

Mudita: Cultivating Joy

by Barry H. Gillespie

The Buddha was known as “The Happy One”, someone who seemed to always be joyful. He encouraged us to cultivate joy.

Our first thought may be “Why do I need to try and be joyful? Isn’t joy something that just arises naturally, spontaneously?” Unfortunately, for most of us, most of the time, this simply isn’t true.

What can we do? What does it mean to “cultivate” joy? Webster’s dictionary gives 3 related definitions to the word.

- to encourage.
- to foster the growth of.
- to prepare or prepare and use for the raising of crops.

Let’s use the last of these as an analogy, in the context of right effort, the sixth step in the Noble 8 Fold Path.

To prepare a field to grow things, you first have to take out the big stones and pull out the weeds. This is like the first part of right effort, to prevent unwholesome states of mind from arising and to get rid of unwholesome states that have already arisen.

We’d like to think that we are always naturally joyful, but actually the opposite is more often true. Part of this is purely biological. Our basic instinct for self-preservation has us always on the lookout for trouble; is there something close by that is coming to kill me, to eat me, to steal my mate or my children? We always have our guard up, looking for trouble. The mind simply tends towards fear and aversion. Then our current culture reinforces this with all the negative advertising and bad news. Every ad we see tells us that we aren’t good enough, that we can’t be complete without product X. The news media wallows in the negative, in the unpleasant; painting a grim picture of a dangerous, undependable world. To cultivate joy we first have to see that this is the case, to understand that we are going against the current. We have to look at the deeply ingrained habits of mind that tend towards the negative, the unwholesome. We have to dig out the rocks and pull out the weeds. This takes a lot of effort.

Then the second part of right effort can be applied; to create the conditions where wholesome mind states can arise and to preserve these mind states once they have arisen. Going back to our analogy about preparing the field we have to turn the soil, add fertilizer, plant the seeds and water the plants when they sprout. This is the practice of Mudita.

How can this be done, how can you practice being joyful? First we have to realize that what we normally look for to bring us happiness doesn’t work that well. No matter how much we acquire, no matter how much praise we receive, no matter how much status we gain, it is never enough. Mudita is different. You don’t have to “get” anything. The Pali word “Mudita” is usually translated as “sympathetic joy”, joy that arises from seeing other happy. You simply have to be open to what is arising all around you; children playing, a dog being taken for a walk, someone sitting on a bench sunning themselves, a blissful couple walking hand and hand. This has to be a conscious choice otherwise we will be caught by envy, the opposite of sympathetic joy. Instead of feeling happy seeing other beings happy you complain about the noisy children, or worry that the dog owner won’t pick up the poop, or think the person on the bench is lazy, or that the couple is foolish, “it won’t last”. Let yourself be happy seeing all the good in the world, all the happiness that is all around you. Cultivate joy.

In Theravaden Buddhism there is also a specific meditative form that can be practiced. Choose an individual, hold them clearly in your mind, visualize them at a time you knew they were happy, think about all the good things in their life, and then repeat the phrase “May your happiness continue, may it increase”. This isn’t as easy as it sounds. It takes both concentration and vigilance that unwholesome mind sates don’t arise that are in opposition to the idea. You may end up thinking “It’s not fair, they are so lucky, how come I’m not so happy”, or even “If they are so happy there’s no way I can be”, as if there were some limit on joy, only so much to go around. You can even start thinking that they don’t deserve to be happy, you start focusing on the opposite of their wholesome qualities.

This doesn’t have to be the case. We can get past these mind states and change our patterns to ones where joy arises more and more often. With practice we can overcome our unwholesome tendencies and start seeing the joy in the world. We just need to consciously tend our mental field, to cultivate joy. Then we become more joyful ourselves, and that affects all those around us. The more joy we experience, the more we naturally spread it around to others. Happiness is contagious.