Cultivating Sympathetic Joy With Equanimity

The contemplation of Sympathetic Joy represents a third category of what are called the Divine Abidings--Lovingkindness and Compassion are two others, and these three are balanced by the fourth of the Divine Abidings, Equanimity.

Mudita (moo-dee-tah), the Pali word representing Sympathetic Joy, is a quality of mind derived from cultivating metta (meh-tah), Lovingkindness, with a different focus. It is typically translated as *sympathetic joy--empathetic joy, appreciative joy* and *unselfish joy* can also be useful translations. Its characteristic is experiencing happiness through empathetic attunement to the happiness of others. Personally, I also experience it as a manifestation of *dana* (dah-nah), the Buddhist term for *generosity*, not necessarily of a materialistic nature—the expression of mudita is in terms of celebrating the success of another being.

Here is a quote regarding this quality of attention and action: “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. This quote also establishes the relationship between generosity and gratitude, additional benefits from the cultivation of mudita.

Mudita represents celebrating the happiness of another in ways that are altruistic and not selfish. This might involve congratulating a coworker who got a promotion that you could have gotten or participating in the preparation of a birthday party for someone. It might be something as simple as watching children gleefully playing.

It is also described as the antidote for jealousy and envy, which are considered the “far enemy” of mudita; the “near enemy” is the experience of joy that is a mistaken compensation for one’s own low self-worth—in a sense, celebrating someone else’s happiness to try to compensate for your own lack of satisfaction—in this way it is very vulnerable to suddenly flipping into jealousy. Another manifestation of the near enemy is exaggerated enthusiasm—for example, the excitement experienced when your favorite football team wins a game.

Jealousy and envy arise when a person identifies self-worth through status or accomplishments. In one case, a person might be equally qualified for a promotion or award and feels jealous because someone else was promoted or awarded. The integration of a wholesome personality does not develop through external reinforcement, but rather through the manifestation of Lovingkindness and Compassion for oneself—it’s an “inside job”. The same is true regarding envy, with a slightly different perspective: I might envy someone who is rich, famous, or in a happy marriage, not through a perception of unfairness and resentment, but rather through low self-esteem. In either case, my ability to enjoy life is compromised by comparing life circumstances.

As is the case with Lovingkindness and Compassion, Sympathetic Joy emerges from the skillful development of empathy, a fundamental function in all mammals who live in groups, and the social development of empathy has played a very important role in the success of human beings as a species.

The experience of empathy seems to operate neurologically through a coordinated functioning of the anterior insular cortex, just above and in front of the ears, within the inner areas of the cerebral cortex, and right next to the parts of the brain associated with feelings, in the limbic system. The insular cortex processes physical and emotional stimuli and is part of the way self-identity is formed. When we witness the experience of another person or animal, the stimulation activates the parts of the brain that react to that observed experience—in this regard, some of these neural connections are called “mirror neurons”. That mirroring reaction can either be unwholesome, such as in the case of jealousy and envy, or wholesome, as is the case with Sympathetic Joy. Our meditative training inclines attention away from unwholesomeness and towards wholesomeness.

Regarding joy, there are important distinctions to be understood. Joy can be primarily generated through external stimulation, such as the joy one experiences when dancing or being infatuated with someone. That sort of joy is associated with the same neurological pathways as those associated with addiction, that is, the nucleus accumbens, found in the limbic system, which organizes attention and behavior to either avoid unpleasant sensations or to experience pleasurable sensations. This manifestation of joy relies on external reinforcement—the joy of dancing can be spoiled when another person criticizes how one dances. Regarding infatuation, the joy of love can quickly flip into shame or anger when the person you are infatuated with doesn’t reciprocate your affection positively or doesn’t live up to your idealized identification of him or her. This sort of unwholesome reaction can also apply to a pet or to a sports personality or team.

A more wholesome quality of joy is activated when the mind is generally stable and peaceful. Mindfulness, combined with Investigation of Mental Phenomena, provides ongoing awareness of how the mind is interpreting what is going on in the environment. Right Effort functions to disregard unwholesome interpretations and nurture Sympathetic Joy, countering the potential for either the near enemy or far enemy to arise. This experience emerges from internal processes and is not reliant on external stimulation. This quality of awareness is not overexcited but rather is a manifestation of enthusiastic interest in what is happening in the mind. This kind of joy doesn’t require external reinforcement, and the more a person cultivates a calm, stable quality of awareness, the less likely a person is to become jealous or resentful when an expected external reinforcement doesn’t happen. There is an ongoing quality of internal buoyancy and resilience regarding disappointments or humiliation.