Mudita: Practicing Joy and Gratitude

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:05

This talk was given to a group of people sitting in silence during a meditation retreat. It is intended for a mind that is quiet and attentive. We invite you to enter into your own mini retreat by sitting quietly and listening wholeheartedly. The teachings you're about to receive were freely offered. If you would like to make a donation to support their continuation, please visit us at dharmaseed.org.

I'm going to start by retelling one of the stories that Sharda told last night. It's a little bit of a cardinal sin among teachers, but I'll do it anyway because it's such a good story. She mentioned that there was a Zen master who was asked about the value of practice. In the version that I heard, the Zen master was asked, "What's the value of a lifetime of practice?" His response was: "Appropriate response."

When I first heard that reply, I thought that was really wimpy for a Zen master. I thought that sounded like something a Vipassana teacher might say, but that a Zen master should be much more of a warrior and say something like: "After a lifetime of practice, a Zen master is able to sit up in full lotus while dying with a perfectly straight back and compose a spontaneous haiku summing up their life's understanding." That's what I was expecting. So this "appropriate response"... I don't know.

But the more I thought about this answer, the more I appreciated it. What it says is we have to have that wakefulness in every single moment. It means that every single moment, life is presenting us with changing conditions and new situations, and we have to have the right response to meet that moment. There's no formula for that. Only the awakeness of—you could say—wisdom or awareness can bring that about. As I thought about it, this is really a beautiful way to describe the fruit of our practice.

For me, the Brahmaviharas have provided one of the best roadmaps of what constitutes an appropriate response to life. They, together with the near and far enemies, give us a whole terminology for understanding the way the heart relates to these changing conditions of life. The Brahmaviharas themselves represent the awakened response. The near and far enemies represent the not-so-awakened responses.

When you think about it, in general, the heart is open and tuning into the well-being of others—that's loving kindness. When it encounters suffering, the awakened heart responds with compassion. When it encounters happiness, the awakened heart responds with sympathetic joy. And when it's not particularly being tested, it can hold all the joys and sorrows in the beautiful balance of equanimity—the practice you did this afternoon.

The near and far enemies map out how we fall into less than awakened responses to the same changing

conditions of life, the joys and sorrows. I'll touch on a couple of those as we go. Overall, I think they provide really good groundwork for evaluating our response moment after moment. It's pretty complete.

This evening, I want to talk particularly about the response of joy—appreciative joy or sympathetic joy—that's pointed to by the quality of mudita, the practice we did yesterday afternoon. As I mentioned, this has the potential for being the happiest practice among the Brahmaviharas, and in fact, the happiest practice that I know of, because it feeds on happiness. It is about happiness meeting happiness.

Just a simple example: I got a phone call from a friend I hadn't spoken to for a while. I picked up the phone, happy to hear from her, and said, "How are you?" Immediately, with a great deal of enthusiasm, she said, "I'm wonderful!" And without even thinking, sort of triggered by her voice and tone, I said, "I'm wonderful too!" I didn't even wait for her to ask me. That was the impact of mudita. I just got infused and enthused from her energy, and that's what came out of me.

So it's this beautiful double hit of happiness. It's sometimes called sympathetic joy because we resonate in sympathy with another. If you know the instrument the sitar, it's got seven main strings on top that you pluck, and then seven smaller strings underneath that are usually not plucked. Those are called the sympathetic strings. When you pluck a frequency, the strings underneath that are tuned to that resonate, and they give that rich, metallic, jangly sound that the sitar has. It's like our heart has these sympathetic strings and resonates to the happiness around us.

The Dalai Lama said that if you can be happy because of another's happiness, your odds for happiness go up by six billion to one. That's a lot better than Vegas—put your chips down, this is the bet to make. It's very helpful to cultivate this as part of your practice. Joy is a really integral part of the spiritual path.

I'll talk toward the end about how this fits into the whole Buddhist unfolding toward liberation. Joy is an integral component of the move to liberation. As you develop it, you'll see that the emphasis on joy keeps the mind inclining to what's skillful and what's wholesome. It keeps the mind in a positive and helpful state. In this way, it embodies two of the four right efforts, which are to bring about and then maintain skillful qualities of mind.

James is becoming known as the joy guru in our scene because he's been leading a class for the last couple of years in Berkeley called Awakening Joy. It was really out of generosity that he let me give the joy talk in this retreat because he's starting to own the topic. He's getting a little bit of a copyright on the subject matter, so I'm happy he let me share in it tonight.

James's class started off modestly—maybe a hundred or so the first time around—and each iteration through word of mouth and people getting tremendous benefit, it's steadily grown. So in the current class series, between people who come to Berkeley and are there in person and those participating by email, the number registered is up to 685, I think. And it's probably going to be even bigger in future, but I'll let him tell you about that.

The fact that so many people have responded to this teaching is really a sign that there's a thirst in our community of practitioners for this element. Maybe we spent too much time talking about the Four Noble Truths, suffering and craving over the years, and people want to hear a different tune now. But there is this large welling of interest and appreciation for being able to find ways to bring these qualities more to life in our daily life as well as in our retreat practice.

A big part of this bringing to life is noticing them when they're there. It's funny, but I noticed in the early days of my practice, I would consistently overlook beautiful qualities of mind because when they came, I thought, "Well, this is what I've been expecting all along. Why did you take so long in getting here?"

When you think about it, it really lines up with ego's project. We use ego to refer to this small sense of self, false sense of separate self that's based on self-centered interests. Ego's project is: things should always be happy, things should never be unhappy, not even to the slightest degree. That's the project that ego is about creating. Somehow, it believes that it can do it. Those assumptions crumple under the early days of retreat, usually. Nonetheless, it strives to maintain this fiction.

And so when happy states come, ego goes, "Yeah, that's what I was about to create." So ego is gratified, thinks its work is done, and it goes to sleep. It may only wake up again when things get difficult. The ouch kind of wakes us up and makes us realize something else is going on. So it's very important to notice.

You see, the Buddha wasn't biased in this way. He wasn't biased toward wholesome states of mind or unwholesome states of mind. His bias was on emptiness, or you could say zero. So when a wholesome state came, he recognized, "That's wholesome. That's on the positive side of the meter, helpful for spiritual practice and awakening." When a painful state came, he recognized, "That's not so skillful or helpful. That's on the difficult side of the spectrum." But he always kept his mind in the middle so he could clearly see one or the other.

We need to develop this skill also so that when wholesome states come, when the beautiful states come, we really know: this is loving-kindness. This is contentment. This is joy. The more we recognize them, feel them in the body and in the mind, the more we learn the way back to them. And so the more possible it is that they will visit again. We become familiar and on good terms with them.

As the Buddha put it, "What one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind." So as we turn the mind in this direction, these beautiful states come to visit more often.

I was really struck by the power of mudita last fall. I'd taught a long retreat on the east coast and then after that retreat, I stayed on and with two of my friends taught a weekend retreat—silent retreat—on this theme of mudita practice. A lot of the people who came had never practiced mudita before, and I'd never taught it intensively before. Part of the reason I did it is I wanted to learn about it.

So people were just there for two days, from Friday night to Sunday evening. You know what the first two days of a retreat are like. The first day is all sleepiness, so that's difficult. And the last day, as you probably

noticed, starts to be about going home. So you're not much present on the first and last day, and I didn't have many expectations for the weekend, because it was a first day and a last day.

But very curiously, people really applied themselves and got tremendous benefit from just two days of practice with this. At the end of the retreat, we just asked in the hall like this, "What was your experience of these two days?" One woman raised her hand and said, "This is the happiest that I've felt in years based on these two days of practice."

Since that retreat, I started practicing mudita a lot in my daily life, and I noticed that it made a real difference—that my mind started to focus on the beautiful and uplifting qualities of life.

So one evening I sat in front of his photograph and I told him my troubles. I said, "Your Holiness, I'm really struggling here. The conditions are difficult, I'm homesick, and my spirits are quite low. What should I do?"

And as I sat there looking at his photograph, I could almost hear his response. I could imagine him saying, with that characteristic laugh of his, "Well, you have a choice. You can focus on all the difficulties and be miserable, or you can focus on what an extraordinary opportunity this is and be joyful."

And I realized he was absolutely right. Here I was, sitting in a monastery in Burma that very few Westerners ever get to visit, studying with a master teacher, ordained as a monk in the tradition that goes back to the Buddha himself. I was receiving teachings that have been passed down for twenty-five hundred years. What an incredible privilege this was!

So I started practicing mudita more intentionally. I began to focus on my good fortune rather than my difficulties. I felt appreciative joy for the opportunity to be there, for the teachings I was receiving, for the ancient tradition I was participating in. And when I shifted my attention in this way, my whole experience transformed.

The rain didn't stop. The bugs didn't leave. My robes continued to slip. But my relationship to all of this changed completely. Instead of seeing obstacles, I began to see the richness of the experience. The sound of rain on the roof became soothing rather than depressing. The bugs became fascinating creatures to observe. Even struggling with my robes became part of the authentic monastic experience.

This is the power of mudita - it can completely transform our experience by shifting where we place our attention. When we focus on what's difficult and challenging, that's what fills our mind. But when we consciously direct our attention toward what's beautiful, fortunate, and worthy of appreciation, that becomes our reality instead.

So the practice isn't about denying difficulties or pretending everything is wonderful when it's not. It's about recognizing that we have a choice in where we focus our attention, and that this choice has profound consequences for how we experience our lives.

So I turned to the Dalai Lama photograph and spoke directly to him. "I'm having a hard time," I said. "Do you have any advice for me?"

Immediately, he replied. His voice came through in that peculiar Indian-accented English that he had. "Hmm, yes," he said. "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then the transmission ended.

It was a very clear message, and because it had come from such a good source, I took it as a practice instruction. For the next period of time, I often worked at keeping my mind cheerful, optimistic, and confident—if I could even remember what cheerful felt like, which wasn't so easy. When I could bring these qualities to mind, it made a real shift in the way I was relating to the situation.

The fact is that this cheerfulness, this optimism, this confidence exists in each of us if we can only remember it. Sometimes I could bring it up simply by thinking of it, by turning my mind toward it. When I did, it transformed how I felt in those difficult conditions.

This capacity becomes a tremendous refuge as we develop it. We discover that we can turn our mind to these uplifting qualities, and the mind learns more and more how to go there, how to touch them and bring them alive in the present moment.

The Dalai Lama, of course, is a pretty happy person himself, as you probably know. A friend told me a story about a gathering of scientists that took place in Dharamsala, where he lives. It was sponsored by the Mind and Life Institute—every year, a group of scientists meets with His Holiness to discuss the intersection between Buddhism and science. In recent years, they've been focusing on neuroscience, with fascinating research emerging from that collaboration.

During a tea break between the formal sessions, there was a chance for informal conversation. One of the scientists approached the Dalai Lama with a personal question: "Your Holiness, what was the happiest time of your life?"

It was such an intriguing question to pose to the Dalai Lama, given his varied life. You might think of his childhood, growing up with his parents in a small village in the Tibetan countryside—a very idyllic lifestyle. Or perhaps after he was recognized and brought to Lhasa, installed as the Dalai Lama, living in the Potala while Tibetan Buddhism was still vibrantly alive and flourishing, being tutored and learning deeply.

I was hanging on the edge of my seat for the answer—the happiest period of the Dalai Lama's life. Without any hesitation, my friend said, he answered: "Hmm, I think right now."

That's the right answer. That's absolutely the right answer.

As we cultivate the quality of mudita, we begin to tune into happiness in our life and in the lives of others. We start to become familiar with the different kinds of happiness that are available to us.

One happiness available to us as laypeople is the happiness of sense pleasures—pleasant experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. This encompasses good food and pleasant music, enjoyable drinks and sensuality, movies and the arts, sculpture and painting. All of these form the basis of pleasurable experiences through the five senses.

This is part of our life. As laypeople, the Buddha referred to this reality over and over again. In choosing this life, we open ourselves to pleasant experiences on these levels. If we wanted to cut ourselves off from sense pleasures, we might as well live the life of a renunciate, because in the renunciate life, one deliberately does not seek out pleasures of the physical senses in order to turn the attention more completely inward.

But as laypeople, we are open to the pleasures of the senses. Take a look and see if these experiences don't have an uplifting quality in your life. In spiritual circles, we often dismiss sense pleasures because the truth is that the pleasures of meditation and Dharma practice, of realization, are greater than sense pleasures and more reliable. But this does not negate the happiness that comes from the pleasures of the senses.

Please notice in your life the uplift that pleasurable activities bring into your hearts and minds. This is one of the things we can enjoy. We learn that they're temporary and we learn their happiness is limited, but the happiness nonetheless is real.

Here on retreat, our sense pleasures are much simpler, but they're still present. You know—waking up in the morning when it's a little cool in the residence halls and maybe your window's been open all night, but there's a hot shower waiting for you. Or rolling down the hill for breakfast when it's been raining and it's a little damp and chilly, and there's a hot cup of tea for you. Going down the hill at lunchtime to discover this beautiful meal we had today with all kinds of spices and great flavors.

And then one of the greatest pleasures in retreat life for me was lying down at the end of the day. That was sometimes the moment I looked forward to all day long.

There were days like that. I just couldn't wait to lie down at the end of the day. And the only thing that was really disappointing was how short it lasted. Because I'd be really tired, I'd fall asleep like that, and the next thing I knew I was waking up to start all over again the next morning. But that's a delightful feeling, lying down at the end of a good day of work.

As you get into this lifestyle, this really simple lifestyle, you may have noticed that the senses get even more awake. Simple pleasures bring a lot of delight. Some of my favorite meals on retreats have just been the taste of an orange or a cup of tea after days in retreat, because it tastes so rich. The Buddha mentioned 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'm appreciating how our senses really wake up in this setting and we're much more open here.

It goes more deeply. Another kind of happiness that we start to tune into is the happiness of good conduct. When we live a life according to the precepts that we talked about at the beginning of the retreat, we enjoy what the Buddha called the bliss of blamelessness. You come in to meditate and you find you don't have as many regrets about your actions as you once did at an earlier time in your life.

James mentioned the list of his ten most awful mistakes. I also had a list in my early retreat. I only aimed for ten, but I filled ten quite easily and went through a lot of remorse about those. As the years go by, and I've worked consciously to practice with non-harming, that list is more remote, a lot shorter. And when I come to sit, there's an easier settling now than there used to be. The Buddha said that of the blessings of the lay life, the bliss of blamelessness is the greatest—to have a good feeling about the way we've acted toward others.

There's the joy of nature. After I ordained as a monk the first time in Thailand, I went to practice in a monastery that was in the north, outside of Chiang Mai. It was right out in the country. It was a beautiful spot. The monastery was set at the base of a river gorge. There was this river running through it and tall hills on both sides, cliffs on both sides. The nuns' kutis were on one side of the river and the monks' kutis were on the other. So no dilly-dallying, for sure.

The Thai people being so hospitable gave me the best hut on the property, which was the one most upstream. From it, I couldn't see or hear any other people. So it was a very beautiful setting, very isolated, very quiet and private.

But there were challenges in that environment. I was there for three months to practice. There was a teacher, but the teacher didn't speak English and I didn't speak Thai. So we had no way to communicate. For three months of intensive practice, I didn't have any interviews and I didn't have any dharma talks. It really was quite self-reliant. The teacher would occasionally come up to bring visitors up to my kuti, and usually I'd be meditating, which was good. They'd stand outside my hut and look in through the windows, and the teacher would see me meditating, and all I'd hear, or all I could understand him saying was, "Dee, dee," which means "good, good" in Thai. So I felt grateful I was meditating at that point in time. But that was about all the confirmation I got around my practice.

What really sustained me and kept my spirits good during that time was the beauty of the nature that I was in. Every day, seeing the sun climb over one of those cliffs and flood the gorge with sunshine, and at the end of the day disappear, and the constant sound of the stream outside my hut. There was also a beautiful mango tree growing near my house. It was mango season, so the ripe mangoes were falling on the ground and that beautiful perfume. Unfortunately, I couldn't eat them. As a monk, you're only allowed to take what a human being has put into your hands. So I couldn't even collect the fallen mangoes, but they smelled great. It was poignant for me too.

Here the nature is so available. I've been in a number of meditation spots around the world and I don't think I've ever been in one that has the combination of architectural beauty and natural beauty that this

place has. It makes it a very special place to practice. Of course between the two I would always pick the natural over the architectural. So you can open so wonderfully to the nature around here—the golden hills, the vivid blue sky, those white clouds, the deer who seem so less afraid here than they are anywhere else that I run into them.

This is a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Sun":

Have you ever seen anything in your life more wonderful than the way the sun every evening, relaxed and easy, floats toward the horizon and into the clouds or the hills or the rumpled sea and is gone? And how it slides again out of the blackness every morning on the other side of the world like a red flower streaming upward on its heavenly oils. And have you ever felt for anything such wild love? Do you think there is anywhere in any language a word billowing enough for the pleasure that fills you as the sun reaches out, as it warms you, as you stand there empty-handed? Or have you too turned from this world? Or have you too gone crazy for power, for things?

Here we really have the time, the chance, just to be with nature, just to open to it. And this opening is augmented by another of the joys that comes from retreat: the joy of concentration or stillness. I trust that each of you has found this to some degree during your days here—times when the mind settles just a little from its usual whirl, when you can drop into your heart and feel that metta connection with yourself or another.

These different levels of peace were the hook that kept me coming back on retreat. I'd touch a level that I'd never touched in my daily life. I'd go, "Wow, that is so amazing. If that's possible, I wonder what else is possible." So I'd go back again and see. Then I found an even deeper level of peace. And I would come back again to see what else was possible.

The Buddha said that these levels of peace—basically the delight of them—is that the hindrances have fallen away. The mind is not stirred by liking and disliking, by pushing and pulling. He said being released from the hindrances like this is like being let out of prison after a long term in a cell. It's really a wonderful, joyful feeling.

In the mudita practice, we come again and again to appreciate the joy in a friend's life. When I started doing my practice of mudita over the winter, a good friend was in a five-month retreat on the East Coast—someone for whom retreat is the happiest activity in their life. So as I was sitting in meditation and doing mudita, I would think about them sitting in meditation on the other side of the country, being so fulfilled in their activity, and that would just pick me up. Finding a friend who has something wonderful going on is a great support for joy arising in our own heart.

And then we open to mudita for all beings. This can be quite a trip. I came across a video on YouTube that many of you may have seen, called "Free Hugs." What happened was this guy in Australia got the idea to go into a shopping mall in Sydney with a big sign on which he had written in capital letters: "FREE HUGS."

He stood in the middle of the shopping mall and just held the sign up. How much nerve would it take to do something like that? That's not something I would think of doing offhand.

A local rock group got inspired by this and wrote a song and made a music video based on this concept of free hugs. That's what's on YouTube now. In the video, you see many people walking by who look at this guy like he's kind of crazy. "What is this guy doing? Is he a weirdo? Is he a sicko? Something really strange is going on here." They don't want to get too close. They walk around so they don't get near him.

Then some brave souls take the plunge. They take it at face value and go up and hug him, and they laugh afterwards. Because honestly, the idea of hugging a stranger in a shopping mall is kind of weird, isn't it? It really is weird. But once one person starts and takes the plunge, other people come up and do it, and the energy becomes contagious. Pretty soon people are laughing and smiling. There are guys skateboarding by and running into him on their boards, and you just feel the contagious joy of it all.

This movement has taken off and spread. Now there are free hug videos from Japan and Israel and Europe—it's all over the world. There's this international movement now. You don't have to be a shopper in Sydney anymore to have free hugs.

One of the things I like to reflect on—as we talked about a little the other day—is that virtually every human being, whatever their circumstances, whatever their condition, has some happiness in their life. This exploration is very rewarding: checking this out and seeing if it's true with your friends, even the ones who are going through a hard time.

See if there's not something that lifts their heart at different points in their routine, in their days, in their weeks.

I had a vivid example of this on a metta retreat a few years ago. There was a practitioner on the retreat from Manchester, England. Manchester is not one of the happiest cities on the face of the earth—one of those northern industrial cities where the weather is bad, the winters are brutally cold, and the architecture is old and gray.

Yet she was a lovely person, and her job in Manchester was helping to transition refugees who had come from third world countries to England. These refugees had fled their homelands to escape imprisonment, torture, or death—primarily because of their political or social views. Here were women from the third world, mostly warm countries, who had been forced to leave their culture, their families, their familiar lives, and move to this cold gray northern city to adapt to a completely foreign existence. This woman was helping them transition into that new life.

I asked her, "Could you find some mudita in their lives? Could you find joy in their experience?"

"Absolutely," she replied. "That was one of the most amazing things about these women. Their spirits were so resilient. Even in the midst of all the difficulties they were dealing with, they maintained this

remarkably optimistic and positive outlook as they created their new lives there."

Reflecting on that sometimes makes me feel a little humble. When I find myself grumbling about not getting enough protein at tea time, I think, "Wow. Things could be a lot tougher than that."

So as you practice mudita, remember you want to tune into what makes the other person happy, not necessarily what would make you happy.

When we first bought the land here at Spirit Rock in 1987, we inherited an old horse who had been a quarter horse on this property, rounding up cattle and running up and down these hills for years. The land had been leased for cattle before we owned it. The previous owner didn't want to take him, so we did. You know where the horse field is now—he lived there for about the first fifteen years that we owned the place. He died about five years ago. His name was Bob. Bob the Quarter Horse.

My wife is a horse person, so she took on the care of looking after him. At that time, there was no other horse in that field—just old Bob, literally out to pasture. She would come down every morning to make sure he had feed and water and was healthy.

In the winter, the horse trough where he got his water would freeze over on cold mornings, so she'd have to break through the ice. Sometimes when it was so wet in winter that the ground would never dry, he'd get abscesses in his foot, and she'd have to lift his foot and soak it in a bucket of hot water with Epsom salts. Getting a horse to stand still while you lift their hind leg into a bucket with Epsom salts is not the easiest maneuver. Sally did it happily every day because she loves horses.

It would not have been my cup of tea. But I could appreciate her connection to nature and to horses while she did that.

A few years later, we had skunks who came into the crawl space underneath our house. It was winter, and they were looking for a dry place to shelter. They particularly enjoyed bouncing up and down on our furnace at about two in the morning—the sound would reverberate through the aluminum casing. Other evenings, around three in the morning, we'd be awakened by this rich, musky smell drifting up through our bedroom, and we'd know the skunks were down there.

Mudita was not exactly my initial response, but I was able to appreciate the fact that they were warm and dry until we could manage to move them on to more natural habitats.

The far enemy of mudita is envy. This occurs when we look at somebody else's happiness and our heart doesn't go into uplift. When I went into the Peace Corps shortly after college, I broke up with my girlfriend in order to go. I was in Malaysia teaching, and a few months after I'd arrived, I got a letter from my best friend telling me that he and my ex-girlfriend had gotten together and were in a relationship.

Joy was not the first emotion that I felt on that occasion.

Similarly, sometimes when we hear reports of friends who are doing really well, it may be difficult to feel that quality of joy for them. Maybe a friend buys a house and we haven't yet been able to do that. Or somebody gets a promotion at work or some kind of recognition that we might have liked to have ourselves. It may not be so easy to feel mudita for a colleague in such circumstances.

Because of this, some teachers say that mudita is the hardest of the brahmaviharas to practice—as though with somebody getting more happiness, there's not enough left over for us. It's like there's a finite pool, and if they get that much...

We don't have enough. But actually what I think is going on underneath that is some kind of comparing mind. If somebody is doing really well, we take that as meaning, oh, they're a better person—or maybe they're better than I am. So instead of simply observing that they're experiencing more good fortune in one area of their life, we frame it as a hierarchical situation: it must mean they're better than I am. But that assumption is simply mistaken. You cannot compare two people based on just one quality.

This same mechanism operates in the near enemy to compassion. The near enemy to compassion is pity. If you consider what pity actually is, it's a way of looking down on somebody. It's like saying, "I'm sorry things are going hard for you, but I don't have that problem." We use it as a way to distance ourselves from the other person, which gives us a sense of superiority based on the fact that things are going better in our life than in theirs.

When we view joy and sorrow through this lens, we can use the comparing mind to position ourselves either up or down. But as the Buddha said, these comparisons are deluded. This is precisely why these are called the enemies of the brahma-vihara states.

As we turn the practice of mudita toward ourselves, what really emerges, in my experience, is the quality of gratitude. Gratitude is a truly beautiful state where we appreciate our own blessings because, first, it doesn't encourage wanting—we become aware of how many gifts we already have. And second, it doesn't encourage disliking because we recognize the abundance that is there. So it's a very skillful state of mind that deflects both desire and aversion.

A friend of ours is a wise teacher and also a grandmother. One Christmas day, she called up her granddaughter, who was probably about five or six at the time, and asked, "Did you get a lot of presents today?" The granddaughter said, "Yeah, it was great!" And the grandmother asked, "Well, when you get lots of presents, does it make you thankful for what you have, or do you want more?" The little girl replied, "Oh, Nana, I want more!" And the grandmother simply said, "Oh, that's too bad."

The little girl was listening and caught something in her tone. She said, "Well, what do you mean?" So the grandmother explained, "Haven't you noticed that when you want more, it doesn't feel so good? And when you're happy with what you've got, it feels really good?" The little girl paused and said, "Oh, Nana, you're right!"

This is a beautifully simple teaching on gratitude. It feels good when we can find that place where we appreciate all the blessings we have. And all of us here have so many things to be grateful for.

A friend of mine worked in a refugee camp in Thailand. He was training teachers who were educating refugees coming from Laos and Cambodia because of the wars, often from the hill tribes of those countries, as they prepared for relocation to the United States. Coming from a very simple hill tribe life, they had to learn things like how to use money, what coins were, how a toaster worked, what a washing machine was, how to read a bus schedule. They were learning these basic Western skills in the camps.

As part of his discussions with people in the camp, my friend once asked a teenage girl, "What are the most important things in life for you?" She replied, "The most important things in life are fire, rice, and water."

Those would be the most important things for us too, if we didn't have them. But because they are so readily available to us, we tend to take them for granted. If we just step back and consider all the human beings on the planet who don't have adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medicine, we begin to realize how fortunate we are that all of us in this room were well-fed today. Most of us, I suspect, have reasonable access to healthcare if we're ill. Probably most of us have a roof over our heads to go home to. These are all basic blessings that I think most of us enjoy.

And beyond this, we also possess something that Tibetans, from a Buddhist perspective, call a precious human birth. This refers to the circumstances and situations that have allowed us to be where we are today. We were born at a time when the teachings of liberation were available, when there were people practicing the authentic teachings of liberation, when there were people sharing them, when our minds were clear enough to open to and appreciate those teachings, and when we have the leisure time to practice toward our own liberation.

When you consider this constellation of circumstances, there are not many people on the planet who have all of these conditions aligned. So there are many, many blessings for every one of us in this hall.

Toward the end of a retreat, gratitude is something that gets mentioned frequently. I heard it several times in the interviews today. I encourage you to turn your mind toward gratitude as it arises over these days. Let that feeling grow within you.

One of the people here tonight started a very beautiful practice of gratitude.

Started it and reported it to a class that we were all doing and then it sort of spread from there and now a number of people have picked it up. And that is at the end of each day, would email one or two things that he was grateful about to a buddy, his gratitude buddy. And the gratitude buddy would do the same. So that at the end of every day, there would be this practice before going to bed, emailing to your buddy one or two things you were grateful for that day, and do it as a daily practice. And so that helps to just turn the mind regularly to the things that we appreciate in our life.

On one retreat, I made a list, because my mind was getting a little bit aversive, I made a list of all the things I was grateful for in my life because I wanted to offset that aversion. So I just took half an hour and just wrote down on one page of paper line after line of the things that I appreciated in my life. And they just kept coming and coming. The more I reflected on it, the more of them came out. And then during that retreat, I'd pick that paper up and read it every morning. And that would kind of set the tone for my day. It's a wonderful thing to do to focus on this quality of gratitude.

One of the things I often feel grateful for, and I know a lot of you do too, is gratitude that this path exists. Grateful that there is a clear way to move from suffering to freedom, and all we need to do is walk it, that the instructions are there. And in thinking about gratefulness, how did you get turned on to this path? Have you ever thought about that? What led you into practice, spiritual life at all? Not necessarily this Buddhist path, but a spiritual path, a spiritual life. Think about the people who kind of helped nudge you that way.

It may seem kind of like chance. Wow, it was just an accident. I saw a sign in the health food store for a meditation class. Or one of my good friends had had an experience and suggested that I come along and check it out. It may seem kind of random. And in fact, you may know people from a very similar background to you, similar growing up or education or work or something like that, similar temperament, who never found their way into a path. How does that happen?

I don't think it's just random. You know, I think this is part of the movement of what in an earlier age we might have called fate or destiny. But from a Buddhist point of view, I think we could call karma. There's something in our past actions that has predisposed us all in this direction.

This is from the Chippewa Native American tradition: Sometimes I go around pitying myself while all the time I'm being carried across the vast sky by great winds.

We don't know the great winds that are taking care of our lives. We don't know the combination of forces that have brought us here. But we can trust that those forces are at work. And use that as part of our faith and confidence.

Then I want to just close by describing the role of joy in the overall path to liberation. The Buddha described this in a discourse called the Discourse on the Links in the Samyutta Nikaya. He said that difficulty in life leads to our questioning, which leads to faith, and that faith leads to joy. That's an interesting connection, isn't it? That suffering is a link that brings us into joy. As we start to question, we start to get a sense that the path exists. That is a joyful place.

Then this joy starts to bring our interest into the present moment. As the present moment gets inviting and rich, the mind collects in this level of interest and alertness called piti in Pali or rapture in English. And this is another quality that increases the sense of delight, so much so that we learn that we can start to trust in that. And it settles down some of the wandering of the mind.

And this quality of delight in the dharma leads to tranquilizing of our mind and body. And as the tranquilizing happens in mind and body, we come to a different level of a kind of delight called happiness. The Pali word is sukha. Another word is contentment. I like this word sukha because it sounds kind of like sugar. And sukha is a very sweet state of mind.

So this joyful interest has risen into energy, then pacified through tranquility and settled out into this deep state of contentment called sukha or happiness. And in this state of sukha or happiness, the mind starts to find its contentment from within itself. When joy was arising, the mind tended to find its happiness outside. It'd be through the beauty of nature,

the faith in the three gems, beauty of beings, qualities of heart. But as it settles into us, the mind finds its peace within itself, finds its contentment in itself and no longer has to reach out, looking outside itself.

That collects the mind to a yet deeper level of what's called concentration, a state of deep stillness, relaxation, ease, peacefulness inside. And as the mind gets so stilled and peaceful in that way, and then it investigates the nature of the mind and body and of life, then from that place, the liberating insights can come through. And from the liberating insights, the heart is freed.

So joy plays a role in a few different places along this path—an energizing role in the beginning of waking us up, tuning us into the beauty of life, collecting the attention in the moment, and then settling out into this deep contentment from which insight arises. As we progress on the path, these qualities all come more and more alive for us, qualities of joy and contentment, and we feel that we're living life from a much richer, more satisfied, more heartfelt, happier place.

The Buddha said something really interesting about this growth of happiness in the path. He said one of the things that he never lost sight of in his whole practice career was not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind. I was kind of shocked when I first heard that, because when I began practice, if I could have found consistent wholesome states of mind, I would have been really happy.

The Buddha said, don't settle just for wholesome states of mind, but use the wholesome states of mind as the foundation for the heart's liberation. Because more is possible. Further development is possible. The complete end of suffering is possible for us.

And he expressed this most clearly in another discourse called The Simile of the Heartwood, where he said that the goal of this holy life is not virtue or fame or the peace of concentration or even insight. But he said it is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end.

This is what our Vipassana practice is aiming for. This is what our metta practice is contributing to. Nothing less than the full liberation of our hearts and minds.

Let's just sit together for a moment in silence, please.

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

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.