

***Muditā*: Sharing in Joy**

A Chapter from Ajahn Sucitto's book, *Meditation: The Way of Awakening*

Muditā means 'appreciative (or empathic) joy.' It's the happiness that arises from appreciating other people's (or one's own) good fortune. It comes from acknowledging the basic happiness, the freedom from pain, fear or grief that all beings seek. It can be sensed as the buoyancy that occurs when we touch into well-being or whenever a difficulty ceases – even temporarily.

This quality, which flows into appreciation, contentment and gratitude, is tremendously nourishing. It is however, something we lose contact with. Often we're dwelling in the future with desire or anxiety, or in the past...and even in the present, the mind snags on what we find irritating, and is programmed to imagine how much better things could be than they are right now. It takes an effort to imagine how much worse things could be! This critical program motivates us in terms of discovery and invention, but it's numb to appreciation and contentment. Without the balance of being able to appreciate the good fortune, the relief from pain and distress that we have right now, the mind gets stuck with the inner critic, the voice of complaint and negativity. This faultfinding negativity can dog everything we do and snipe at other people as well. We don't see the good things that we/they do, or we see our own or others' unskilful actions as some kind of permanent identity. When this critic (called *āraṭi* in Buddhism) takes over, cynicism, jealousy and more subtly, indifference, also grow. They make our hearts gloomy, petty and contracted. And even when it's just that sense of resignation, *āraṭi* closes down access to well-being and joy.

It's good to consider what gets in the way of this natural joy. Factors such as perfectionism, performance drive and goal orientation will have the *āraṭi* side effect unless they're balanced with appreciation. Meditation itself gets tense when we expect results and neglect a sense of appreciation. So it's important to cultivate a sense of respect for the aspiration and commitment that gets us to meditate in the first place. I generally advise meditators to reflect and dwell on the goodness that is already there in terms of ethical sensitivity and integrity, and let the heart fill with that at the beginning of a meditation session. Effort requires nourishment: it's the common sense measure of putting gas in the tank when setting out on a journey.

As with the other bases of kindness and empathy, once we put aside the differences in personality and status, it's easy to refer to other people as much the same as ourselves. We sympathize with their suffering and shortcomings, and are gladdened by their happiness and goodness. So it's skilful to keep returning to the basics in oneself and others, to attune to the specific presence of people and things without adding comparisons of self with others or past with future.

We can let go of the tendency to judge in terms of who deserves what, and how things should be: who knows? And where does happiness arise from – in ourselves and in others? It's through

appreciation, not through accountancy – and appreciation of our own humanity is something that a downturn of fortune doesn't deprive of us of. So when we cultivate *muditā*, it's based not on who deserves what, but on the wish that we or others get in touch with our innate goodness. It also causes self-improvement: whoever is more appreciative is going to be more contented, less demanding and irritable. As a consequence, they're going to act a lot more skilfully.

When we attune to a fundamental sense of being, rather than just our personality or our current concerns, we can be simply open and present. It's through this, rather than adding a whole list of approvals, that we arrive quite naturally at appreciative joy.

Cultivate Appreciation for Oneself

While sitting, standing, walking or reclining, cultivate appreciation with reference to yourself...

Centre your awareness in your body, being aware of the general form, the central core and the breathing. Explore the relatedness of all this: the whole body being an interplay between the light flow of breathing and the firm stability of the body's mass. Acknowledge the inner space of the body and the outer space around it, with the breathing connecting the two – now reaching out, now reaching in...a sharing sense.

Every few moments a breath comes to be. Every few moments the shared air enters, permeates, saturates the body. Every few moments the body empties its breath into the shared air. Let yourself be held in this interplay.

Finer even than breath, each moment mind comes to be. Thoughts, attention, moods well up and move out into the silence. Each moment, something is received – a sight, sound, touch or intuition – some with purpose, some without; some with reaction, some with the resonance of awareness. Sense the present vibrancy.

Acknowledge the conscious system that you are – living from one moment to the next. Who or what is that? Cultivate a sense of wonder and then of thankfulness. Dwell with that for a while.

Consider your own body, the parents whose genes established it and the many life forms that sustain it. Allow your mood to be part of that sustenance by appreciating your body. In doing that, attune to and enjoy the participation which that sense affords.

Enjoy, with mindful awareness rather than thoughts, your own presence. Attune to the specific uniqueness of how that is right now. Appreciate your presence. Acknowledge any need for boundaries, such as the wish to be private or unnoticed: appreciate that protective function but check now whether there is a need for defence. Notice how the defended sense affects your body. If the present space around your body, chest, throat, etc. is safe...can the body relax? Work on laying a boundary aside, temporarily. Feel a little freer.

Soften the impulse to do or be something special. All that you need right now is here.

Allow yourself to feel open and keep acknowledging the nourishment that the air is bringing you, the steadiness of the ground beneath and the willing receptivity of the knowing space that wraps around you. Feel the steady support of your own bodily centre.

Enrich this mood with reference to wholesome actions that you have done or kindly aspirations that you have, or ongoing intentions for supporting others. These recollections, which the contracted mind obscures, may now be more apparent. Give yourself time to recollect, sense and get a feeling for them. Where does this ethical and compassionate sensitivity arise from now? Where is the source of the great heart?

Practise Extending Appreciation to Others

Recollect an occasion when you felt that your presence was enjoyed by another person. Recall how that felt, return to that feeling and try to stay within that in the present.

Acknowledge that you're part of a creation in which beings live with a consciousness turned towards looking after and protecting themselves. Recognize in all of them the vitality that rises up, the wish to be alive that living beings have. Attune to the well-being that the resources of the planet bring. Join in their interest that this well-being not be parted from them.

While staying centred, practise introducing the perception of the actions and happiness of others. Sense the joy that arises when a person meets again a dear friend or a relative that they have been separated from. Attune to the happiness that occurs when someone attains a goal that they had been working for. Acknowledge that it does not lessen you. Stay connected to the arising of the happiness that you feel they have.

Work through the perceptions of those one feels are worthy of good fortune, then advantaged, then privileged. Consider them as happy. Stay connected to your own ability to empathize when you bring to mind people who have greater good fortune than yourself. Stay connected to the sense of happiness but let go of whose it is.

Introduce the perceptions of people who are worthy and who have little good fortune, but not much suffering. Attune to the inner strength and contentment that they may have.

Acknowledge people living in hardship who have to develop intelligence to bring themselves to safety and well-being. Appreciate the skills and strengths that living beings develop in order to sustain life. Remember the happiness that arises when one comes out of deprivation or trouble and into comfort. May all beings find their way out of suffering!

Introduce the perception of people who experience a lot of suffering. Attune to the simplicity of the relief related to any lessening of suffering, and to the ability for people, even in states of deprivation, to bear with their suffering and care for their families or friends. As you recognize this fundamental strength, also appreciate its support in your life and in that of others.

The obvious difficulties associated with *muditā* are faultfinding, jealousy and indifference. With all of these, one thing that helps is to acknowledge how unpleasant these make our own minds and hearts. Secondly, to acknowledge that these all stem from a particular focus – they are not objective truth. Focus, or attention, is a conditioned factor and in all these cases it isn't bearing the whole picture in mind. With indifference, attention doesn't even extend very far. It only takes a glimpse and omits any reference to the heart of conscience and concern. So when that mode prevails, it may be that we're just overloaded with concerns or defending ourselves against being affected. Then it's good to take time to recollect one's own well-being, how one feels right now.

When attention goes into fault finding, maybe we've lost touch with the context or the specific character of the person that we're finding fault with. Maybe their actions were clumsy, or that piece of language felt offensive...but perhaps she/he/I was acting in haste or from a reflex...or maybe that's as good as we could get it right now. How can we help someone or ourselves improve? In any case, we should acknowledge their good side and speak to that good side about the concerns we feel. A good person will want to know where they're short of the mark or letting themselves and others down. The first step then is to get in touch with 'the good person.' That's what *muditā* is about.

With jealousy, the point to bear in mind is that other people's good fortune needn't diminish your own well-being. If you allow it to, you'll always be in trouble. Guard the well-being of an appreciative and contented heart.

A less apparent difficulty is that one gets too excited with *muditā*. Contemplate the snatchy quality of excitement and how it reduces clarity, balance and mindfulness. Rest back a little.

If this form doesn't help you...

You may benefit from taking interest in the natural world. Explore just for the sense of interest and discovery. Take up exercise that puts you in touch with how the body works. From there you may find interest in observing and being part of group activities where some of that enjoyment comes from the shared sense – trekking, a hobby and so on. Consider that no matter who or what else seems to be the source of that happiness, that feeling is arising in your mind or heart. Notice where and how that is.

Settle into and contemplate the quality of *muditā*:

Move from considering any object or person into the awareness that attunes to the joy of sharing. Where does this ethical and compassionate sensitivity arise from now? Where is this great heart?

Contemplate that sense, letting the mind take in the boundlessness of that. Acknowledge that dualities of 'you', 'me' and 'how he/she was,' are a play of consciousness. Sense the separateness of beings to be like currents in the wind that give the wind its manifest qualities. Trust, or be thankful for, that wind.

After an appropriate period of time, return to the interplay of the breath, and allow your sense of yourself to get reestablished. Welcome this as you would a good friend coming home from a long journey.