

Practical Joy

The awakened one, the Buddha, said:

Here, one lets one's 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, one continues to pervade with a heart of unselfish joy, abundant, grown great, measureless, without hostility or ill-will.

Unselfish Joy
- Nyanaponika Thera

The virtue of *mudita* [*mudita*], [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-vihara* [*brahma-vihaara*]), of which *mudita* 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 (*mudita-brahmavihara*). 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 *mudita* can grow into a strong plant which will blossom forth and find fruition in many other virtues, as a kind of 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 paralyze the productivity of society, on governmental, professional, industrial, and commercial levels. Should not, therefore, all effort be made to cultivate their antidote, that is mudita?

Mudita will also vitalize and ennoble charitable and social work. While compassion (karuna [karu. naa]) is, or should be, the inspiration for it, unselfish joy should be its boon companion. Mudita will prevent compassionate action from being marred by a condescending and patronizing 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 mudita. 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 realization of the Buddha's central doctrine of No-self (anatta [anattaa]). 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! 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 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 practice of loving-kindness (metta [mettaa]) and compassion (karuna), in deeds, words, and meditative thought. Yet, in a world that

can never be without disappointments and failures, we must also connect ourselves with the equanimity (upekkha [upekkhaa]) to give us strength in the face of discouragement and feelings of frustration, should we encounter difficulties in our efforts to expand the realm of unselfish joy.