a radical notion, because if that's true, then we can't attain our highest happiness by going out and rushing about to make all kinds of outer things happen. But our highest happiness opens when we look within and release ourselves from the forces of wanting and not wanting. This letting go, he said, is the root to the highest kind of happiness that we can know.

I'll say that for me personally, one of the things that awakened my passion and deepening interest in the Dharma was discovering peace from the retreat experience and feeling how every retreat I did, I seemed to touch a new level, a new depth in the quality of the peace. And then that inspired me to come back for more and more and keep touching that depth of peacefulness.

These are ways that we can tune into the joy in our own life. The practice also is about tuning into the joy in the lives of others. So it's delightful to take a friend, think about the things that are going well in their life, and then just say that phrase: "May your happiness and good fortune continue."

Recently, one of our good friends, who's also a Dharma teacher, kind of reached a milestone with his son. His son is twenty years old and just attended his first month-long meditation retreat. I don't know how that would feel to you, but for our friend, it was kind of like the crowning reward of twenty years of child raising—to be able to introduce his son to the Dharma in such a committed way and have his son appreciate it so deeply. As a Dharma parent, I can't think of anything I would want more for my child than to have that blessing, especially at the age of twenty. So he was rapturous for the whole month that his son was sitting.

Another beautiful practice is extending that appreciation to all beings. This is kind of a challenge, but a very illuminating undertaking. Sometimes you get hits of the widespread nature of joy. Sometimes we just don't open our eyes to it. You notice how often you turn your mind to all the suffering that's in the world?

How often do you turn your mind to all the joy that's in the world? Usually we turn that way much less often. But I believe that it's just as prevalent as the suffering when we learn to tune into it.

Sometimes the internet reveals these things. Somebody sent me a link to a video on YouTube that was called "Free Hugs." Have you seen this video? So Free Hugs started in a shopping mall in Sydney, Australia, with this one young guy who just got the idea, and he made a sign. It was about three feet by three feet, and it just had handwritten big letters that said "Free Hugs."

So he went down to a shopping mall and he held up this sign: Free Hugs. And first people would walk by and go, "What? Is this guy crazy? Or is he some kind of creep that you don't really want to get too close to because he might be a little bit weird?" But eventually some people started to break through the barrier and the suspicion, and they went up and they just hugged him. And then they'd come away smiling. And then more people saw that happening, so they went up and hugged him and would come away smiling. And pretty soon all these people were coming up and getting free hugs.

So this started to gain some momentum. It was happening a lot. He'd go back to the shopping mall, and they started to make a video of all the people who were coming to get these free hugs. And they posted that on an Australian site. And then this Australian rock group decided to dedicate one of their songs to this experience. So they put his video to music and edited it further and posted this music video, which is now up on YouTube and has had 1.6 million views as of about a month ago.

So when you get back, go to YouTube, look up Free Hugs, and you'll get a hit of real mudita. It's just so fun to see all these people in a shopping mall being surprised at the possibility they could hug somebody they don't know, and it just tickles them.

And now it's spread. People are offering free hugs in Japan, Israel, Europe, and all over the world. It's a beautiful example of mudita for all beings.

What I discovered when I began practicing loving-kindness for a truly wide range of beings is that everyone I could think of had some happiness in their life. I don't want to make an absolute pronouncement that every human being has happiness—I don't know that to be universally true. But all the people I could bring to mind had some measure of joy or contentment.

I had this observation confirmed during a metta retreat I was teaching at Spirit Rock. One participant was from Manchester, England. If you know Manchester, it's probably not among the world's happiest places—one of those northern industrial cities with old urban architecture, gloomy weather, cold and rainy. You get the picture.

Her work there involved helping women seeking political refuge in England, generally from developing countries. Reflect for a moment on what this means. These were women who had gained asylum in Britain because they faced threats of murder, assault, or violence if they remained in their home countries. They had to leave everything familiar—their homeland, culture, warm climate, family, friends, religion—for

their very survival, transplanting themselves to this cold, gray, rainy northern industrial town. Imagine that adjustment.

She told me the most remarkable thing about working with these women was their level of cheerfulness. Despite everything they'd endured and lost, they possessed such resilient spirits, such optimism and courage. I think about this whenever I consider how happiness appears in the most unexpected places.

When we begin to encounter the areas of happiness in our own lives, gratitude often arises naturally. And gratitude is a truly beautiful quality of heart and mind. When this quality is present and we appreciate what already exists in our life, it's a wonderful place to dwell.

Notice how gratitude counteracts both wanting and aversion. We're not greedy for our life to be different because we appreciate the riches already present, so it offsets desire. We're also not resisting our circumstances because we're appreciating the blessings we have, so it offsets aversion. Instead, we recognize and cherish the positive aspects of our experience.

A wise friend of mine, a grandmother, once called her seven-year-old granddaughter on Christmas Day. The child was bubbling with excitement about all the presents she'd received. The grandmother asked, "When you get lots of presents, does that make you thankful or do you want more?"

"Oh, Nana, I want more!" the little girl replied.

"Oh, that's too bad," her grandmother said gently.

The child paused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, it feels good? And when you're wanting more, it doesn't feel as good?"

The little girl stopped completely. "Oh, Nana, you're right."

This is such a beautiful and simple teaching about gratitude. All of us have countless things to be grateful for if we turn our minds in that direction.

A friend of mine worked in refugee camps in Thailand, receiving Cambodians fleeing the killing fields after so many had died in their country. He was working with Thai teachers to train these refugees for emigration to other countries—many came to the United States, and there's now quite a large Hmong population in Fresno, California, many of whom came through these very camps.

Among the refugees was a young Hmong girl from a village in the hills. As part of her training—which included learning for the first time how to use money, operate a washing machine, read a bus schedule, and understand what a toaster was—she was asked: "What are the most important things in life?"

Her answer was immediate: "The most important things in life are fire, rice, and water."

This is profoundly worth reflecting upon, because if we couldn't take those things for granted, they would be the most important things in our lives too. But we have all these necessities in such abundance that we easily forget much of the world doesn't. We have as much food as we want. Here, on this cold and perhaps windy night, we sit warm and dry inside.

If we became sick, each of us would have access to pretty good health care. So many people in the world lack adequate food, adequate shelter, adequate clothing, and adequate medicine. These the Buddha called the requisites of human life. For the most part, we have all these.

In addition, all of us enjoy what the Tibetans call a precious human birth. This means a birth that, beyond these basic requisites, has some other qualities. It basically means we have the ability to awaken, or you could say to come to the true end of suffering. Each of us has that possibility.

We've heard about it as a possibility, we've understood it to some extent, and so that is within our reach. That is very rare. We're born as human beings. Our minds and bodies work reasonably well. We're at a time when there are authentic teachings still alive on the earth of how to walk the path to come to the end of suffering. This is not always true in every period upon the earth, but somehow all of us have met up with these teachings in an authentic way and understood authentic instructions on how to walk that path and how to practice for the very end of suffering, should we want to do that.

In addition, you and I have the leisure time to spend some time carrying out these teachings. When you look across the whole population of six billion people on the earth, it's a fairly small percentage that have all those conditions that make up the precious birth that we have.

Some people at this point in the retreat start to mention this feeling of gratitude. Someone mentioned it today and said, "But in an approach where there's not considered to be a God, who do you offer this gratitude to?" And personally, I feel it toward the Dharma. I feel so grateful to have had the teachings in my life.

When I reflect back on what my life was before I knew about these teachings, it was a lot of confusion because suffering and happiness seemed to happen in this really random way. I knew I wanted to be happy, but I had no idea how to make that possible. It was just a time of bewilderment and kind of groping in the dark for something. And to know for ourselves the way to happiness—for me, it's been an incredible gift, the best gift in my life.

So I said that I would talk a little about how this quality of joy fits into the path. Let me finish by describing the progression. This is described in more detail if you're interested in a text in one of the books of the Buddha's teachings called the Upanisa Sutta. This teaching is sometimes called Transcendent Dependent Origination, but it's not as forbidding as the title.

One of the early qualities is this quality of gladness that we were talking about—when just in a moment you tune into an aspect of your experience that awakens this kind of delight, the delight of the warm

shower or the warm cup of tea or the beautiful sight of nature. You let that fill your heart. You take time to feel the gladness of mind that that brings.

Then as you bring that quality of gladness into the meditation, you find that there starts to be a delight in your connection to the meditation subject. Whether that's breath or body or sounds, there's a delight in being with that. This is called, in the Pali word, pīti.

This delight starts to calm our mind because in some ways this level of delight and interest is what we've been looking for. So the mind starts to settle a little bit, comes to peace out of that sense of delight and engagement.

Then this peaceful and engaged feeling leads to a new level of happiness. The Pali term here is sukha. This is a happiness that's not so much dependent on outer conditions, but we've in a way found it within ourselves in this combination of peacefulness and interest in our experience.

So a contentment starts to grow in us that's not dependent on outer conditions. This is a wonderful thing to discover. As one of my teachers said, it was in this phase of practice that he truly learned that happiness comes from within. Because we feel how clearly its source is inner, not related to outer events at all. It's sort of like the happiness of coming home or being at home.

Then as that tranquil contentment settles, the mind is just able to collect very deeply because it's no longer pulled out to externals. It's not searching for this and that. The restless groping for satisfaction stops temporarily, and the mind collects in this deep state of concentration.

And from this deep state of concentration, then there is the opening, the potential for the opening into liberating understanding. It's the insight, the wisdom, that truly liberates.

So the role that joy plays is the kind of awakening of the delight. Then it mellows through tranquility, settles into our being, into deep contentment, but doesn't stop there. One of the things the Buddha said is that he reminded himself all along his practice career not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind. This in itself is a radical pointing—not to settle just for wholesome states of mind, but to continue to let that wholesomeness deepen into concentration and then allow the liberating insight truly to free the mind into that deepest kind of security, which is the knowledge, as the Buddha said, "Suffering can never return to this mind."

Can you imagine what that would feel like? To know that there was no possibility any longer of suffering ever arising again. This is considered to be the fullness of freedom.

As the Buddha said in the simile of the heartwood, it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end. Joy is an incredibly important accelerating factor toward that end.

I'll close with a reflection from Rumi: "Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened.

Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

It is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end.

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