

Vanessa Zusei Goddard

*The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion*

Week Three: "Rejoicing in Others' Success with Sympathetic Joy"

May 16, 2020



Hello, I'm Zusei Goddard. Welcome to this third segment of "The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion." Today I'm going to focus on sympathetic joy, *mudita*. Sympathetic joy is the ability to feel happiness at another's happiness, to feel happiness at another's well being, another's success. Because of this, it is a challenging practice. It is a profound practice at the same time, and it can really be summarized in the words of Buddhagosa, who said that sympathetic joy (and the practice of the four immeasurables in general) is the breaking down of barriers. To me that really is the the long and the short of it, the breaking down of the barriers as a practice, and then ultimately the realization that there really are no barriers to break down other than the ones we have created in our own minds. To very deliberately cultivate sympathetic joy is to choose to turn toward what is affirming, what is life-giving and what is joyful about our lives.

In some sense this should not be so difficult, and yet it is difficult for many of us, because we so enthusiastically, so insistently focus on what we lack and on what we feel dissatisfied with. Practicing sympathetic joy is letting go of our entitlement. It is letting go of what we think is our right to be in a funk, to be mired in our dissatisfaction. We could say that the cultivation of joy is really the renunciation of anything and everything that gets in the way of that very same joy.

Imagine you give two different people a kind of liturgy to practice every day: you say to one person, "Every day you are going to wake up, and for the first hour of your day, you going to bring to mind and then give voice to everything that you feel grateful for." Then you turn to the other person and you say, "You are going to spend the first hour of your day bringing to mind and giving voice to everything that you feel dissatisfied about, everything that you want to complain about." You have the two people do this day after day for an entire year. At the end of that year, whom do you think you will want to spend time with? It's not difficult for us to understand that negative thoughts shape negative people. And still it is so difficult for many of us to turn toward joy. So the practice of sympathetic joy, of *mudita*, is really encouraging us to dig

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deep if we need to, and to find that joy, not only at our own happiness, but at another's. Because if we can truly do that we don't have to worry about our own joy that is already taken care of.

Thinking a little more closely about why it is that it is difficult for us to express joy I wonder if in terms of our culture, with its emphasis on perfectionism. You know, if you think about it, perfectionism is a kind of arrogance; it is a belief that things should be the way I think they should be the way, perhaps I *need* them to be or I *think* I need them to be. So sympathetic joy entails relinquishing of that belief and it also brings about a kind of humility. It is the acknowledgement that we don't actually know everything, that there's more than we don't know than that would we do know, and that there is much excitement and energy in not knowing and in that kind of humility.

It makes me think of a story of practitioner who had devoted his life to the repetition of the Tibetan Buddhist *mani* mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*. He had achieved a state in his practice where he was authorized to teach, so he decided to visit a hermit whom he had heard was also practicing this mantra, thinking that it would be a good way to test himself and to test her. So he set off. This hermit lived on a small island. He hired a boat to row him across and he found the hermit, an old woman, drinking tea. She welcomed him very warmly invited him to sit down, and they were talking. At a certain point, the younger teacher asked her what her practice was. She said, Oh, well, I've been reciting the *mani* mantra. He said, “Oh, I have I have too; and how have you been doing that?” And the old hermit said, I've been saying, “*Om mani padme hum.*” The young teacher was just horrified for a moment and he said to her, “I am so sorry. You have been wasting all these years; you have been saying this mantra incorrectly.” Then the hermit felt really bad and said, “Oh, no, please explain to me you know how I should say it.” So the teacher gave what he felt was the correct pronunciation and the hermit repeated it a few times. Then she said, “You know, do you think you could leave me now because I really want to get started with this practice, you know, I have a lot of catching up to do.” So the younger teacher readily agreed.

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He gets back on the boat and he's heading back to the mainland. He's filled with self satisfaction and he's thinking “I'm so glad that I that I visited the hermit because at least she has a few years so she can practice this mantra correctly.” And as he's thinking this all of a sudden he looks up and he sees that the boatman's eyes are just huge, and he turns to look and standing right next to him on the surface of the water is the hermit with her hands in *gassho*. She says to him, “I am so sorry, I forgot the mantra. Could you please tell it to me again?” Now the young teacher is completely embarrassed and he says, “I don't think you need it.” The hermit says, “No, no, please, I want to say it correctly.” So the young teacher just mumbles out his pronunciation. The hermit once again, repeats it a few times, and then starts walking away. As the young teacher is being rowed back, he turns to see the old hermit walking back to her hut on the surface of the water.

This story makes me realize that there is truly so much that we not only do not know, but perhaps have little sense of. What we can capture with our minds is truly so limited. So this practice of cultivating joy at another's happiness rests on the acceptance of that fact. Instead of being depressed that we don't know everything, instead of being saddened by the fact that there is really nothing certain besides death, a spiritual practitioner finds this mystery exciting and they see it as the fuel for the spiritual life. It is what infuses their path. That is what brings about so much of the joy of the journey, and of the discovery. Cultivating and being able to feel this joy, they then can offer it to others.

The near enemy of joy is aversion, which makes perfect sense. Someone who is feeling a version has a very difficult time having the space for another, let alone feeling joy at another's well being. The far enemy of sympathetic joy is envy. As I said, returning to Buddhagosa's phrase, sympathetic joy is “the breaking down of the barriers.” It is seeing through those barriers. It is doing away with this distinction of “me” and “mine.” It is cultivating the practice of seeing

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another as myself, as Shantideva encouraged us to do. Seeing another's body is as mine, seeing another's possessions as mine, and eventually just letting go of those boundaries altogether.

When Lewis Carroll [*sic*] (Lewis Thomas) in the 1970s was thinking about the earth, and he was reflecting on how to best describe it, he said, “You know, I'm trying to see it as a single organism, but there's too many complex relationships, and I just can't quite make it work. As he was driving one night, it suddenly came to him: it really is most like a single cell. And that is also true of the body. And it has always been true. That is exactly why the foreign measurables are immeasurable. That is why they are boundless.

It is from that truth that we in fact, are boundaryless, that we are able to practice them and cultivate them for one another. I mean, Carroll [*sic*] (Thomas) also said, you know this body is rented, it's occupied. It reminds me of a poem in one of the Zen koans that says, if you are enlightened, then you will know that coming out of one husk into another of a husk of the body, is like a traveller. Putting up at an inn. So in other words, we were moving through this life in in borrowed bodies for the time being, and because occupancy and the body that is, the Earth is increasing exponentially it makes it that much more pressing for us to learn how to get along. Longchempa, the 14th-century Tibetan master, said that one of the qualities for cultivating the four immeasurables—and I would say specifically joy—is to sense negativities as a speck in your eye. And at first I thought it meant that it's insignificant, but it's actually the opposite. When you have something in your eye, you will do anything that you can to remove it. So it's really understanding that without dealing with our negativity, we cannot truly offer joy.

We cannot truly say, may I be filled with happiness and another's happiness. And so it very much incorporates the practice of acknowledging and working with our own negativity, as I said before, whatever gets in the way of feeling and expressing that joy. So, to summarize, we looked at joy, *mudita* as the cultivation of deliberate joy, at another's happiness and well being,

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understanding that that very much includes my own joy and my own happiness, that the two in fact are inseparable. And in this way, the four immeasurables move from being just a practice ethic of reciprocity into an ethic of *unity*. In the next and last segment would like to bring it together by speaking of equanimity, the immeasurable which the other three are based on, really the ground for the other three qualities and to look at it in a particular way, as both a taking of refuge and also as that expression, the very fundamental reality of things as they are. So I will see you next week.