

The Purpose of Empathetic Joy

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When the Buddha lists the brahmaviharas, he notes that if you use the different themes of the brahmaviharas as topics of meditation, as you go up the list you get to higher and higher levels of concentration. Compassion leads to a higher level of concentration than goodwill, perhaps because the desire to help those who are suffering, or those who are creating the causes for suffering, is a more uplifting emotion than the simple desire to see beings be happy. You open up your heart more to those who are suffering, and with that opening of the heart there's a greater sense of joy, a greater sense of calm, well-being, which allows the mind to get a deeper concentration.

Higher than compassion, though, is empathetic joy. And you might wonder: Isn't it a higher thing to feel compassion for those who are suffering than to be happy for those who are happy? Well, it's more than just being happy for those who are happy. You think about the fact that they did something in order to gain that happiness. In fact, you're also happy for those who are creating the causes for happiness now.

There's a sense of joy in seeing that the teachings on kamma really work: You do skillful things and there will be rewards. That's a somewhat more impersonal principal, but it lifts the mind to a higher state, because it's getting "you" out of the way. Think about it: What are the attitudes in your mind that would interfere with empathetic joy? They're all very childish. One is if you see someone who has something that you want but you don't have, and you feel resentment, jealousy, envy. But when you're able to overcome that and take yourself out of the picture, that heightens the concentration.

There are also cases where people have done things that lead to happiness, who acted skillfully in the past, but they're not skillful anymore. In fact, they've taken the results of their past skillful actions and now they're abusing them—and you don't like it, you don't want to see them be happy, you feel they don't deserve their happiness. But when you think in the terms of the principle of kamma, they did something, someplace in the past that leads to that happiness, and even though they're spoiling the results, the fact that you're willing to accept the principle of kamma—that good actions based on good intentions do lead to good results—it lifts the mind.

But it also gives rise to a sense of *samvega*: You realize that you can do good things many, many times, and then somehow the mind can change. We see so many cases like this. People come into a position of power, people have wealth, people have beauty, people have strength, and they must have done something in the past for those things to come about, but now they let it go to their heads. People with power feel they're invincible; people with beauty think they can get away with anything; people with strength can force their will on others.

So it makes you realize that if you're going to be aiming for happiness, you don't want to content yourself with the happiness of the world—because it's not safe. The only safe happiness is the safety of the noble attainments. So as you develop empathetic joy in this way, it leads to a more mature attitude, as you accept the impersonality of the principle of kamma and also you come to admit the limitations of kamma.

After all, the Buddha said there are four kinds of kamma: bright, good actions that lead to a good rebirth; dark, bad actions that lead to a bad rebirth; mixed, bright and dark, which will lead to a rebirth where there's pain mixed with pleasure, like the human realm. But then there's a fourth level of kamma: kamma that leads to the end of kamma—and that's the noble eightfold path.

It's only when you see the limitations of even the best bright kamma that you're willing to go for the noble path.

This is a pattern throughout the Buddha's teachings, as in his step-by-step discourse. He starts with generosity, giving, virtue, the virtue of restraint; and then the rewards of giving and virtue: the various heavenly realms that you can enjoy. That's bright kamma. But then he talks about the drawbacks of sensuality. He calls them not only drawbacks, but also the degradation that sensuality involves. Here you are, just eating up the results of your old actions, and you're not producing anything good to replace them. So of course you're going to fall.

And as I said a while back, it's as if samsara is a sick joke. You work really hard to develop good qualities, and then, when you get the rewards for those good qualities, they spoil you—unless you devote them to the noble paths.

So with the next step in that step-by-step discourse, when you've seen the degradation of sensuality, you begin to think, "Well, maybe renunciation is a good thing." *Renunciation* here, of course, means not only giving up sensual pleasures, but also providing yourself with a better pleasure to replace them, which is what we're doing as we meditate.

We're working on the pleasure of form—the body as it's experienced from within. We're making it as pleasant as possible, to give the mind the food it needs in order to practice, to settle down, be still, and see things as they really are, to see the movements of the mind as they're actually happening, to see the extent to which you're fabricating your experience, and then the value of those fabrications: which ones are useful, which ones are not. When you're engaged in concentration, you see these things more clearly.

I was doing a Zoom teaching this afternoon and one of the questions was, "I've been meditating for many years but I've never really looked into these jhanas. Do you think they really are necessary?" As I told the questioner, "How are you going to see the processes of fabrication unless you get the mind really, really still?" At the same time, you use the processes of fabrication to create that state of concentration. As someone once said, "The things we know best are the things we do." You do concentration by taking form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness, and turning them into a state of concentration—that's how

you really get to know them. If you don't use them like this, you don't know them. And if you don't know them, how can you gain insight into them?

Of course, on top of that, when the mind is really still like this, you can see really subtle levels of fabrication you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

That's when the mind is ready for the four noble truths, to see the extent to which you're creating stress where you don't have to.

You work on developing dispassion for the stress, you abandon the cause, and the mind opens up to cessation. *Cessation* doesn't mean only that these things stop. When they stop, there's an experience of the deathless. And when you hit that, that's when your happiness is safe.

Up until this point, everything is unsafe—even jhana is unsafe. You can develop a sense of pride around it, you can get complacent about it, there are periods where it comes really easily and you get lazy about it—and you can decide that you're satisfied with that level of pleasure, and you stop right there.

So there are dangers, even in the concentration, that bliss of concentration. It's when you've had your first taste of the deathless, that's when you've found something that's totally safe.

So when you reflect on empathetic joy, do precisely that: reflect. Remember the Buddha's image of the mirror that he taught to Rahula. When he introduced the practice as a whole, he started with the image of a mirror. You're going to be looking at yourself, and in particular at your actions. When you see people doing good things that would lead to happiness, you see them enjoying the results of those good things, it inspires you to turn around and do good things as well.

When you see people who are enjoying the results of their past good actions, but they're abusing them, it should inspire you to aspire to something higher—to a happiness that's really safe.

It's when you've reached that happiness that you know that you've used the contemplation of empathetic joy to its best purpose. Remember that all the teachings, all Dhammas have an *attha*—a goal, a purpose. You don't just sit with them. You take them someplace—and they take *you* someplace.

There was another question that came up today: A woman had been meditating for many years and said she was afraid that she was becoming a hypocrite about her meditation. How so? Because she wanted results, and that was craving, right? Isn't craving wrong? I told her, "Not always. Desire is what motivates the path. It's simply a question of making sure that your desires are aimed at the right goal." You use the Dhamma to get to that goal—that's what it's for.

So when you've used empathetic joy to the point where it opens the mind to something deathless, that's when you know you've used this particular teaching, this particular practice, for its intended purpose. You've reaped the rewards. You've gained the benefits.

And you realize that this is why the Buddha taught. This is why he had the compassion to set out the religion, to establish the Dhamma and Vinaya, so that people thousands of years afterwards in another part of the world could taste these benefits. This is why the experience of the deathless is accompanied by a sense of intense gratitude for the Buddha—for what he did to find this happiness, and what he did to keep the path to this happiness open as long as it's been open.

Ajaan Suwat said that when you've completed the path, as far as you're concerned, weeds can grow up on the path again. But then you look back and you see that other people want to find the end of suffering as well. So when you see other people putting stones and other obstacles on the path, you want to clear them away, because you've seen that the *attha* of the Dhamma—when the Dhamma is practiced in accord with the Dhamma—is so excellent. And you want to do what you can to keep that opening, that possibility, alive for whoever wants it.