

Appreciation

April 12, 2009

Pali has a word for the feeling you have when you see people are happy and you're happy along with them. It's *mudita*, which can be translated as appreciation or empathetic joy. It's one of the four brahmaviharas. And of the four, it's the one that's discussed the least, but it's as important as the other three. It's what goodwill feels when it encounters someone who is actually happy or who is creating the causes for happiness. It's the opposite of resentment and jealousy. And it's an important quality to develop.

We see other people creating the causes for happiness and we feel happy with them. That makes it easier for us to create the causes of happiness as well. It gives rise to a sense of joy.

Like today: We had the Songkran festival. Songkran itself is not a Buddhist holiday. It actually comes from an astrological belief, which is that the new year begins when the Sun enters the constellation of Aries. Of course, the new year could begin at any time. There's no one point as the Earth goes around the Sun where it passes a little spot that goes click and moves us up to the next year. We have January 1st, we have the Chinese New Year—there are all kinds of new years.

But the idea of a new year is a good convention to have because it reminds us that our years are numbered. We want to think about our lives. What are we doing with our lives?

One thing that's important to do with our lives is to create the causes for happiness. So even though Songkran is not a Buddhist holiday, we observe it in a Buddhist way. Like today we had the *phaa paa*, which was a group donation. And the atmosphere was very festive.

For a long time, Western observers thought this very ironic. They read the Buddhist texts in such a way as to see the Dhamma as very pessimistic. They interpreted the first noble truth as "Life is suffering." They interpreted nirvana as total annihilation: that somehow the only way out of suffering was to be wiped out.

Yet here they saw Buddhists having a good time at Buddhist festivals. They thought, "These poor Buddhists, they don't understand their own religion, they've distorted what the Buddha had to say"—that's what they thought.

But if you look at what the Buddha actually had to say, it's a very festive message, a very happy message. True happiness is possible. It is possible to totally put an end to suffering. You do it by doing good things. Being generous is something that feels good. Observing the precepts means learning how to avoid harming yourself, avoid harming other people. As you get used to these practices, there's a sense of self-esteem: a sense of blamelessness that comes with the practice.

We sit here and meditate, showing goodwill for ourselves by the way we breathe, showing goodwill for others by trying to train our minds.

All these are very good things to do. Which means not only that true happiness is possible, but also that it can be attained by doing good things.

The general message of the world is that happiness is possible but it doesn't last and it has its limitations. It can be found, but a lot of times you have to find it by clawing other people, scrambling up the ladder, stepping on other people to get on top of them and ahead of them. That's the way of the world.

Or by holding a belief that you're part of the chosen few and everybody else has to go to hell: "Ah, that's too bad for them, but as long as my skin is safe that's okay." Which is a really miserable belief when you think about it: all the mental contortions people have to go through to think that the Creator of the world wanted to sentence his creations to damnation and that he was just and kind in doing so.

There's nothing of that in the Buddha's teachings. True happiness is possible and comes from developing qualities you can be proud of. And it's something available to everybody.

No wonder, then, that when the Buddha passed away, people celebrated his life. The very first Buddhist festival was the Buddha's funeral. It was conducted with song and dance. People were planning to cremate the Buddha one day after he had passed away but they had so much fun singing and dancing in his honor that they delayed the funeral for another day, and then another day and then another day until finally it was a week after they'd had enough. And that became the template for Buddhist festivals ever since.

So it's good at the end of the day like this that we think about all the people that came because they *wanted* to be generous. That's why all those people came here. Some people wanted to fix food to hand out to everybody else who came. Other people came to be generous in other ways: generous with their time, generous with their money, generous with their strength.

And it's good to rejoice in their merit. The word for rejoicing in other people's good activities, *anumodana*, comes from the same root that *mudita* does: *mudi*. Other people do good and you appreciate their goodness.

Sometimes here at the monastery it's easy to feel overwhelmed when this wave of hundreds of people comes in. Here we are very quietly minding our own business and all of a sudden a huge crowd comes. It's as if a huge wave washed into the monastery and then just washed out.

One of the women who came in today noticed that the regular kitchen crew seemed to be cowering with the onslaught. And it's natural to feel that way. We've been living quietly, and all of a sudden everybody comes in and they're having a big party.

But it's also good to think, "Here are all these people coming to make merit, which is not just merit points. They wanted to do something that was good. They wanted to make themselves happy by doing something that was good."

You look at what so many people are doing in the world right now: trying to destroy the

rule of law, trying to make their fortune by taking advantage of poor people, killing other people—all the horrible things that are happening in the world—and yet here's a group of people who want to get together just to do good, in a harmless way. So it's good that we appreciate that, to encourage that in them and in ourselves.

That sense of encouragement and appreciation helps to dissolve the boundary we place around ourselves and our cherished ideas about how things should be done. The word *mudita* is related to another word, *mudu*, which means to be soft, to be gentle. We're malleable, which is a good trait—not in the sense that we would be malleable if someone came along and wanted to do good—but in the sense that we bend to the good in others.

When other people want to do good and they find happiness in being generous, that's something you want to encourage. The Buddha talked about the various motivations people might have for being generous. The lowest he said is desiring reward in a future lifetime. Even that has good rewards. But higher rewards come from simply enjoying being good. It makes you feel good to be generous.

That's something you want to encourage. Because for all we know, when the arahants look at our notions of what it means to do good, they might shake their heads and say we're not quite there yet. But they still appreciate and encourage and feel empathy for our desire to do what's good.

So it's good to think that there are people out there who take joy in supporting our practice. Of course, that places the onus on us to practice well, to make it a kind of practice that's worthy of other people's support.

So no matter how tired we may be at the end of the day, it's good to appreciate the fact that there are people out there who *want* to do good. There are people out there who find happiness in doing good. And that should make us happy, regardless of whether the support is directed to us or to other people who are practicing.

It's good to spread the happiness around. Because that's one of the fine things about the Buddha's teachings. It points out that happiness doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. In other words, it doesn't have to be the case that if you gain some happiness, somebody else has to lose, or if they gain, you have to lose. As the Buddha pointed out, there are some good forms of happiness where everybody benefits.

In terms of generosity, the person who gives benefits and the person who receives benefits.

The same with observing the precepts. The person who observes the precepts benefits and the person who's not killed, not stolen from, not lied to, doesn't have to deal with people who are getting drunk or engaging in illicit sex: That person benefits as well.

When we meditate and lessen our greed, anger, and delusion, we learn how not to be overcome by our moods and emotions. We realize that we have tools to use so that the emotion is not just a given that we have to accept, but is instead something we can learn to work with. We learn how to reshape the present moment in a skillful way inside our minds.

When we do this, we're not the only ones who benefit. The people we touch in our lives—touch with our thoughts, touch with our words, touch with our deeds—they benefit as well.

So this is why it's good to rejoice in the goodness of other people. It reminds us that true happiness dissolves barriers like this. True happiness spreads around. And it energizes our own practice to develop that quality of appreciation and empathetic joy.

In return, we can dedicate the merit of our practice to the people who support us.

There's a passage that appears several places in the Canon, where the Buddha points out that one of the valid motivations for wanting to become an arahant is that the gifts that are given to you will then bear great rewards for the people who gave them. In other words, becoming an arahant is not a selfish thing. You realize that a lot of other people are going to be able to benefit because you've cleansed your mind from greed, anger, and delusion.

So when you see other people doing good, even though it may not yet be the goodness of meditation, they do good by being generous, they do good by being virtuous. It should encourage you though to step up your own practice, to find joy in your practice as well.

Ajaan Suwat, when he first taught Westerners, was struck by how grim they were as meditators. He said it was because people here in the West come to meditation mainly without having gone through the training in generosity and the training in virtue that Buddhism gives. Or at least, they hadn't found the joy in being generous and virtuous. This is partly because the training in generosity and virtue we receive here is that generosity is forced on you, virtue is forced on you.

In the Buddha's teachings, though, generosity is taught with a sense of freedom. You're not obligated to be generous, but it's a good thing to be generous. And you learn how to do it with a sense of joy.

And the same with the precepts. Nobody forces you to take on the precepts. But they show you the way action works, the way karma and cause and effort work, and you develop the desire to be virtuous. This is what right effort is all about: It begins with generating desire. This is the right attitude to have toward the difficult parts of the practice. You train yourself to *want* to do them.

So the lesson we can learn from the people who came here today is that you want to learn how to find joy, even in doing hard things. Learn to see them as challenges. You're up for the challenge. You want to figure these things out. It's a skill to master and there's a joy that comes in mastering the skill.

This is why it's good to find happiness in the happiness of others. It's good to find happiness in the activities of others that are genuine causes of happiness, because that makes us want to create those genuine causes in ourselves as well.