

Anumodana

April 8, 2018

When you study a new language, the most interesting words are the ones that have no real equivalent in your original language. Those words give you an insight into the mindset of the new language.

And in Pali, one of those words is *anumodana*. We don't really have a word for that in English. The closest might be "congratulations," but the feeling of *anumodana* is a little bit different. It's an expression of rejoicing in the goodness of other people.

So what does that mean that we don't have this word in English? It could mean that we have a very jealous society. People are very competitive. And if someone else does something well, there's that feeling that you've been lessened by their achievement—which, when you think about it, is extremely petty and childish. So one of the reasons why it's good to develop an attitude of *anumodana* is to overcome that pettiness.

For instance, on a day like today, Songkran: Lots of people came and helped. There were a lot of people doing work of various kinds, practicing generosity. And even though it was as if a storm came whipping through the monastery and then left very quickly, still they left behind some good things. So we should try to cultivate an attitude of *anumodana* for what they've done, because this attitude opens the heart. We see other people doing good, and it's a good thing.

After all, what do we have in the world if people don't do good? We've got news in the newspapers, which can be pretty depressing. But when you see people doing good, you realize, okay, the human race is not all lost. And although different people have different ideas of what it means to do good, the fact that they *want* to do good is something that should be encouraged.

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha had the monks chant *anumodana* for people who gave donations, to encourage people in doing good. Not necessarily to encourage them to come back and give more, but just to encourage them in the qualities of generosity, the qualities of virtue, and in developing goodwill. These are things that should be encouraged because we all benefit. After all, the practice is one where we're not in competition with one another. If someone else is practicing really well, it gives energy to the people around them. So it's good for those people around them to appreciate the goodness they've done.

The word *anumodana* is closely related to the word *mudita*, empathetic joy. They come from the same root. And again, even though “empathetic joy” is close, there’s really no English word that’s just right for *mudita*. We’re happy for people for their happiness. Of the different brahmaviharas, this is the poor stepsister, the one who doesn’t get much press. People talk a *lot* about goodwill, a *lot* about compassion, a *lot* about equanimity. Empathetic joy gets pushed off, yet it’s an important attitude to develop. When you see other people doing good – not only that, but they’re also reaping the results of having done good – you realize that there’s no reason for jealousy, no reason for resentment.

As the Buddha once said, if you see someone else who has all the possible types of good fortune you could imagine, you should remind yourself you’ve been there, too. This is nothing new. This is nothing you’ve never attained. You’ve been there before—and you lost it. And you’ve been there again and you lost it again, many, many times. And you’ll probably be there again if you don’t leave *samsara* beforehand. So the question is, why be jealous? Why be resentful? Do you want other people to be jealous and resentful of *you* when you enjoy good fortune? Not really.

We’d all like to be in that kind of world where you’re at the end of a romantic movie and the couple finally gets together and everybody is so happy for them that they applaud. That doesn’t really happen that much in this world. All too often, people are jealous of other people’s good fortune. You see them happy and you feel reduced by their happiness. Which is silly. Here’s happiness free for the asking. All you have to do is be happy for *them*.

So when you see someone else practicing well, someone else engaging in generosity, virtue, meditation, you see somebody ordaining, be happy for them. You’ve been there before, you know it’s a good thing. If other people have it right now, the fact that you don’t have it right now doesn’t lessen you. The opportunity will come again. And as I said, you’d like to have other people happy for you when you enjoy good fortune, so give them some generosity in this way. Because if you can’t be happy for other people’s happiness, then it’s hard for you to really be happy for your own.

It’s like stinginess. We tend to think the Buddha encouraged people to be frugal – and he did – but he didn’t encourage stinginess, the kind of miserly attitude where all you can think of doing with wealth is squirreling it away. He said that one of the benefits of wealth is that you get to enjoy it. He actually criticized people who don’t know how to enjoy their wealth. It’s because basically you feel bad about enjoying things, and if you feel bad about enjoying things yourself, then how are you going to feel good about other people enjoying things?

How are you going to want to make other people have joy? The mind just shrivels up, the heart shrivels up, with an attitude like that.

So to nourish the heart, it's good to learn how to take some joy in the wealth that you've got, the goodness and good fortune you've got—and that you take joy in the goodness and good fortune of other people. That nourishes the heart. Remind yourself that happiness is a good thing. After all, the practice of Dhamma is a practice for the sake of happiness. And although the ultimate happiness, nibbana, doesn't depend on other people, the path is nourished by the goodwill for other people, by empathetic joy for other people. We can help one another along the path in this way.

So as you go through the brahmaviharas, take good note of empathetic joy. And as you go through the day and the monks give the anumodana, realize that they're rejoicing in your goodness, reminding you that it's a character trait that deserves rejoicing. This gives nourishment to your practice. And it's one of the ways in which we can help one another along—instead of dragging one another down.

One of the things that keeps the devas up in the heavens is that they learn how to rejoice in the goodness of human beings. One of the things that keeps the Brahmas in the brahma worlds is that they've learned how to rejoice in the goodness of others. So here's a way of lifting the state of your mind. And it's all free. There are people around who are happy, so be happy for them. There are people around who are being good, so be happy for their goodness. It's free energy. Take as much of that free energy as you want.