

Muditā

The Buddha's Teaching on Unselfish Joy

Four essays by

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The awakened one, the Buddha, said:

Here, O, Monks, a disciple lets his mind pervade one quarter of the world with thoughts of unselfish joy, and so the second, and so the third, and so the fourth. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around, everywhere and equally, he continues to pervade with a heart of unselfish joy, abundant, grown great, measureless, without hostility or ill will.

Introduction: Is Unselfish Joy Practicable?

by Nyanaponika Thera

The virtue of *muditā*,¹ i.e., finding joy in the happiness and success of others, has not received sufficient attention either in expositions of Buddhist ethics, or in the meditative development of the four sublime states (*brahma-vihāra*), of which *muditā* is one. It was, therefore, thought desirable to compile this little book of essays and texts and to mention in this introduction a few supplementary features of this rather neglected subject.

It has been rightly stated that it is relatively easier for man to feel compassion or friendliness in situations which demand them, than to cherish a spontaneous feeling of shared joy, outside a narrow circle of one's family and friends. It mostly requires a deliberate effort to identify oneself with the joys and successes of others. Yet the capacity of doing so has psychological roots in man's nature which may be even deeper than his compassionate responses. There is firstly the fact that people *do* like to feel happy (with—or without—good reason) and would prefer it to the shared sadness of compassion. Man's gregarious nature (his "sociability") already gives him some familiarity with shared emotions and shared pleasure, though mostly on a much lower level than that of our present concern. There is also in man (and in some animals) not only an aggressive impulse, but also a natural bent towards mutual aid and co-operative action. Furthermore, there is the fact that happiness is infectious and an unselfish joy can easily grow out of it. Children readily respond by their own smiles and happy mood to smiling faces and happiness around them. Though children can be quite jealous and envious at times, they also can visibly enjoy it when they have made a playmate happy by a little gift and they are then quite pleased with themselves. Let parents and educators wisely encourage this potential in the child. Then this seed will quite naturally grow into a strong plant in the adolescent and the adult, maturing from impulsive and simple manifestations into the sublime state of unselfish joy (*muditā-brahmavihāra*). Thus, here too, the child may become "the father of a man." Such education towards joy with others should, of course, not be given in a dry didactic manner, but chiefly in a practical way by gently making the child observe, appreciate, and enjoy the happiness and success of others, and by trying himself to create a little joy in others. This can be aided by acquainting the child with examples of selfless lives and actions for his joyful admiration of them (and these, of course, should not be limited to Buddhist history). This feature should not be absent in Buddhist youth literature and schoolbooks, throughout all age groups. And this theme should be continued in Buddhist magazines and literature for adults.

Admittedly, the negative impulses in man, like aggression, envy, jealousy, etc., are much more in evidence than his positive tendencies towards communal service, mutual aid, unselfish joy, generous appreciation of the good qualities of his fellow-men, etc. Yet, as all these positive features are definitely found in man (though rarely developed), it is quite realistic to appeal to them, and activate and develop that potential by whatever means we can, in our personal relationships, in education, etc. "If it were impossible to cultivate the Good, I would not tell you to do so," said the Buddha. This is, indeed, a positive, optimistic assurance.

If this potential for unselfish joy is widely and methodically encouraged and developed, starting with the Buddhist child (or, for that matter, with any child) and continued with adults (individuals and Buddhist groups, including the Sangha), the seed of *muditā* can grow into a strong plant which will blossom forth and find fruition in many other virtues, as a kind of

¹ Usually rendered by unselfish, sympathetic, or altruistic joy.

beneficial “chain reaction”: magnanimity, tolerance, generosity (of both heart and purse), friendliness, and compassion. When unselfish joy grows, many noxious weeds in the human heart will die a natural death (or will, at least, shrink): jealousy and envy, ill will in various degrees and manifestations, cold-heartedness, miserliness (also in one’s concern for others), and so forth. Unselfish joy can, indeed, act as a powerful agent in releasing dormant forces of the Good in the human heart.

We know very well how envy and jealousy (the chief opponents of unselfish joy) can poison a man’s character as well as the social relationships on many levels of his life. They can paralyse the productivity of society, on governmental, professional, industrial, and commercial levels. Should not, therefore, all effort be made to cultivate their antidote, that is *muditā*?

Muditā will also vitalize and ennoble charitable and social work. While compassion (*karuṇā*) is, or should be, the inspiration for it, unselfish joy should be its boon companion. *Muditā* will prevent compassionate action from being marred by a condescending and patronising attitude which often repels or hurts the recipient. Also, when active compassion and unselfish joy go together, it will be less likely that works of service turn into dead routine performed indifferently. Indifference, listlessness, boredom (all nuances of the Pali term *arati*) are said to be the ‘distant enemies’ of *muditā*. They can be vanquished by an alliance of compassion and unselfish joy.

In him who gives and helps, the joy he finds in such action will enhance the blessings imparted by these wholesome deeds: unselfishness will become more and more natural to him, and such ethical unselfishness will help him towards a better appreciation and the final realisation of the Buddha’s central doctrine of No-self (*anattā*). He will also find it confirmed that he who is joyful in his heart will gain easier the serenity of a concentrated mind. These are, indeed, great blessings which the cultivation of joy with others’ happiness can bestow!

Nowadays, moral exhortations fall increasingly on deaf ears, whether they are motivated theologically or otherwise. Preaching morals with an admonishing finger is now widely resented and rejected. This fact worries greatly the churches and educators in the West. But there are ample indications that this may, more or less, happen also in the Buddhist countries of the East where ethics is still taught and preached in the old hortatory style and mostly in a rather stereotype and unimaginative way, with little reference to present-day moral and social problems. Hence modern youth will increasingly feel that such “moralizings” are not their concern. In fact within the frame of the Buddhist teachings which do not rely on the authoritarian commandments of God and church, but on man’s innate capacity for self-purification, such conventionalized presentation of ethics which chiefly relies on over-worked scriptural references, must appear quite incongruous and will prove increasingly ineffective for young and old alike. The need for reform in this field is urgent and of vital importance.

It was also with this situation in view, that the preceding observations have stressed the fact that a virtue like unselfish and altruistic joy has its natural roots in the human heart and can be of immediate benefit to the individual and society. In other words, the approach to a modern presentation of Buddhist ethics should be pragmatic and contemporary, enlivened by a genuine and warm-hearted human concern.

In this troubled world of ours, there are plenty of opportunities for thoughts and deeds of compassion; but there seem to be all too few for sharing in others’ joy. Hence it is necessary for us to *create* new opportunities for *unselfish* joy, by the active practise of loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), in deeds, words, and meditative thought. Yet, in a world that can never be without disappointments and failures, we must also arm ourselves with the *equanimity*

(*upekkhā*) to protect us from discouragement and feelings of frustration, should we encounter difficulties in our efforts to expand the realm of unselfish joy.

Unselfish Joy: A Neglected Virtue

by Natasha Jackson

From *Metta*, The Journal of the Buddhist Federation of Australia, Vol. 12, No. 2.

Muditā—unselfish or sympathetic joy—is one of the most neglected topics within the whole range of the Buddha Dhamma, probably because of its subtlety and of the wealth of nuances latent within it. Besides getting honourable mention within the context of The Four Divine Abidings (*brahma-vihāra*), few commentators have had much more to say about it apart from explaining that it means “sympathetic joy at the good fortune or success of others.” Only one notable writer, Conze (in *Buddhist Thought in India*), has had the insight to suggest that *muditā*, i.e. sympathy, is a pre-requisite of *mettā* (loving kindness) and of *karuṇā* (compassion). He thus names appreciation as one of the components of *muditā*. How right he is! For one cannot appreciate another person without seeing some good in him. If one does not appreciate the other person in the slightest degree, one would be hard put to experience joy at any stroke of good fortune or success that may befall him. To stimulate feelings of pleasure when, in fact, one feels none, would be the grossest of hypocrisy. Thus, *muditā* tacitly implies looking for the good in others and learning to recognise and admire what good there is.

Likewise, if one has a misanthropic view of mankind, regarding people as essentially evil and not worth being concerned about, one cannot, on the face of it, make much headway with any of The Four Divine Abidings. To have a sympathetic attitude towards human beings does not betoken an idealisation of man, but rather a realistic appraisal: that, though often in error and grievously at fault, man has, nevertheless, the potential to rise above his darkness and ignorance into the light of knowledge and even to undreamed of heights of Nirvana. Unless one has that measure of faith and confidence in mankind which the Buddha himself had, the practise of *mettā* and *karuṇā* is impossible. Thus, the broadest and most simple aspect of *muditā* as sympathy towards mankind, is also the most basic and important.

To regard *muditā* as being relevant only on certain relatively rare occasions when our friends and acquaintances come into a bonanza of some kind, is to fragment it and render it trivial, thereby missing the essential matrix. It should not be regarded as a matter of turning on a tap from which *muditā* will gush forth. There should be, in a certain sense, a quiet stream of sympathy and understanding flowing within the individual all the time. Though, to be sure, it does also mean developing the capacity to participate in another person’s finest hour and doing so spontaneously and sincerely. It is indeed a depressing fact that people are much more ready to sympathise with the misfortunes of others than to rejoice with them, a psychological quirk in people which wrung from Montaigne the ironic statement:

There is something altogether not too displeasing in the misfortunes of our friends.

Turning back to the essential matrix of *muditā* as sympathy towards mankind, faith in its potential for good and acceptance of its worthwhileness, this is precisely what is lacking in the world today. There is abroad a kind of cosmic gloom and, among some large sections of people, a feeling of defeatism. Probably the scene is largely coloured by the shadow of the hydrogen bomb and the various other horrible weapons of destruction which we know the nations are so busy in manufacturing. All in all, too much has happened in too short a time. More scientific and technological discoveries have been telescoped into the last fifty (or is it thirty?) years than

in the previous five hundred, and the total result is, at the moment, of dubious benefit to humanity as a whole, though of inestimable worth to the new millionaires who have managed to muscle in on the expanding economy. Electric and nuclear power, the spectacular forging ahead of communication, transport and industry have brought in their wake such negative by-products as over-population, more and more urbanisation into colossal, concentrated centres, such as Tokyo, New York, and London (and even Sydney and Melbourne), which, in turn, has given rise to other unfortunate results, both physical, and psychological: pollution from industrial waste, destruction of natural resources; individual de-socialisation, alienation, stress, as evidenced by the delinquency figures, the drift to drugs, character disorders, feelings of the meaninglessness of life, rise in crime, wanton destructiveness (a sure symptom of frustration and an un-lived life), despair, suicide. We know that such ills have always existed in society, and that probably they always will to some degree, but the frightening thing about the present situation is that they are insidiously increasing, in spite of the fact that many people, and especially the youth, have never had it so good. As it is, man feels more insecure than ever, more uncertain and lost. Viewing these symptoms, many people throughout the world have drawn the conclusion that man has arrived at the period of moral decline and disintegration and that humanity has become so depraved as to be hopelessly beyond redemption or recall. Such a view has always been characteristic of old age. We can, with a certain degree of amusement read the lines:

To whom do I speak today?

Brothers are evil,
Friends today are not of love.

To whom do I speak today?

Hearts are thievish,
Every man seizes his neighbour's goods.

To whom do I speak today?

The gentle man perishes,
The bold-faced goes everywhere...

To whom do I speak today?

When a man should arouse wrath by his evil conduct,
He stirs all men to mirth, although his iniquity is wicked...

The above admonition was composed in ancient Egypt during the Middle Kingdom, thousands of years ago, but the words are those which every generation hears.

There is a proneness in periods of crisis and transition, to conjure up in the mind a fantasy of a previous golden age, when people were of sterling worth and life was lived in accordance with the noble virtues. But, we may well ask, when was there such an age, and where? If people who harbour such quaint notions were to read history, they would realise that such a belief is just about as valid as that there ever was a time "when flowers bloomed for ever and sweethearts were always true," in the words of the old song. Ancient history and the Middle Ages are definitely OUT as far as morality is concerned. Without going so far back, merely a couple of hundred years, Smollett wrote this of eighteenth century England:

Commerce and manufacture flourished to such a degree of increase as has never been known in this island; but this advantage was attended with an irresistible tide of luxury and excess which flowed through all degrees of people, breaking down all the bounds of civil policy, and opening a way for licentiousness and immorality. The highways were infested with rapine and

assassination; the cities teemed with the brutal votaries of lewdness, intemperance, and profligacy.

In the nineteenth century (relatively recently), Wordsworth wrote:

The wealthiest man among us is the best:
No grandeur now in nature or in book
Delight us. Rapine, avarice, expense,
This is idolatry; and these we adore.
Plain living and high thinking are no more;
The homely beauty of the good old cause
Is gone, our fearful innocence,
And pure religion breathing household laws.

And James Hemming, a modern writer in his book *Individual Morality*:

Nineteenth-century London was frequently shaken by the destructive antics of informally organised hooligan gangs of young aristocrats. Those young roughs, having idled away their days, spent their nights beating people up, smashing up coffee stalls, alarming women and such like—the Bucks, the Corinthians, and all their imitators and hangers-on. Such bands were following, somewhat less cruelly, in the tradition of the nefarious Mohocks, who terrorised eighteenth-century London.

Sexual propriety? Quoting again from Hemming:

Brothels in the nineteenth century were big business, and, laws to forbid living on the immoral earnings of women, after several rebuffs in Parliament, did not reach the statute books till 1885.

But this was in England, the most progressive country in Europe. There is no evidence for believing that conditions were better on the Continent.

Understandably, twenty-five years after World War II, we are still appalled by the memory of the Nazi gas-chambers and the genocide which was their aim. This is by no means an isolated instance of genocide. History bears witness to similar incidents of destructive hate, culminating in mass murder. The Albigenses were wiped out to a man, and in 1572, at the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Eve, thousands of Huguenots were slaughtered, Pope Gregory XIII commanding bonfires to be lit and a medal to be struck in celebration! The idea that the mass destruction of one's ideological enemies is justified was already old in the days of the Old Testament. Saul was commanded:

Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.

All of the foregoing is not intended as apologetics justifying violence, bloodbaths, or individual or collective acts of immorality but merely to dispel the myth that there was ever a previous idyllic phase, when man could have said with some semblance of truth:

God's in His Heaven
And all's right with the world.

So, let us lay to rest forever the belief that in the past men were truer, kinder, more upright, and generally more worthy than they are today. Let us give that piece of romantic fiction the respectable funeral that it deserves. Our ancestors and predecessors were no better than we are, and we are certainly not worse than they were. In many respects we have improved considerably on the ways of our forbears. Actually, there has been a great deal of progress, considering that slavery hung on in England until 1772, in America till 1863, and serfdom in

Russia till 1861. And, in spite of the injustices and lack of moral scruples that still exist, there is more awareness, kindness, and sensitivity in many human societies than there has ever been before. Today when a national disaster of great magnitude occurs in a country, quite often the rest of the world rallies around and helps—perhaps not to the extent that it should, but nonetheless, to *some* extent. Such a broadening expansion of the human conscience would have been deemed a Utopian ideal in former times and impossible.

When acts of genocide were perpetrated in the past, people just accepted it: that was that, and there was nothing to be done about it. In our time, the whole world was revolted by the Nazi gas-chambers, eventually rose against the loathsome disease of Fascism and smashed it even though it took the combined might of the allied force five years of bitter conflict to do so.

However, in the past, without exception, whatever was inflicted upon a people, they mostly took. Today they don't—they protest, they demonstrate, they kick up a fuss. They have become articulate because they have realised that the greatest evil of all is not poverty, racialism, or war but powerlessness. Naturally, such an unexpected show of interest in public affairs is embarrassing to governments accustomed to an inert and docile population and there is some wistful talk by diehards of "the silent majority," but the present indications are that "the silent majority" is likely to become a silent minority in the face of such urgent problems as over-population, and destruction of natural resources, which, if left unchecked, will make the earth uninhabitable within a foreseeable future. However, against this general tendency is the lamentable fact that nothing was done about the rape of Tibet, and even now there are no large-scale or forceful protests being made about the genocide that is being practised in that country by the Chinese.

So, far from feeling dejected and dispirited about mankind, we should be hopeful and buoyant. There would be infinitely more cause for alarm and despair if people were as easy to manipulate as sheep or merely apathetic. The arguing and the restlessness throughout the world is about the principles on which we should run our lives, a struggle for values other than the profit motive, for ways and means to make possible greater co-operation between individuals and nations, and for moral maturity in coping with man's new powers and responsibilities. People discuss, argue, petition, protest, demonstrate because of their sympathy, compassion, and love for mankind. It is very difficult to differentiate between the three or to recognise precisely the line of demarcation where one ends and the other begins, because they are illimitable. There are, of course, others who see in these conflicts only hatred but this view is hardly tenable because it is much easier and much more comfortable to remain uninvolved, drifting with the current, nor swimming against it.

The Ven. Nyanaponika has summed up the interdependence of the Four Divine Abidings in the following quotation:

Love imparts to equanimity its selflessness, its boundless nature and even its fervour...

Compassion guards equanimity from falling into cold indifference and keeps it from indolent or selfish isolation. Until equanimity has reached perfection, compassion urges it to enter again and again into the battlefields of the world.

Sympathetic joy gives to equanimity the mild serenity that softens its stern appearance. It is the divine smile on the face of the Enlightened One.

—From *The Four Sublime States* in *The Wheel* No. 6.

Muditā

by C.F. Knight

From *Metta*, Vol. 12, No. 2

A feature of the Buddha-Dhamma is cognizance of the pairs of opposites in the training to get beyond them. The Buddha's method of mental training and development was to teach by first defining unwholesome or unskillful thoughts, words, and deeds, or practises which characterise many of man's proclivities, and then to propound their opposites of a wholesome or skillful nature as an achievement to be sought after for the abolition of them both, eventually, when even the good must be left behind as well as the evil; when even the Raft of Dhamma is to be abandoned—*after* crossing the flood of saṃsāra. The trouble with so many of the unwise is their desire to abandon the Raft of Dhamma *before* reaching the further shore. The Buddha's method of expounding the negative and the positive, the passive, and the dynamic aspects of behaviour, in both abstract and concrete terms, is obviously to create awareness of what is to be sought after and nurtured.

The basic ignorance featured in Buddhism is not so much a rejection of the truth as it is a failure to perceive it. It is, as it were, a "blind spot" in our perception akin to the physical damage of a section of the brain or the nervous system which results in impaired vision or locomotion. In other words, the depth of our ignorance may be measured by our lack of consciousness of it.

This is why it is so necessary that we should see and recognise our failings and shortcomings if we are to eradicate them. It is also important that we should be mindful of "the good that has arisen," and to foster and develop it to the point of perfection. To realise our imperfections is the beginning of wisdom—the first light to shine on the darkness of our ignorance. While we are blissfully unaware of unwholesome states of mind within ourselves, such states will continue to flourish, and their roots will dig deeper into our very being. Just so too, in our relationships with our fellow men, the unperceived evils will be repeated unconsciously and unrecognised, building up a cumulative unhappy future for us under the retributive causal law of karma.

In dealing with muditā or altruistic joy, we are once more to some extent frustrated with the inadequacy of translations for "brahma-vihāra" or "*appamaññā*"—the former as "sublime or divine abode," and the latter as "boundless state." To reduce either of these terms to modern idiom is difficult. The four characteristics grouped under these terms are: loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity, extended to universal application. In their perfection they are "sublime" and "boundless," and to be "dwelt in" as one speaks of "dwelling in Peace," so we will leave it at that.

As with all perfections, these four desirable characteristics are the antidotes to the poisons of their opposite imperfections, and here is where the recognition of their opposites is apposite. Less has been said or written of muditā than of the other three of these four characteristics, perhaps, again, because of its somewhat clumsy translation. While loving kindness and compassion are objective, reaching out to all sentient beings, muditā and equanimity are subjective, or personal in their application.

It may seem strange at first, until we critically examine the source, to speak of either selfish or unselfish joy. Joy is an emotional ecstasy arising from pleasure. It is something intensely personal. While we can and do share our pleasures to some extent with others, the resultant

impact of them on various personalities will vary as widely as the personalities. At times what may give rise to rapturous joy in us, when shared, may give rise to positive aversion in another.

A pertinent example of this would be the reactionary effect of certain music on people of differing tastes. While it is not uncommon for some of the modern generation to literally swoon in ecstasy under the influence of the combination of discordant and dissonant notes and chords, others find them anything but entertaining or pleasurable. Here we have what might be termed “selfish joy” on the part of the participants, by those who have to suffer most unwilling participation. For all that, within the group enjoying it, there is a reciprocity of delight, happiness, and rapture between the entertainers and the entertained. Superficially, then, we could say it is not the phenomenon of joy itself, that is either selfish or altruistic by nature, but that time, place, and circumstance must all be considered in relation one to the others.

However, to bring *muditā* within the ambit of the Buddha-Dhamma we need to go deeper into the necessity for cultivating this perfection. What are the opposites to be eliminated by its cultivation?

We never tire of asserting the interdependence of every aspect of the Buddha-Dhamma, no matter which particular facet is being discussed. We have already stated that ignorance is failure of perception, and it is true that greed and hatred do arise through the non-perception of their source and subsequent results; that basically craving born of ignorance is the culprit, and that the purpose of the Buddha-Dhamma is to eliminate craving. It is craving that gives rise to jealousy, envy, covetousness, avarice, and greed in all of its manifestations. Here it is that *muditā* when practised and developed becomes a “sublime” and “boundless” state of mind to be “dwelt in” as a corrective characteristic for their removal.

One of the most frequently used similes by the Buddha was that of fire. At times it was the destructive quality of fire that was likened to the destructive nature of the passions. At other times it was the ardent nature of fire that was to be emulated in the pursuance of the path to holiness. In its uncontrolled existence fire is a destructive danger. Under control it is one of man’s greatest boons and blessings. In either case it was a motivating force to be reckoned with, at all times active, potent, and energetic.

The three roots of evil—greed, hatred, and delusion—are also known as “the three fires.” On one occasion the Buddha and his band of monks were for the time staying on Gaya Head, a mountain near the city of Gaya. From their elevated position they watched one of the great fires that from time to time ravaged the countryside. This inspired what is known as “The Fire Sermon,” which is the third recorded discourse delivered by the Buddha subsequent to his Enlightenment, and at the beginning of his long ministry. To the Buddha, the world of *saṃsāra* was like the flaming plains below, “Everything is burning,” said the Buddha, “burning with the fire of passion, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of stupidity.” (Vin I 34)

It is these three fires that give rise to jealousy, envy, covetousness, avarice, and greed. The craving for possessions, the craving for sensual pleasures, the begrudged success of others, the hatred that is begotten by the gains of others, the odious comparison of greater status compared with our humble circumstances, these are the “fires” that burn within us to our undoing.

It is now evident why *muditā* is such an important characteristic to be cultivated. When we can view the success of others with the same equanimity, and to the same extent, as we would extend *mettā* and *karuṇā*—loving kindness and compassion—to those who suffer grief and distress, sadness and tribulation, sorrow and mourning, then we are beginning to exercise *muditā*, and are in the process of eradicating greed and craving. Developed still further, we can reach the stage of sharing with others their joy of possession, their financial or social successes, their elevation to positions of civic or national importance, or their receipt of titles and

honourifics. In such a manner *muditā* is counteractive to conceits of all kinds, and its growth and development checks craving's grip.

Until we have developed this subjective characteristic within ourselves how can we develop the objective characteristics of *mettā* and *karuṇā*? The accumulated possessions, results of our greed, may give us the pleasure and the happiness of the miser gloating over his hoard of gold. The happiness born of shared pleasures, shared love, shared possessions, shared delights in another's success, will surpass the meagre selfish happiness of the miser.

Unselfish joy multiplies in ratio to the extension of its application, quite apart from its purifying effect on our own lives.

In Ñānamoli's translation of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* he uses "gladness" for *muditā*, with the footnote: "Muditā—gladness—as one of the divine abidings is always used in the sense of gladness at others' success." Buddhaghosa illustrates this by saying: "On seeing or hearing about a dear person being happy cheerful and glad, gladness can be aroused thus: 'This being is indeed glad. How good! How excellent!' Just as he would be glad on seeing a dear and beloved person, so he pervades all being with gladness."

In "The Analysis of the Sixfold Sense-Field" (MN 137) the Buddha speaks of the six joys connected with renunciation. While such joys are subjective by nature, they are devoid of any taint of egoistic craving that could give rise to the cankers of jealousy, envy, covetousness, or greed. These joys arise on the realisation of the impermanence of material shapes, sounds, smells, flavours, touches, and mental states, and the renunciation of attachment to them.

The Nature and Implications of Muditā

by L.R. Oates

From *Metta*, Vol. 12, No. 2

Altruistic joy is one of the four “sublime states” of mind—friendliness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity—which together form one related group among the various spiritual or physical exercises generally described as meditation or contemplation. These all have as their common aim the attainment of mental calm or equanimity, which is intended in turn to foster the development of liberating insight. “A still mind, like still water, yields a clear reflection of what is before it.” This is why this particular series ends with equanimity, but the route by which it is attained in this case is different from that traversed for the most of the other themes used as a focus for concentration.

The others, such as meditation on the breath, on death, on visual objects (*kasīṇa*), or on the Buddha, the Doctrine, and the Order of the Enlightened One, are entirely concerned with the self-cultivation of the meditator. Most of these themes are abstract or inanimate, while the Buddha and the Order (in the strict sense applicable here) have transcended any power of ours to help or hinder them. So the only person concerned or affected in these forms of training is the meditator. It was doubtless to encourage those wrestling by these means with their own inner weakness or conflicts that the following verse of the Dhammapada was uttered:

Let no one neglect his own task for the sake of another’s however great; let him, after he has discerned his own task, devote himself to his task. (Dhṛp 166)

But if this were the whole story it would be difficult for such self-cultivation to serve in turn as a basis for the freedom from bondage to the self-concept, which is the main characteristic of the development of insight. Indeed, it was the recognition of the dangers of self-preoccupation, or self-righteousness, liable to arise in these often acute struggles for self-discipline, that impelled the more extreme exponents of the Pure Land school of Buddhism to abandon self-cultivation in favour of the less exacting path of reliance on the Buddha’s transforming grace. But the cultivation of the “sublime states” represents a less radical form of compensation which, while compatible with other practises, can help to broaden the meditator’s perspective in order to achieve a mode of equanimity which does not imply withdrawal into oneself or indifference to others.

The starting point here, of course, is on the ethical plane in the practise of generosity in practical ways (*dāna*) which, in order to become interiorized and thereby go beyond mere outward form, must be grounded in an attitude of friendliness (*mettā*) for all beings without distinction. Since this outlook implies the recognition that all beings are subject to joys and sorrows just as we are, it finds a natural development in sympathy—that is to say, compassion—for their sorrows and joy in their blessings.

The former of these seems much the easier to achieve, since it is possible to feel compassion for suffering even in the absence of any positive friendliness for the sufferer, whereas it is only possible to share genuinely in another’s joy if there is some element of true affection or friendliness present. This is perhaps why, on a much lower level of sensitivity, the reporting of news seems so heavily concentrated on the side of crimes and disasters, which are perhaps felt

more likely to arouse interest than happier events and deeds. If the latter arouse any interest at all, it is likely to be spiced with envy or cynicism.

Not only does genuine joy in the prosperity of others require some element of affection; it requires this to be of a quite high order. A great deal of what passes for love is really aimed at mere emotional gratification on the part of the lover, for whom the "beloved" is little more than a prop for acting out some drama satisfying a purely subjective need—the beloved's own needs being treated less seriously. Indeed, even apart from outright commercialization, a certain habit of bargaining with affections seems remarkably widespread, when one begins to take notice of it.

In the light of this, the ability to feel a genuine joy in another's happiness, equal to one's satisfaction with one's own, represents a truly "sublime state." So it is not surprising that in the history of Buddhism, which cultivated this attitude systematically, there arose an aspiration to share with others not only one's material resources, but the spiritual resources described as merit. This aspiration follows naturally enough from the basic theory as to what merit is. Merit is the accumulation of tendencies resulting from enlightened deeds which, according to the law of moral causation (the law of karma), conduce to the future happiness of the doer.

Here he is joyful, hereafter he is joyful, in both worlds the well-doer is joyful. "I have done good" is the thought that make him happy. Still greater is his joy when he goes to states of bliss.

If the doer is still in a state where only purely personal forms of satisfaction are possible, the fruits of merit can only take this form. But suppose he loves even one being so much that, if that being is in some state of deprivation, he can only be made happy by the improvement of that being's lot, then the merit which is due to him can only take effect by benefiting him through that other's welfare. The wider his altruism expands, so that purely personal gratifications no longer adequately satisfy him, the wider must be the range of the benefit which his own merit would need to bring to others if it is to fulfil its defined function of bringing happiness to him. At the same time, his altruistic tendencies will ensure that he will have vastly more merit due to him, so his resources will tend to become commensurate with the aspirations, for example, of Śāntideva, when he says:

May I be an alleviator of the sorrows of all beings and a divine medicine to those afflicted by disease. May I be the benefactor and bringer of peace to them until all their bodily ailments and mental tribulations are at the end.

The principle of the sharing or transference of merit, so much stressed in Mahayana Buddhism (though not unknown in Theravadin practises) is sometimes objected to by Western Buddhists because of a superficial resemblance to the Christian doctrine of atonement, which they have rejected. But the principles entailed are not really identical, since the Christian doctrine is based on an essential distinction between the roles of the Creator and the created, while the Buddhist sharing of merit arises from a combination of the definition of merit and of the nature of altruistic joy.

It has a further importance too, in that it anticipates the emancipation to be derived from insight into the emptiness of the self-concept, that is to say, awakening to the emptiness of the concepts "I" and "mine" in terms of ultimate truth. On this level, the description "mine" as applied to merit will finally be seen to be as inapplicable as in the case of any other assumed possession. This was already explicitly set out in one of the Buddha's earliest discourses, "The Marks of the Not-self," in which he taught his first five disciples to contemplate each of the five components of personality in the terms: "This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self." The fourth of these components is the aggregate of mental tendencies or activities, which include merit and demerit. Even on a lower plane than that of perfect insight, it can be seen that our deeds are not exclusively ours, because no one acts in absolute isolation, so that every act

involves some stimulus or opportunity arising from activity of others. On the other hand, a too persistent insistence on the individual nature of merit can only impede the ultimate awakening to the Not-self.

This has some bearing, too, on the reason why friendliness, compassion, and altruistic joy are regarded as leading to an equanimity which does not imply an indifference to the joys and sorrows of others. In the absence of such a conclusion, the alternate sharing of joys and sorrows, like these emotions arising on one's own account, would be as endless as the world-cycles which it is the Buddhist aspiration to transcend. The goal of the "divine states" is that the aspirant, who in process achieves the role of a Bodhisattva in a two-way empathy with others by his perfect sharing of their joys and sorrows, is in a position to radiate to them stability, which in turn will help them to be less subject to their own emotional vicissitudes. In this way, he and they are liberated together, each sustaining the other.

The Meditative Development of Unselfish Joy

by Ven. Buddhaghosa (fifth-century)

Excerpted from *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*

One who begins the development of unselfish joy should not start with dearly beloved person, a neutral person or hostile person. For it is not the mere fact that a person is dearly beloved, which makes him an immediate cause of developing unselfish joy, and still less so neutral or hostile person. Persons of the opposite sex and those who are dead are not suitable subjects for this meditation.

A very close friend, however, can be a suitable subject. One who is called in the commentaries an affectionate companion; for he is always in a joyous mood: he laughs first and speaks afterwards. He should be the first to be pervaded with unselfish joy. Or on seeing or hearing about a dear person being happy, cheerful, and joyous, unselfish joy can be aroused thus: "This being, verily, is happy! How good, how excellent!" For this is what is referred to in the Vibhaṅga: "And how does a bhikkhu dwell pervading one direction with his heart imbued with unselfish joy? Just as he would be joyful on seeing a dear and beloved person, so he pervades all being with unselfish joy" (Vibhaṅga 274).

But if his affectionate friend or the dear person was happy in the past but is now unlucky and unfortunate, then unselfish joy can still be aroused by remembering his past happiness; or by anticipating that he will be happy and successful again in the future.

Having thus aroused unselfish joy with respect to a dear person, the meditator can then direct it towards a neutral one, and after that towards a hostile one.

But if resentment towards the hostile one arises in him, he should make it subside in the same way as described under the exposition of loving kindness.

He should then break down the barriers by means of impartiality towards the four, that is, towards these three and himself. And by cultivating the sign (or after-image, obtained in concentration), developing and repeatedly practising it, he should increase the absorption to triple or (according to the Abhidhamma division) quadruple jhāna.

Next, the versatility (in this meditation) should be understood in the same way as stated under loving kindness. It consists in:

(a) *Unspecified pervasion in these five ways:*

"May all beings... all breathing things... all creatures... all persons... all those who have a personality be free from enmity, affliction, and anxiety, and live happily!"

(b) *Specified pervasion in these seven ways:*

"May all women... all men... all Noble Ones... all not Noble Ones... all deities... all human beings... all in states of misery (in lower worlds) be free from enmity, etc."

(c) *Directional pervasion in these ten ways:*

"May all beings (all breathing things, etc.; all women, etc.) in the eastern direction... in the western direction... northern... southern direction... in the intermediate eastern, western,

northern, and southern direction... in the downward direction... in the upward direction be free from enmity, etc.”

This versatility is successful only in one whose mind has reached absorption (*jhāna*).

When this meditator develops the mind-deliverance of unselfish joy through any of these kinds of absorption he obtains these eleven advantages: he sleeps in comfort, wakes in comfort, and dreams no evil dreams, he is dear to human beings, dear to non-human beings, deities guard him, fire and poison and weapons do not affect him, his mind is easily concentrated, the expression of his face is serene, he dies unconfused, if he penetrates no higher he will be reborn in the Brahma World (A v 342).

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