

Taking Joy

As we've said, the five key steps in the process for developing skillful action include:

1-Seeing what the mind is like.

2-Developing skillful intention.

3-Acting.

4-Seeing the benefits in skillful action.

5-Taking joy.

Taking joy is integral. It's necessary, the same way that water is necessary for plants to live and grow. Joy enables the skillful qualities to grow.

The fact is, the Buddha and his companions were not a grim bunch. They made great effort, but they were joyful. They didn't gripe, didn't complain, as they journeyed along the path. They took joy in their effort. Their hearts were filled with joy.

As a dharma student, you're asked to follow the example set by the Buddha and his cohorts. You're asked to cultivate joy. You're asked to practice joyfully.

Joy is a quality of the heart. It's the quality that responds to goodness, our own goodness, the goodness in life. It's an everpresent quality, part of the way things are, the dharma, the truth. It's a quality that exists within us, always. It's there, in the heart. But we're often not connected to it. In practicing the dharma, we learn to connect to joy. We learn to take joy.

It's a skill. Taking joy is a skill.

As dharma students, we're proactive. We don't hang out waiting for things to happen. We don't wait around for joy to suddenly appear. Maybe, if we're lucky, joy will arise. Maybe one day our ship will come in. No. We act. We actively cultivate joy.

There are three basic steps for cultivating joy:

1-Recognizing the blessing of our goodness (skillful qualities).

2-Connecting to gratitude.

3-Connecting to joy.

In the Rahula sutta, the Buddha instructs young Rahula in taking joy in his skillfulness. After you've acted skillfully, he tells Rahula, recognize it, take note of your goodness, take joy in it.

"(Having done a bodily action) if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities."

In the "Mahanama Sutta" the Buddha encourages Mahanama, a householder, to recollect his skillful qualities and take joy in them. In the following passage, the Buddha speaks to Mahanama about recollecting his generosity:

"Furthermore, there is the case where you recollect your own generosity: 'It is a gain, a great gain for me, that — among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness — I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of

possessiveness, freely generous, openhanded, delighting in being magnanimous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms.' At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, his mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. His mind heads straight, based on generosity. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones gains a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

"Of one who does this, Mahanama, it is said: 'Among those who are out of tune, the disciple of the noble ones dwells in tune; among those who are malicious, he dwells without malice; having attained the stream of Dhamma, he develops the recollection of generosity.' (AN 11.12)

In cultivating the skillful qualities we recollect our goodness. We think about our good qualities, the ways we've acted skillfully. It may not be the sort of stuff that you normally think about. It's something, however, that you've got to learn to think about.

You're asked, in taking joy in your skillful effort, to reflect on the effort you've made to abandon the unskillful and develop the skillful. You're asked to reflect on the effort you've made to practice breath meditation. And the effort you've made to stay with the breath during daily life.

There might be voices in your mind that object. As you acknowledge your effort, there might be voices that contend you're not making very good effort. The voices may insist that

you're not doing enough, that you're not doing it right, and so on. It's important to notice these voices, these tendencies to criticize yourself, sabotage yourself. It's important to see these voices for what they are, just voices in the mind, just thoughts.

It's sometimes helpful to think of these voices as Mara. Mara, in Buddhist tradition, is the personification of unskillfulness, desire, aversion, delusion. Hearing one of these voices, you might identify it as Mara babbling on, trying to cause trouble, trying to throw you off the path. In a firm tone, you might tell Mara: "Thanks for sharing. But I'm not going to put any stock in what you're saying."

As you reflect on your skillful qualities, recognize that it's a blessing to have these qualities. This is a crucial perception. It's a blessing. It's a blessing that you're able to act skillfully, that you're able to express your goodness. It's a blessing that, as a human being, you have the ability to develop these good qualities.

As you reflect, let your awareness reside in your body. Allow the perception of your skillful qualities to infiltrate your body. "Sit" for a moment with the understanding that these qualities are a blessing. See if you can move beyond merely thinking about the blessing of your good qualities. Move beyond the level of "verbal" or "intellectual" thought. Recognize the truth, the truth of your blessings, in your body.

Reflecting on your blessings, begin to connect to a feeling of gratitude. When we recognize that we're blessed, we feel gratitude. Gratitude is a mental state, an emotion. In fact, it's one of the most useful emotions. As you connect to the quality of gratitude, keep your attention on your body and see if you can connect to a felt sense of gratitude. Feel gratitude.

Then incline your awareness toward your heart, toward the quality of joy.

Gratitude gives rise to joy. Appreciative joy. The joy that emerges in the heart as we appreciate our goodness.

Joy is there. It's always there, in the heart.

As you shift your awareness toward the heart, try to distinguish the quality of joy. You may experience joy as a brightness in the heart area. A light. It's hard to describe. It's something you'll have to come to know for yourself. The way I experience it may be different than the way you'll experience it. In any case, you'll have to discover how it arises for you. It takes practice. That's basically it. You've got to practice.

It is perhaps a subtle art, connecting to the heart. But if you practice, you'll develop the ability to connect. You'll learn to know the brightness in the heart, the quality of joy.

In the beginning, as you attempt to connect, you may notice just a hint of joy. Maybe just a faint bit of light. And that's okay. In fact, it's more than okay. It's just what you need. It's all you need. Often times, in trying to connect to the heart, we make the mistake of looking for a big experience, a grand spectacle of light, an explosion of light, something like that. It's how we are. We like big things. But it's not what we're looking for; we're looking for some brightness, some light, a bit of light, a small subtle bit of light.

There are various times when you might cultivate joy.

Really, you can do it just about any time.

The most obvious time to take joy, keeping to the Buddha's instructions to Rahula, is right after you've acted skillfully. After practicing generosity, after making skillful effort, after taking any skillful action, you might take time to reflect, to recognize the blessing of your goodness.

At different times during the day you might also pause and reflect on the blessing of your skillful qualities. It's a good habit to develop. It's particularly helpful to cultivate joy when you're feeling downhearted, when there's darkness in the mind.

You might reflect on your skillful qualities at the outset of a period of formal meditation. This is an ideal time to take joy. If you make it a habit to "brighten the mind" before practicing sitting and walking meditation, it will have a remarkably beneficial effect on your ability to develop concentration.

It's important as you strive to abandon the unskillful and develop the skillful that you recognize the blessing of your effort. We tend to look for joy in the results, but as dharma students we learn to take joy in the effort we're making. When teaching beginners I encourage students, right off the bat, to take joy in their effort. Beginning students usually have a difficult time practicing breath meditation. They often become discouraged. They doubt their ability to meditate. After a while they may give up. For this reason, I teach new students to reflect on the blessing of their effort at the conclusion of every period of sitting meditation. The meditation might not have gone the way you wanted, I tell them. You might not have been able to pay attention to more than a couple of breaths. But you put in the effort. You developed the quality of effort. Instead of judging yourself, acknowledge your effort, the fact that you've made an effort to meditate, the fact that you're making an effort to do what you've got to do, to end your suffering and find a better life. Acknowledge the blessing of your effort, I tell them. Feel gratitude. Take joy.

Every meditation, I explain, is an opportunity to develop your practice. If you're not able to cultivate much concentration, you can still develop the skillful quality of effort.

When new students learn to take joy in their effort, they're less apt to become discouraged and give up. When things don't go according to plan (they often don't), when things are difficult (they often are), they recognize that they're developing important qualities, and, in turn, they stay with the practice, they go on.

Taking a few moments at the end of a sitting to reflect on the blessing of our effort is, of course, a good practice for all dharma students, regardless of how long we've been on the path.

There are always students who protest when I suggest they acknowledge their skillful qualities, their goodness. It's wrong, they say, to recognize their generosity, ethical conduct, truthfulness, effort. It's selfish. It's immodest. It indicates a lack of humility. They believe they shouldn't draw attention to themselves in this manner.

If you harbor these kinds of preconceived notions, it might be helpful to look at what the Buddha said. He said it was alright to recognize your goodness, and, in recognition, to take joy. He said that this was exactly what you should do. In the above sutta, he gives Mahanama explicit instructions: to recollect his skillful qualities. He says that the practitioner who engages in this recollection is "in tune" with the dharma.

"Of one who does this, Mahanama, it is said: 'Among those who are out of tune, the disciple of the noble ones dwells in tune; among those who are malicious, he dwells without malice; having attained the stream of Dhamma, he develops the recollection of generosity.'

The truth is, it's alright to admit to your goodness. It's alright. More than that, it's essential.

It's essential that you learn to take joy.

We all need joy. It's a crucial element in our emotional, psychological, and spiritual health. Most of us could probably use a little more joy in our lives. Actually, most of us could probably use a lot more joy.

If you're going to continue forward along the Buddha's path, you're going to have to learn to take joy, to practice joyfully, to be a joyful dharma student.

In many ways, we're a cynical, skeptical lot. Standing in the thick shadows of the machineries of modern life, we tend to downplay things like joy. But as a dharma student it's essential that you to learn to take joy.

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