

# Empathetic Joy

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We chant the phrases for the brahmaviharas or sublime attitudes every night before we meditate because they're attitudes that really are conducive to getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being. You have no ill-will for anyone, no desire to see anybody suffer. You don't resent anyone's happiness; and as for the things that you can't help or can't change, you learn to put them aside for the time being.

All of this helps make for an easy break with all the issues of the day so that you can focus on the work at hand, which is your awareness right here, keeping your awareness focused on the breath.

If you can't be generous in practicing the brahmaviharas, it's really hard to settle down. There's a passage where the Buddha actually says that people who are stingy can't enter strong states of concentration. They mistrust them. A sense of ease comes up, and they don't feel right about it. There's another passage where he says that the inability to enjoy pleasure is a sign of something wrong. This may sound strange. After all, the Buddha has a lot to say about the drawbacks of sensual pleasure. But when pleasure comes, when happiness comes—they use the same word in Pali, *sukha*, for pleasure, ease, well-being, bliss—when any of these things come, you have to learn how to enjoy them. If, after enjoying them, you begin to realize that they have their limitations, you can move on in a mature way. If you're afraid of happiness, your letting go of happiness will be neurotic and unbalanced. You find yourself coming back to nibble at the happiness in secret, or at least trying to hide it from yourself, because the mind does crave happiness.

This is where one of the least emphasized of the brahmaviharas is especially useful: *mudita*, which can be translated as empathetic joy or appreciation. Basically, it's an attitude that when you're happy, you appreciate it. When you see other people are happy, other beings are happy, you appreciate it. You don't resent it; you're not jealous of anyone's happiness. If you're jealous of other people's happiness, it's very difficult to enjoy your own. That's a karmic consequence right there. You don't have to wait for the next lifetime. If you have a very narrow heart that resents other people's wealth when it's greater than yours, their intelligence when it's greater than yours, or whatever their good fortune may be: If you resent it when they have it, you're not going to be able to enjoy it when you gain it yourself.

*Mudita* is an attitude you extend not only to the results of skillful actions—which is what the happiness is—but also to the skillful actions themselves. When you see someone else doing something meritorious, and maybe you're not able to do it yet, if someone's further along in their meditation or they're able to be more generous, whatever, you learn not to resent that. You appreciate it. And that appreciation in itself becomes part of your own merit.

There's a traditional belief, based in the Canon, that that's what hungry ghosts live on: their appreciation of other people's goodness. They never developed their own goodness enough, and so they need to learn this lesson: not to resent other people's goodness.

You hear stories in Thailand of people having visions in their meditation, and the most interesting ones are those where lots of people without any knowledge of one another find that they have a vision of the same spirit in a particular place. There once was a monk who was stabbed to death at Wat Makut. He had been dealing in Buddha images on the black market. Ajaan Fuang lived right near his dwelling, and this monk didn't like the idea that Ajaan Fuang would be nearby. After all, Ajaan Fuang was a meditating monk, and meditating monks might be awake at 2 a.m., 3 a.m., which was when people would come to this monk with their Buddha heads or Buddha hands, with no questions as to why they were just heads or hands, or where they came from.

So the monk did everything he could to get rid of Ajaan Fuang. This went on for about two or three years. Finally, Ajaan Fuang was invited to start Wat Dhammasathit in Rayong. Soon after he left for Rayong, the monk was stabbed to death. Then, a few years later, Ajaan

Fuang went back to the same building to teach meditation again. Every now and then, people who knew nothing about the story and who knew nothing about one another's experiences would tell Ajaan Fuang, "You know, there's this spirit of a bloody monk wandering around the building." And Ajaan Fuang would say, "Okay, dedicate the merit of your meditation to him." They'd sit there meditating for a minute or two, and then they'd say, "He won't accept it." He still carried that resentment of Ajaan Fuang, even after he died. That's a case of someone who can't appreciate someone else's goodness and has to suffer as a result.

But you don't have to look at other realms, just look at the human realm. People who can't bear to see other people's happiness: What kind of mind state is that? When we see it in other people, we regard it as very petty. Yet all too often, we may have that attitude ourselves and not recognize it. So it's good very consciously to develop an attitude of appreciation and empathetic joy when people are doing good things and when they're reaping the results of good actions. That makes the mind very expansive.

It's a form of generosity, a generosity of spirit: that you're happy to see other people doing something that might be better than what you're able to do. That generosity of spirit is a good aid to the meditation, so that when you stay with the breath and it feels comfortable, you don't feel guilty about the fact that it's comfortable. You don't feel ill at ease around the comfort.

Some people feel they don't deserve happiness. Well, the issue of deserving and not deserving happiness never comes up in the Buddha's teachings. There's simply the issue of cause and effect. A good action, an action motivated by a skillful intention, leads to good results. It's impersonal. Unskillful actions motivated by unskillful motivations lead to pain. Each of us has a lot of actions in the past, so there's bound to be good mixed with bad. You don't have to wear off the bad kamma before you can enjoy the good. You simply learn to make the best use of both pleasure and pain when they come along.

The Buddha never talks about having to wear off your old kamma before you can gain awakening. The idea that meditation is a purification that burns away your old kamma is actually a Jain teaching that he ridiculed. And you wonder what he would have said about a passage I read the other day in a Buddhist magazine—that if you can maintain equanimity during sex, that can also be a form of purification. The Buddha had no use for these ideas. You don't have to burn off your old kamma. If you had to burn off your old kamma, he said, we'd never be done. As for the idea of burning off bad kamma by having sex, he would probably have shaken his head in disbelief. But while you're meditating you can develop a good expansive state of mind—and empathetic joy is one way of developing that expansive state of mind—that helps to mitigate a lot of the results of your own past bad actions.

In other words, there are potentials for suffering coming from your past bad actions but there are also potentials for happiness coming from your past good actions. We all have a mixed bag. Or in the Buddha's analogy, we each have a field full of seeds of different qualities. There are seeds that will grow bitter fruit, and there are seeds that grow sweet fruit. Just because we have bitter seeds in the field doesn't mean that we deserve to eat nothing but bitter fruit. It means simply that those sorts of potentials are there. If we keep watering those particular seeds, the fruits are going to come. But we have the choice of which seeds we're going to water. So you want the water of your mind to be an expansive attitude, one that can water sweet seeds or else sweeten the bitter fruit in such a way that it's not so bitter.

Empathetic joy is one of the best ways of expanding that attitude. As with goodwill, it's not simply a matter of imagining a pink cloud radiating from your mind. You spread thoughts of empathetic joy first to people that it's easy to feel it for—the people you like, the people whose happiness you're easily happy about. Then you pose the question in the mind: "Is there anyone else out there whose happiness I don't like? Whose happiness I resent?" And you may think of a few people. Well, ask yourself, "What do you get out of resenting their happiness, what good comes from that?" It's a narrowing of your mind to allow that resentment to take over. And so, person by person, you try to work through it.

In the beginning, it may be hard, but as you get more used to it, the realization goes deeper and deeper that you don't gain anything from anyone else's suffering and you're not lessened by other people's happiness—or their wealth, or their status, or the praise that's given to them, any of the worldly things that we see. You're not lessened by the fact that other people have higher Dhamma attainments than yours or become noble ones. In fact, if you can appreciate the fact that they're there, that makes it a lot easier for you to practice.

So search through your mind. If you see any areas of resentment, use this contemplation to help root them out. This is one more way of expanding the mind to make it a much nicer mind to be in—one that's not narrow, one that's not fearful or resentful. That way, as you settle down with the breath and there's a sense of well-being, you can enjoy it without any sense of guilt or a sense that it may be inappropriate. And when you can settle down with a sense of well-being like that, it becomes a much more solid base for the insight that's going to grow as your concentration grows stronger and you become more skilled at it.

So, if you've been neglecting empathetic joy in your practice, maybe it's a good time to give it a little more emphasis. There will be a brighter world as a result.