

Empathetic Joy

June 4, 2014

When we talk about the brahmaviharas, the one that doesn't get mentioned very often is empathetic joy. People talk about goodwill, compassion, equanimity quite a lot. But empathetic joy somehow gets lost between the cracks.

Which is unfortunate because it's a very important background for our practice, a very important context for our practice. If you can't be happy for other people's happiness, you'll have trouble feeling right about your own.

We hear again and again stories of people who gain a sense of ease and well-being, pleasure in the concentration and they don't feel they deserve it. They shrink away from it. That's because they have trouble being happy with other people's happiness. So developing empathetic joy is a good practice. It expands the mind.

As the Buddha said, if you can make your mind large and immeasurable, then the results of your bad past karma hardly make a dent. And empathetic joy is one of the most expansive of the group, because what you're being asked to do is to be happy for other people's happiness. You don't have to think about all the suffering out there. Just realize that there are people not only being happy but also people doing skillful things. Wherever that's happening, you're happy for them.

Cast your mind out. Think of some examples and ask yourself, "Why would you not be happy for their happiness?" At some point, you'll come around to the quality of resentment in the mind.

If you're sitting here breathing easily, and the mind is beginning to settle down, you can ask yourself, "Why would you want to engage in resentment? Someone else's happiness or good fortune or their ability to do skillful things that maybe you're not able to do yet: To what extent does that lessen you?" It lessens you only if you think that it does. Their happiness is not what's lessening you. You're the one who's lessening yourself.

Learn how to think this through and pull away from the small-mindedness and the small-heartedness that make it difficult to feel empathetic joy.

They say that hungry ghosts have to feed off of empathetic joy. In other words, they have to hang around places where people are doing good and hope to get a little bit of the merit by rejoicing in other people's merit. That's what the word *anumodana* means. The reason they need that is because when they were alive as human beings, they didn't rejoice in other people's merit. They led a very hungry existence.

So learn how to be happy for other people's happiness. It makes the brahmaviharas complete. Because if you can't be happy for their happiness, if you're jealous of their happiness, that means of course that when you gain some happiness, other people will be jealous of yours. And you yourself won't feel right about it.

This is one of the aspects of Western Buddhists that Asian Buddhists find the most difficult to understand: the people who feel unworthy to have some real happiness. It's because we haven't made a regular practice of gratitude on the one hand and empathetic joy on the other.

So think of the cases of people who've been good to you, because empathetic joy and gratitude are very closely related. That goodness is something you want to appreciate. Here's an example of someone who did feel that your happiness was worthwhile, your well-being was worthwhile, and they were willing to give what was needed. So you appreciate their goodness.

Another way of translating *mudita*, the word for empathetic joy, is appreciation. Appreciation gives energy to your practice. It's when you realize that happiness is a good thing wherever it comes by skillful means.

And the question of deserving and not deserving happiness doesn't enter into the equation at all. You never see this in the Buddha's teachings, the idea that someone deserves to suffer or someone deserves to be happy. Everything is expressed simply as cause and effect. There are good actions, skillful actions that lead to happy results. And there are unskillful actions based on unskillful intentions that lead to unpleasant results.

Karma is not a respecter of persons. There are people who are good now who've done some bad things in the past, and there are people who are pretty miserable in their behavior now but they may have done some good things in their past. The world is all jumbled up like this. You see the jumble in other people. We've all got the jumble in all of us. Each of us has this jumble of good and bad past actions. If we had no bad actions in the past, we wouldn't be human beings. We'd be on a much higher level right now.

Those actions created the causes that led us here. But the fact that those things are in the past doesn't mean we have to suffer from them. That's where our choice lies: in realizing you don't have to suffer. It gives you energy to react as skillfully as you can and be proactive as skillfully as you can with whatever potentials come up in your life.

So don't hesitate to go for the pleasure and happiness based on skillful actions when they arise. It's simply a matter of learning how to make the best use of them.

Like right now, there are pleasant and unpleasant sensations in your body.

Which are you going to focus on?

Ajaan Lee recommends trying the pleasant ones. The Buddha says to try to nurture the pleasant ones by the way you breathe. Steps five and six in the breath meditation tell you to learn how to breathe in and out with a sense of rapture, breathe in and out with a sense of pleasure. People are not admitted to those steps only when they've proven they deserve them. They're things anybody can do.

Be sensitive to how you're breathing. Be sensitive to the process of the mechanics of the breathing in your body.

We talked about this a little this afternoon. There are certain parts of the body that tend to stay tense because you use them to hold the body erect and you use them to breathe. Often they're starved of breath energy.

So you can visualize the breath energy going in right there immediately. If they've been doing the work, allow them to have a little vacation. Consciously keep them relaxed and see if you can still breathe in. The in-breath has more tension than on the out-breath. And this is where they're doing most of the work: on the in-breath.

So when you notice a part of the body that feels tight, tense, closed off, think of all the breath channels opening up there. At the same time, think of it relaxing. It doesn't have to do any work at all. As for holding the body erect, try to relax into an erect posture.

This way you find that you have more potentials for a sense of well-being in the present moment than you might have noticed before. And you want to make the most of them.

That old idea that you have to just put up with whatever's there if you want to really gain discernment—and you hear this far, far too often—really has nothing to do with what the Buddha taught. He teaches you how to take advantage of whatever the potentials for pleasure and rapture there are.

The problem is that if you think that you're just watching arising and passing away, a lot is happening behind the scenes. You're closing off your awareness of the extent to which you're participating in shaping that arising and passing away.

You see this much more clearly when you consciously shape things, when you experiment with your perceptions. Take your perceptions about the breath: When it comes in, where is it coming in? We know that the air is coming in and out of the nose, but what about the other sensations in the body that don't correspond with what we've been told about what the breath does? Have you been blocking them out because you didn't think they were possible?

It's like those satellite images, the data they were getting from over the South Pole about the ozone hole. For years they threw out the data because they thought

it was impossible. They had to open their minds first and then they could take advantage of the data.

It's the same way with the breath. We pick up certain ideas, either from our own conjecture or from what we've read about what the breath does. Then we force it into that mold.

So when we talk about breath energy, we're asking you to open up your mind at the same time that you're opening up the breath channels, so that you can get more and more in touch with the good potentials, the pleasant potentials that are waiting here for you to pay attention to them, to cultivate, to emphasize.

So have a little empathetic joy for yourself here. You're sitting here meditating, doing something that's really skillful. And you've got lots of good potentials here in the body.

I was told that one time that Ajaan Lee got up on the sermon seat and said, "Okay everybody, let's see if we can see the results of our past good actions. See what comes up. Just make up your mind that you're going to notice what results of good actions you can see here in the present moment." Of course, some of the students had psychic powers, while others just focused on their breath.

There was one monk, though, who started shaking all over, convulsing. And it turned out he'd had a very contrary idea: He had said to himself, "I want to see the results of my past bad actions." He had a vision of a dog that he'd beaten to death.

So you really have the choice when you're sitting here: What are you going to focus on: the things that pull you down or the things that pull you up? You're perfectly free to go either way. But you get a lot more out of focusing on the good potentials, because they give you the foundation you need.

We know that we're going to have to deal with the issue of suffering, the issue of stress, and what we're doing to cause that. But to deal with it skillfully, you've got to have a good foundation. And any sense of well-being that you can nourish here will allow you to do that.

So have empathetic joy for others, empathetic joy for yourself.

There are lots of good potentials right here if only you focus on them.