

Marcela Clavijo  
*Facing Fear*  
Week Four: “The Practice of Joy”  
August 28, 2017



We've come to the fourth and final piece in our series on the four immeasurables. We've been talking about each immeasurable [in past weeks]. We began with equanimity, then we moved onto lovingkindness, and last week we spoke about and practiced compassion. These practices help us develop positive qualities and help us to overcome different types of fear. Equanimity helps us overcome fear generated by our likes and dislikes. Lovingkindness helps us overcome our fear of relating to people with intimacy, warmth, and closeness, and it also helps us overcome our fear of loneliness and isolation.

Last week [we discussed] how compassion can help us overcome the fear of getting our hands dirty when faced with people that are suffering or when something is going on in our community or on the planet. [We discussed] how it can help us overcome our fear of getting involved or getting too close with people when they're not feeling perfect, happy and peppy. In other words, they can help us to be more equanimous around people who are suffering. Now, we begin to see how these immeasurables are interrelated. We can practice one, but if we have equanimity, we'll be able to have lovingkindness and compassion towards others. If we develop lovingkindness toward all sentient beings, we already have equanimity and then we'll be moved to want to help them with their suffering. Or, if we have compassion towards beings, we will automatically have a sense of love and caring concern for others that we can extend toward all sentient beings.

Another wonderful feature about the four immeasurables is that when they're combined with wisdom—with an understanding of cause and effect, karma, the four noble truths, and emptiness—it is said that these practices can bring about nirvana. We can see how this can have a very deep effect in our life today, down the line, and in our spiritual development throughout time.

One way that we can focus on practicing this is to think about *this* life. It's very difficult for some of us to conceive of past births or future births. Traditionally, it is said that dharma practice

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really begins when we start to think beyond this life. In fact, in the Sakya teachings, and I am a Sakya practitioner, we have a teaching called "parting from the four attachments." The first line is: "If you are attached to this life, you really don't have a true dharma practice." What that means is that if that all of our practices only have to do with this life, it'll help this life but, by definition, it isn't true dharma. When we begin to practice trying to imagine a future beyond this life and we dedicate the merit of practice with a longer perspective, then it is said we begin to practice a truer dharma.

But until that time, let's say that we can only see this life. Well, what we can wish is: "May I have more equanimity, more love, more compassion when I die than what I have now. From now up until whenever it is that I may die, may I develop these. Or, at least, may things not get worse." I would say if it's difficult to conceive of future births, rebirths, we can, at least, conceive of this life and say: "Well, may it get better, and if it doesn't get better, may it not get worse." That would be a wonderful framework for our practice and that'd be a great way to give this life some shape and some meaning.

Today we'll end with the practice of joy. In the context of the four immeasurables, joy means partaking in the success of others, rejoicing and being happy when good things happen to others. In that sense, joy helps us to overcome feelings of envy, jealousy, and insecurity. When we practice, as we've done the last three weeks, it's very important to know that you're practicing. Today, for example, you'll say: "Okay, today I'm going to sit down and I will practice joy." It's important to know what you're doing and what the basis of the practice is. That also will help you to build confidence in what you're doing.

You won't do it mindlessly if you're a beginner, and if you're somebody who's familiar with practicing, you won't do it out of habit. Every time that you sit down, you take a moment and you become clear in your mind what it is that you're doing and why. At the end of your session, you again become aware of what you've done and why. We call this "doing it correctly in the

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beginning, doing it correctly in the middle, and doing it correctly in the end.” It's a good preparation, it's a good practice, and it's a good way to break down the practice.

We understand that practicing joy will help us to overcome difficult emotions and overcome our fear of not measuring up to others who are doing better than us. The truth is there's always going to be somebody who is doing what we do much better than we are. Thank goodness for that. If there weren't better meditators than me, I'd be very concerned for the welfare of others. When we feel that we need to be better, stronger, smarter, younger, fitter, more educated, or more talented, it can make us fearful of finding out how much we can actually do. When we see that others are doing it so much better than us, we can become discouraged and think that what we do isn't enough, that it's too little. That itself is a form of laziness and fear. Rejoicing when others do well and rejoicing in how happy others can become will help us overcome that.

Let's practice a little joy. We begin by taking a good posture and making sure that the posture helps us to have an upright spine. As you're adjusting your posture, make sure that it's not tilting forward or back, and that you're not tilting sideways. Make sure your “sit bones” are even, and that you're not curling, which makes you sleepy, but also that you're also not over-arching your spine, which can make your back very tired and achy and can agitate your mind. Take a minute or two to sense your body and prepare for a few minutes of meditation. Then from there bring your awareness to your breathing and take a few moments. You'll notice how your breath goes into your belly, and if you let it go into your belly, it'll relax it. You might not realize that you're holding your belly tight because you're trying to be a good practitioner, so you let your belly relax and let it go out and in as you breathe. That's wonderful. That means that you're not holding it in as you're breathing.

Then if you can feel your breath in your chest, that means that you're breathing in such a way that your breath is ventilating your chest. If you feel your breath in your nostrils, then the whole structure of where your breath initially comes into your body—the gateway, the initial passage

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for your breath—is open. It's like a hose with its aperture cleared on the inside. Your breath comes in fully and softly. It is said that the mind rides on the breath the way a person rides on a horse, so depending how the horse moves, the person moves. In the same way, the mind moves depending on how the breath moves. We know that when we're agitated and our breath is choppy, sometimes all we need to do is take three breaths and we'll calm down. That is why it's so important to begin taking a few moments with your breath.

The way to practice joy is to repeat some words in our mind over and over again that familiarize us with a particular state of mind until we get into the habit of doing it automatically. For that to happen, we need to do it many, many, many times. Meditation practice is really great for those of us who like to do things again and again, those of us who are obsessive-compulsive. If we don't like to do things again and again, if we think that we should do things perfectly the first time, this practice will show us that while that may work sometimes, it won't *always* work, and it won't work long-term. So I hope that you're the kind of person that likes to repeat things or that you become the type of person that appreciates the value of doing something good many, many, many, times.

So, what we repeat could be a phrase such as: "May I have the kind of happiness that is free of suffering." That is the definition of joy. "May I have the happiness that is free of suffering." As you say that, you may think that we can become happy by accomplishing many things, but the type of happiness that brings us joy is a type of happiness that accomplishes virtuous and good things. I can accomplish all sorts of things but they're not all virtuous things, but if I accomplish virtuous things, I will be developing joy. You can also say something like: "May I share in the good news of others. When I hear that something wonderful has happened to somebody else, may I partake, may I be happy, too."

Think of somebody that you love and think of something great that has happened to them, and notice how you automatically feel happy for them. But, if you think of another person and you

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think of something happy, or you hear from somebody else that something wonderful has happened to them, you might notice that that same type of joy doesn't come up automatically. That's a little envy, jealousy, or insecurity. If that happens, try to find a way to take joy in that. This is, I think, the most difficult of all practices in our order of equanimity, lovingkindness, and compassion. Joy is a very mature practice. It means that we're free of all blockages and we can even rejoice in the happiness of our enemies, that we can be happy because anybody is happy.

Think of a person that you're having difficulty with, or maybe somebody that has outright hurt you or harmed you, and try to, if you can, have the thought: "May they be happy. May they have good news and may I rejoice in their happiness." Try to work with someone initially that makes it easy for you to develop this joy, someone with whom you're not jealous or someone with whom you don't feel envy or insecurity or that you feel less than they are, or greater than they are. Think of something that has happened to them, something wonderful, they've heard good news, and partake in their joy. What we discover is that we have this capacity to rejoice and celebrate at any time. That is quite advanced. In fact, in the mind-training teachings, that is one of the measures of our practice, of our progress in the practice. The slogan says: "May I always have a joyful mind." That is quite advanced. I encourage you to practice slowly, to find objects that make it easy, that get your juices flowing so that you're confident that you can do this, and if you can do it with one person, that shows you that you can do it. Period.

The difficulty is the discrimination, the fear, the blocks that we have. Joy is the culmination and the fruition of our practice. We can experience it once and that can carry us through. If we deepen our practice and practice consistently—without interruption and with a dedication—we will be able to experience the taste, the experience of joy, and we'll be able to rejoice in the joys of others.

A mundane example that I always think of is this: if any of you watch sports, you watch sports because you have a team that you like. In the final game or in the playoffs, the World Series or

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the World Cup, imagine that your team doesn't win, but that the other team wins. Can you be happy for them? [You can practice with] something that mundane, something related to people you don't know. [Even then] you can't quite be happy because they won a game. This can show how limited we are. Now, if you try that and you're around friends, don't say it out loud because you might lose your friends. But within your own intimate experience, see if you can be happy for the winning team, even if it isn't your team, and for the country or the city or the state, whatever it is, that follows them. I think if we could all do that, we would all have a wonderful chance at developing joy all the time. So you don't have to pick a game or the final playoff. Pick something small where there is a winner and there is a loser, and always cheer for the winner no matter what. That would be a wonderful way to begin to practice joy.

Because this is our last session, I'd like to briefly review what we've learned. The [four immeasurable] practices are [as follows]: Equanimity, or the reduction of partiality, which is a wonderful basis for practicing any of your practices. It doesn't have to be the four immeasurables. It can be anything at all. [Next is] lovingkindness, the wish for all others to be happy—including yourself—and to have the causes of happiness. Compassion is the wish for all sentient beings including yourself to be free of problems and the causes of problems. And as we saw today, joy is the wish for all of us to be able to rejoice in one another's good news, fortune, and good luck.

When you practice, feel free to practice any one of those at any time, and since you know that there are different orders of practicing, feel free to make up your own order. Whatever gives you strength, whatever gives you faith, whatever gives you confidence, whatever makes you want to do it, and whatever ultimately shows you how meaningful your life is. Whatever shows you how deep your capacity is to be a good person, to help people, to affect others, strangers or loved ones, at any given moment in a positive way. Whatever helps you to commit, to not be afraid to commit, to having these practices shape your life, especially if you're out there and you question what your life is about or you're confused.

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These things will shape your life and it'll be the best shape that your life can ever take without having to change your job or your partner or your city or anything at all. It's an internal direction that is ultimately what we all need and we all benefit from. [Regardless of whether] you're Buddhist, a religious person, or a non-religious person, these practices can be [helpful to us].