Celebrating The Happiness of Others

*Mudita* (moo-dee-tah) is a Pali word usually translated as *sympathetic joy* or *appreciative joy* and is one of the four Brahma Viharas, (Divine Abidings), along with metta, karuna and upekkha. *Mudita is an empathetic harmony with the happiness and success of others, whether it is to one’s advantage or not.* Found in each of the Brahma Viharas are the *far enemy* and the *near enemy*. The far enemy of mudita is jealousy and envy, based on a sense of self that feels diminished or lacking in self-respect and well-being, therefore feeling aversion and ill-will towards the success and happiness of another. The near enemy of mudita is pretentious appreciation—one is willing to appear to be joyful in the experience of another’s happiness, but inwardly still feels resentful— “Why isn’t this happening for me?”. Another example would involve becoming over-excited about the success of a favorite sports team or others whose success seems to provide an alternative for one’s perceived lack of success or happiness.

The biological and cultural foundation for mudita is empathy. We are naturally equipped with empathy, the ability to emotionally resonate with another person or even another sentient being, such as a pet. We are social creatures and tend to function best in relationships wherein each person is supportive of others. The underlying biological orientation regards group cohesion as important for survival. For humans, this begins with the primary parent/child bonding process and involves the ability to identify and support that which is in the best interest of those around us in the hope it will be reciprocated. This empathetic attunement is also characteristic of karuna (kah-roo-nah), compassion, which is oriented towards helping others who are distressed.

When fundamental relational needs in childhood are not well supported, a person feels incomplete and unappreciated as an adult, and this sets the stage for the development of jealousy and envy. Through this distorted yet empathetic sort of interpersonal dynamic the child learns how to pretend to be sympathetic to others, and this sets the stage for the near enemy to be activated. Both of these personality traits stem from a self-identity experience that seems inadequate or deprived somehow.

I believe that the foundation for mudita comes about through the experience of gratitude, that is, a sense of appreciation for being on the receiving end of another’s generosity. The Pali word for gratitude is *katannu* (kah-tahn-yoo) and is appropriately experienced as one perceives success and happiness, perhaps provided by the generosity of another. Personally, I am very grateful for having been exposed to Buddhism 40 years ago through the gift of a book and benefitted from the wisdom of the many teachers I’ve had, and this prompts my teaching as an expression of gratitude. I have cultivated what is called a “gratitude inventory” that I reflect on multiple times a day. This makes it easier for me to recognize what creates success and happiness for others and be quite willing to provide support for that when I can.

The word *dana* (dah-nah) is Pali for generosity, and it represents a willingness to “gift” someone else materially, socially and spiritually. For me it is hard to create in my mind a distinction between mudita, katannu and dana—they all seem to blend together--one leads to another—through contemplating my own gratitude for the benefits I have received from my Buddhist practice, from which my creating and sustaining the Orlando Insight Meditation Group emerges, and interpersonally as I realize the richness of giving and receiving cycling through my social connections.

Thanissaro wrote in an article his criteria for the purity of someone’s gratitude and generosity:

“*These two people are hard to find in the world. Which two? The one who is first to do a kindness, and the one who is grateful and thankful for a kindness done*.” — [AN 2:118](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN2_118.html)

In saying that kind and grateful people are rare, the Buddha isn’t simply stating a harsh truth about the human race. He’s advising you to treasure these people when you find them, and—more importantly—showing how you can become a rare person yourself.

Kindness and gratitude are virtues you can cultivate, but they have to be cultivated together. Each needs the other to be genuine—a point that becomes obvious when you think about the three things most likely to make gratitude heartfelt:

1) You’ve actually benefited from another person’s actions.

2) You trust the motives behind those actions.

3) You sense that the other person had to go out of his or her way to provide that benefit.

Points one and two are lessons that gratitude teaches kindness: If you want to be genuinely kind, you have to be of actual benefit—nobody wants to be the recipient of “help” that isn’t really helpful—and you have to provide that benefit in a way that shows respect and empathy for the other person’s needs. No one likes to receive a gift given with calculating motives, or in an offhand or disdainful way.

Points two and three are lessons that kindness teaches to gratitude. Only if you’ve been kind to another person will you accept the idea that others can be kind to you. At the same time, if you’ve been kind to another person, you know the effort involved. Kind impulses often have to do battle with unkind impulses in the heart, so it’s not always easy to be helpful. Sometimes it involves great sacrifice—a sacrifice possible only when you trust the recipient to make good use of your help. So when you’re on the receiving end of a sacrifice like that, you realize you’ve incurred a debt, an obligation to repay the other person’s trust. (downloaded from [https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/Head&HeartTogether/Section0004.html](https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/Head%26HeartTogether/Section0004.html) )

These observations can serve as guides for cultivating mudita derived from the experience of gratitude and the resulting emergence of generosity.

Here are some general suggestions for contemplating mudita:

PRACTICING MUDITA

I have taught many individuals how to practice mudita; here are some suggestions that I have found to support the cultivation of sympathetic joy:

* *Mindfulness* is essential in the cultivation of any of the Divine Abidings, combined with *investigation of mental phenomena* and *Right Effort*, three of the seven Awakening Factors.
* Always begin cultivating mudita with metta to establish the foundation of benevolent intention. Mudita is a “subset” of intentions manifested through kindness and interpersonal inclusion.
* After establishing a consistent feeling of metta, contemplate the events in your life that provided you with the benefits of someone else’s generosity or celebratory recognition of your successes and happiness. Allow the experience of gratitude to grow as a manifestation of joy and appreciation for the goodness of humanity.
* Reflect on times in the past when you have been able to openly and unselfishly manifest joy in the presence of someone else’s happiness, success or accomplishments. In the reflection, investigate to discover any remnants of jealousy or envy and practice understanding the dukkha (distress and confusion) that is the result.
* Consider opportunities that are present in your life to celebrate the happiness of others. It is likely easier than you imagine—watch children playing and allow yourself to open your heart and mind empathetically to their joyfulness; the same celebratory joy can be experienced playing with pets. Watch events through the media that involve someone being rewarded for an accomplishment.
* Actively cultivate joyful appreciation of people you routinely interact with. The practice of a daily “gratitude inventory” can be applied to actively observing and recognizing someone else’s successes and allowing yourself to open up to the empathic attunement that is possible.
* Be generous towards others in ways that bring them joy—birthday parties, weddings, giving gifts, etc. Be alert for the “near enemy” of mudita, which is the need to be congratulated for your efforts or participating in the events in order to make yourself a better person. Of course, the reciprocity principle of wholesome social life will likely involve folks appreciating your efforts, but what happens when they don’t? Be aware of the subtle forms of dukkha that can manifest under those circumstances. It is said that the Buddha suggested that being aware of the near enemy of mudita is subtle and the most difficult to discover—being aware of the near and far enemy of metta, karuna and upekkha are more easily noted than with mudita.

After developing an awareness of lovingkindness, a useful mantra regarding mudita might be like this:

**Just as I have been happy, may you be happy**

**Just as I have been successful, may you be successful**

While cultivating this benevolent intention, allow your heart/mind to open a fully as possible to the experience of joy that would be experienced if you were the beneficiary of someone’s generosity or appreciation. Continue to practice mindfulness, investigation and Right Effort during the practice to notice and disregard any distraction or the formation of either the near or far enemy of mudita.