

1. Self-clinging and Sympathetic Joy

Possibly the biggest challenge in Buddhist practice is to work to loosen, and maybe eventually even to leave behind, our obsessive clinging to our idea of 'self'. This self-clinging is entirely natural (and therefore not something to feel guilty about), and is probably a necessary result of our long evolutionary process. However, self-clinging is also the ultimate root of our mental suffering – but it can certainly be weakened by acts of positivity and kindness, to both ourselves and others. This is a very helpful way to think about the *mettā bhāvanā* and the other *brahma vihāra* meditations.

As we've already said, each of these meditations is the natural response of *mettā* to particular circumstances. Just as *karuṇā* is the response of *mettā* to suffering in others, *muditā* is the response of *mettā* to their happiness or joy. It's been described as 'taking delight in others' happiness and good qualities', but it's usually just translated as 'sympathetic joy'. If *karuṇā* involves the desire to leap up to help a person, *muditā* involves wanting to celebrate that person, to rejoice in them, to tell them how much you appreciate them and their good qualities. In effect, *muditā* has two main objects: somebody's happiness, and also their positive qualities. It's worth remembering that happiness is different from pleasure, although we can easily over-identify happiness with pleasure. What we could call 'real happiness' arises from who and what we are – from the skilful mental states that we've cultivated – whereas pleasure is merely a fruit of previous actions. It is the former to which we can most easily respond with *muditā*.

2. The *Muditā Bhāvanā*

The formal steps of this latest *brahma vihāra* meditation will be covered in the class itself, but here we set out some thoughts as to how it can best be approached. As in the *karuṇā bhāvanā*, we dwell in *mettā* for a time to begin with. Then, in each step we either allow our *mettā* to touch the appropriate person's happiness, or we reflect upon that person's good qualities. As we do this, the *mettā* will change into *muditā*, which has a different tone. If we get lost, we come back to *mettā* again and then return to dwelling upon the relevant person's happiness, or on their good qualities.

We should be watching out for less helpful responses that we might feel to others people's joy. The far enemy of *muditā* is **resentment** or **envy**. These tendencies often take the form of an unfavourable comparison between oneself and another person – we feel that we are less because they seem to have more. A good antidote is to come back to and dwell in

mettā, deepen our appreciation for our own qualities and, in life in general, to be more open to others rejoicing in us.

There are two near enemies of *muditā*. The first is **vicarious satisfaction**. This comes about when you appreciate a person's good qualities because those qualities reflect well upon your association with them. In other words, you believe that their qualities are somehow an expression of your own qualities by extension. For example, you might rejoice in how the person is getting on well at meditation, especially since you gave them some tips on how to take their meditation deeper! In vicarious satisfaction you sit in the warm glow of thinking that their good qualities are thanks to you. The second near enemy is **flattery**, which is insincere praise of a person with the intention of getting them to like you more, or getting something from them. It might even be that you think well of them in the hope that they will think well of you in return.

To counteract both vicarious satisfaction and flattery, we need to pay closer attention to the actual person, to try to appreciate what their experience of happiness and good fortune is really like. We need to return to actual, genuine appreciation of that person. One other pitfall to look out for is simply dwelling passively in pleasant feelings about a person – instead, we want to be actively moved to rejoice in them. As with *karuṇā*, *muditā* is a dynamic feeling, a volition, a positive desire to rejoice in a person. We may know we're experiencing strong *muditā* when we want to get up off the cushions and congratulate the person concerned, or rejoice in them to others!

3. Including Ourselves in a Compassionate Response

As we've already seen, dwelling on the suffering of the world may easily lead us into 'horrified anxiety', as we've described this painful state. To put this in context, it's really important to remember, at all times, that we can't have *any* beneficial effect on the world without first looking after ourselves. This, by extension means that we need to build and maintain a strong foundation of *mettā* (and *karuṇā* and *muditā*) towards ourselves, just as much as we extend those same intentions to the people in the other 'stages' of meditation.

4. The Practice of 'Rejoicing in Merits'

A very simple, but also very effective, practical way of developing *muditā* in everyday life is the activity Buddhists call 'rejoicing in merits'. This can be done on a special occasion – for example somebody's birthday – but also, if you feel so inclined, informally and at any time that seems appropriate. All you need to do is to tell a person that you appreciate exactly what qualities they have that make you feel that way. It doesn't need to be sentimental – just 'telling it like it is' is the most effective way. It can be done one-to-one or in public, and it can be face-to-face (probably best of all), but also in writing. If you've never done it, it may seem a little strange at first, both to you and the fortunate person in whom you're rejoicing. However, it's a powerfully positive thing to do – so why not just try it!