Guided Meditation - Muditā

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 46:28

Tonight we're going to introduce the Brahma Vihara of Muditā, which is usually translated as sympathetic or empathetic joy—joy in the happiness of others. Though I think many of us like to also include the possibility of appreciating our own sense of joy. Consider that an important part of this practice as a balancing to the difficult states of mind that we can often experience in our life and particularly on retreat.

There's a beautiful arc to the development of the Brahma Viharas, such wisdom in the way they are presented to us, beginning with the foundation practice of mettā that introduces this very simple yet profound act of caring for ourselves and others and invites the possibility of an open and loving heart. Then we move into compassion, because what we recognize as that heart opens is that there is suffering, as much as we might wish for others to be happy. We look around and we see in others' lives and certainly in our own life all the different ways that we suffer, that there is suffering. And so this responsive heart naturally develops compassion, opens to compassion.

But if we just stayed there, even that beautiful quality, that beautiful bittersweet quality of compassion, can lead us to only open to a certain portion of our experience as human beings. It's necessary to balance it with this appreciation of joy. Compassion is a beautiful quality, but if we're only looking for the suffering, looking for what's difficult, we can get weighed down with that. There actually can be imbalance in that.

And so to then open up, out of a recognition of the pervasiveness of suffering, to take that wisdom, that knowledge, and turn it deliberately and directly to the expression of joy brings a wonderful uplift and balance to our hearts and our practice. A very wise movement. And then, of course, the last Brahma Vihara is that which holds everything—equanimity, or upekkhā, which we will begin next week.

It's often said that this Brahma Vihara is actually the most difficult to practice. And it's interesting because we would all probably think, "Joy, that sounds good. I'll sign up for that." But we have so many conscious and unconscious ideas about what joy or happiness is. I think one of the things that's necessary to explore in all of these Brahma Viharas is: what is it we're actually wishing for? What is true joy or happiness for us? What does it actually look like or feel like? We must question some of the more superficial ways in which we might have understood joy or happiness in the past and really begin to get in touch with the source of true happiness or true joy for ourselves and for others. So it's not a superficial practice.

I can remember doing some intensive muditā practice for a number of days at a stretch. It's very light. Especially when I was practicing all the Brahma Viharas intensively, to come out of that somewhat heavy

nature of compassion and switch to muditā—I felt like skipping around the retreat center, which is not very appropriate, if you've noticed. People don't tend to skip too much around here. But it had that lightness, that ebullience to it that was really quite wonderful.

This is why the near enemy of muditā is exuberance. It's an interesting take on this quality of mind, of joy, to see the near enemy as exuberance. I really see it playing out as its near enemy when we get into too much thinking. The expression of joy, the experience of joy, can be quite present and alive in this moment, appreciative. But the mind takes over and says, "Boy, isn't this great? Only if there were more of it, and tomorrow, and the next day, and when I get home, and what about this, and I can do this." The thinking takes off and just leads us into amping up our mental energy around the possibility of getting more and more. That's how the near enemy of joy can play out. It's really interesting to look for in the practice.

The near enemies, as you know, are the expressions of heart or mind that masquerade as the true quality of the Brahma Vihara. We can be fooled by them. But if you're sensitive, you can tell when you move out of that direct connection with a sense of appreciation and into a lot of thinking and fantasizing about whatever might be happening. So watch out for the near enemy.

When we begin the muditā practice, we introduce a new person into the range of people we've currently been working with, and that is a person we know reasonably well, whose life is going well, who when we think of them we can have a sense that there are many blessings in their life. Whatever things are important to them—work, relationship, family, creativity, their body, whatever it might be—there's a sense that things are going in the right direction. You might want to be thinking as I'm talking, not thinking too much, but just letting come to you who might be good to play this role for your practice of muditā.

As we look around at our circle of friends, of course we see a range of happiness and suffering in each person's life. It's not about looking for someone who only has happiness; I think that's fairly impossible. But we look for someone who, when we think of them, we can connect with a certain area of their life where there's a great degree of satisfaction or ease or peace. It could be in a specific area of their creativity, even if other parts of their life might have some challenge to them, but you can tune into that. That's what we want to look for to begin this practice—someone you can think of and fairly easily open to this expression of joy and appreciation of their happiness.

The far enemy of muditā is obviously its opposite: envy. It's interesting how even though we may not think this is an emotion we often feel, as we do the practice, what can come up for us is this belief, this sense of limitation that's quite deep for many of us—that if they have X or Y or whatever, it means there's less for me. It's interesting how pervasive this belief can be, even though your rational mind might tell you that this is not so.

There's just this underlying tendency of contraction around how we will be held in the world. And so it's quite natural, actually insightful, for this movement of mind to come up—the comparing, the separating,

the contraction around wanting to wish someone else well. It's really helpful to see it, to see if you can soften around it, to feel the suffering nature of that contraction and the way it brings in a sense of limitation. And of course, to realize that it's not true—that there isn't any way someone else's happiness diminishes your own.

Actually, if you're able to open to and appreciate the happiness of others, it multiplies your possibility for happiness. We always trot out this line because it's so helpful to put it in perspective: the Dalai Lama says if you can be happy at the happiness of others, your possibility for happiness goes up by six billion to one. However many people are out there, if you can find happiness in some of them, then there's a greater possibility of your own happiness. So really hold that perspective as we do this practice.

But if you find this sense of limitation coming up, be willing to open to it and explore what's underlying it. Really question this belief that says, "I'll have less if they have more," and see that you can actually enliven your own sense of well-being by connecting in this powerful way with someone else.

When we talk about this kind of joy, it can invite in us a different way of looking at our experience. So often in our practice we can have the lens or inclination of mind to notice things that are actually quite challenging to open to—suffering, impermanence, emptiness, a lot of letting go, letting go, letting go. Very powerful insights can come from that kind of practice.

This is where the practice of mudita can be a really helpful balance: to see that in the same way, you can incline your mind to noticing what's beautiful in your own experience and in the expressions of other people's lives, and really let that lift your spirits up. We're making choices all the time about what we're noticing. If what you're seeing is everything that's unpleasant, that's what will color your experience and your mind states. If you actually incline the mind to notice what's beautiful, see what happens. It gladdens the mind, gladdens the heart, to see that this is possible.

And I know for myself, and I'm sure you do too, the power of this inclining of the mind—you've seen it through your metta practice. As you come back again and again to this sense of well-wishing, even if it seems artificial in the beginning, over time it actually does incline the mind toward well-wishing and toward happiness. The same can happen with mudita practice.

I think it's wonderful that we're doing this practice today. How many people felt happy seeing the snow? And how many people felt happy seeing someone else happy at the snow? I walked out at lunchtime and was lucky enough to take Bob, the director's dog, out for a little play on the lawn outside. He just ran out into the snow and sort of spread-eagled and dove into it, coming up with a big muzzle full of snow. It lifted my spirit so much to see him so happy. I made little snowballs and threw them, and he chased them and slid. It was just great—I picked up so much happiness from his exuberance in being in the snow.

We can look for little things. This isn't about the joy to end all joys, but really these small moments of contact we can have within ourselves or as we see others experiencing a beautiful sunset, when we often

all stand out there knowing that we're sharing this beautiful, ephemeral display of color, and that everyone's heart is being touched in some way. So really look for not extreme gradations of this, but just the very subtle moments of appreciation. And let that in.

There can sometimes be a kind of insular nature to practice on retreat. We wrap up in our shawls and creep around, keeping our eyes down, trying to navigate without letting anyone else in. Mudita practice says let them in. Really see if you can find the beauty and the joy in every person's expression here. It's just a different way of relating to our practice on retreat, and obviously we can take this out into the world.

So we'll begin—actually not in the usual way. We're beginning by bringing to mind this person you've chosen to send mudita to, and then we'll go to ourselves. Even though it's not actually traditional to do mudita for ourselves, we'll do some, and then we'll go to the benefactor. I think that will be enough for tonight. You can use the same person you have as your benefactor.

It can be interesting to find your way into that different relationship with whoever you're working with. Sometimes people feel a sense of inadequacy around this person: "Who am I to be talking about their happiness? They're so happy already." But that's part of the practice—being willing to open to joy in all its forms and not using this in any way to diminish our own capacity for joy.

The phrases we use for mudita—I'll suggest a few. The traditional one has two parts: "May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase and never wane." It has this sense of acknowledging happiness, well-being, good fortune, and wishing that it continues to grow, that it doesn't diminish, that all it does is keep getting deeper and bigger for this person. So that's the traditional phrase.

May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase and never wane. You simply repeat these phrases again and again.

There are some variations you might find speak to you more directly: "May your happiness and good fortune never leave you." Or simply, "May your joy and happiness continue." Something along those lines. Or even just, "I'm happy that you're happy." You can choose whichever works best for you.

Keeping it simple—may your happiness and good fortune never leave you—and really feeling into the response in the heart as you say that, as you offer this message. A real sense of support and encouragement and well-wishing to this person you've chosen, noticing what response arises in your own heart and mind.

We'll begin the practice by taking a moment to connect with your own current experience. I've said quite a few words about the practice, which may have brought up some response in you—interest, willingness, excitement, or perhaps a sense of contraction or sadness. Just notice whatever is there and let it be just as it is. Perhaps use the breath to open to the energy in the body, to be more directly in contact with what's happening for you here and now.

With all of the brahma viharas, I think it's really helpful to keep our practice based in the body so it doesn't become an intellectual pursuit, a mere repetition of words. If you find it helpful, center your attention in the center of the chest and notice what's present there, without expectation or judgment.

Then bring into your awareness this person you've chosen as your happy person. Take a few moments to really connect with them, particularly with what it is about their being or their life that you know brings them great joy, where things are going well. The practice is to keep coming back to that. Other thoughts or memories may arise—things that are difficult for this person—so we acknowledge those. We don't deny them. But the training is to return to this intention of connecting with joy, with happiness, with good fortune. Each of the brahma viharas is a particular training.

Let their whole situation unfold in your inner awareness, particularly noticing what brings them joy. It can be helpful to imagine them in that place or situation where you know they're quite happy—with the people they're happy with, whatever it is. Imagine them smiling, engaged, playful, however you relate to them and can invoke this feeling of sympathetic joy. Let it resonate in your own heart.

Then begin saying the phrases of mudita for this person: May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase and never wane. May your happiness and good fortune never leave you. I'm happy that you're happy.

Mudita is a practice where you can really let yourself smile a little as you connect with this sense of joy and appreciation.

Now let go of this person you've been practicing with and begin to turn the mudita toward yourself. When we practice mudita in this way, it's really much more like gratitude—a willingness to acknowledge the blessings in our life. Not to diminish the places of struggle or difficulty, but simply to find a way to connect with those areas in your experience—even if small or fleeting—where you find a sense of joy, a sense of lightness.

Using the same phrases for yourself as you did for the friend: May my happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase and never wane. May my happiness and good fortune never leave me. Really be open to exploring this aspect of joy in your life, seeing how inclining the mind in this way brings the possibility of appreciation and gratitude alive. But if there is any sense of constriction, be willing to notice that as well. See if it's possible to come back to any degree of connection to the happiness or gratitude you can find.

Now turn the focus of your practice to the benefactor, this person toward whom you've cultivated both metta and compassion. Look particularly for what you know is beautiful in their life—things they enjoy, places of happiness. Take a moment to really connect with them. Out of the whole tapestry that is their life, pick out those threads you know bring them joy. If it's not someone you know very well, trust your intuition about that. Use the same phrases toward this person as you've used for the others.

I encourage you to take at least another session of mudita practice and move through the remaining categories you're familiar with—the friend, the neutral person—seeing if there's any possibility of practicing with a difficult person, pushing that boundary or barrier a little. And then, of course, opening up to all beings.

It can be a challenging practice in those later categories, so just see what's possible for you without any agenda. Like the other brahma viharas, if you wish to continue in a more concentrated way, dedicate at least one sitting or walking period in the coming days to this practice. In those sessions, you might want to focus just on the happy person and yourself, or find some balance that really speaks to you and uplifts the heart.

It can be a beautiful thing to bring into your life, both in a formal way through dedicated practice, but of course, to also have it become a natural response that arises spontaneously.

If you notice that someone else is really appreciating a bowl of hot soup, or as I mentioned, the sunset, or whatever simple pleasure they're enjoying, just allow yourself to feel that sense of joy, letting it actually touch your heart in that beautiful way.

May your happiness and good fortune continue.

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