

### Centering Meditation

Allow yourself to arrive here, gently let go of the day, all the activity, all the movements and feelings and thoughts and concerns. Let yourself become aware of sitting here, in this place, in this moment. Settle into the safety and peacefulness of this gathering, in this moment. Become aware of being in your body, sitting, breathing. Settle into an awareness of your breathing, gently breathing in and out. Let your awareness settle on your breathing.

If you wish, you may set an intention for these moments of practice, for this evening. Wishing yourself well in these moments.

Notice anything arising in these moments of awareness, notice your response to anything arising in these moments, allow and accept whatever is arising to be here, naming it if you wish, letting it be, letting it in with compassion, letting it go with equanimity. Return your awareness to your breathing; relax into the awareness.

### Dharma Talk

This month of February, we're focusing on Brahma Viharas – states of mind we abide in when our minds are clear and our hearts are open, and practices that keep our hearts open in the face of suffering inherent in human condition.

Two weeks ago, Loving Kindness – abiding in openness, friendliness, loving kindness toward all people, toward all experience. Sylvia Boorstein says: “May I meet this moment fully; may I meet it as a friend.” Practices of good will, wishing well for another's ease, for safety from harm, for freedom from suffering, for their deep abiding in peace and well being. The practices of good will or wishing well meant to reduce or eliminate any ill will or hostility or aversion in our own hearts; to keep our hearts open and accepting.

Last week Compassion – abiding with open mind and caring heart; practices, as in the tonglen we did last week, of breathing in the suffering of another or ourselves into a vast spacious awareness and caring of life, not just our personal caring, but into the sincere desire of all of life for an end to suffering, and then breathing out the care and compassion that would touch and ease that suffering; an antidote to the hindrances of ignorance and confusion in our own hearts. We see, we care, we act.

This week Joy – sympathetic joy or joy in the welfare of others; we practice tonight practices that antidote greed or grasping, that allow us to dwell in a deep contentment with life as it is.

Next week Equanimity – the state of clear seeing and calm heart that can hold all of life's joys and sorrows in a calm abiding; practices to cultivate a sense of centeredness, balance or equilibrium essential to holding the wise effort of the other three Brahma Vihara's, goodwill, compassion, joy.

We'll explore joy tonight in two parts.

1. First, the traditional teachings of the Brahma Vihara's as mudita, sympathetic joy in the joy of others, cultivating our happiness for someone else's happiness, cultivating our deep happiness for their deep happiness

Traditional phrases of mudita practice: "May your happiness continue, may your happiness increase." Meant to antidote any selfishness or over-concern for self, to overcome any grasping, greed, envy on our part, to help us move from unsatisfactoriness – traditional translation of dukkha or suffering is also unsatisfactoriness - to satisfaction, from any contention with life if it's not the way we want it to be or from any grasping for what we think will make us safe, happy, fulfilled the way we want to be, to a larger consenting to what is allowing and accepting how things are, then moving to a deep contentment, ah, it's like this. Joy is a wholesome state to incline the mind toward, to set an intention to cultivate the conditions that lead to the arising of joy is part of sincere wise effort. And...as with all of the Brahma Vihara's, wishing joy for others, or deep joy and contentment for ourselves, mudita opens us up into a sense of the vast interconnectedness of all beings, my joy is completely co-arising with your joy, there is no separate or selfish joy, and to the truth of our true nature, that in our true nature, we are already whole and complete. In Adam Baraz's phrase, we abide in a sense of abundant enoughness.

As in so many practices, we can begin a practice of sympathetic joy, joy in the welfare of others, with joy appreciation gratitude for tangibles – health, their heart opening in joy at accomplishments or triumphs, joy at their sense of blessing (gratitude appreciation) What psychologist and researcher into emotions, Paul Ekman, calls the feeling of fiero, the Toyota feeling. Remember the Buddha taught us to aim for the highest happiness, the deepest joy, ultimately joy in their joy at finding dharma path, journey of awakening to true nature of reality, practices that lead toward liberation, joy at any opening or awakening to that.

Exercise in groups of four: share with each other moment of joy in somebody else's joy [returning to health after illness, making it to the top of the mountain, any mountain, overcoming fear to play at the piano recital after all, resonating with someone's delight at the beauty of a sunset.] De-brief.

2. Deeper exploration; the Buddha taught us to aim for the highest happiness, all other happiness would follow. When we aim for the wisdom and compassion that would lead to the complete end of suffering, we discover that the grip of all the smaller sufferings along the path can loosen and fall away as well.

The keys to this aiming for the highest happiness are practices that lead to wholesome states, and then to the gladness that arises from wholesome states. One sentence condensation for James Baraz' Awakening Joy course: when we mindfully practice loving kindness, compassion, equanimity, gratitude, renunciation, integrity, presence, generosity, patience, we evoke or come unto experiences of the wholesome – wise effort – we cultivate the wholesome, let go of the unwholesome, and there arises in the heart a gladness or delight or contentment from that

wholesome state. Noticing and taking in that gladness of the wholesome is what leads our hearts to joy.

I want to offer an example of what I mean from my own experience last week. Last Friday morning, I'm all prepared to prepare my tax numbers to send to my tax person prior to appointment this afternoon. I begin early in the morning, and almost immediately get caught in an old mindset – this is confusing, this is overwhelming, this isn't workable, I don't know what I'm doing, I can't do this. I notice the state, I'm annoyed at the state, I realize this state isn't doing me any good, and if it was the old state I used to get into about my taxes, I don't have to get into that mindset now. Fortunately, lunch with a friend would have shifted my state anyway, but I also knew I wanted to be able to shift my state on my own, and not only shift my state, but shift my practice. I wanted my practice to be: how can I use a task like my taxes as an opportunity to practice. How can I use every moment of this experience as a practice – to maintain mindfulness, to find my courage, to find my competence, to ask for help if I need it, to create spaciousness around something that is doable, how can I persevere.

So the afternoon went far differently. I was able to stay mindful, stay open and curious, trust the process, trust myself in the process, rejoice in my growing capacities not just about taxes but about practice. The next morning I got up very early, eager beaver to practice some more and complete the task. I was done with my taxes by 7am! Photocopied and mailed and back home by 8:30am. Celebration. Of working with the mind state I had fallen into Friday morning and using it as a cue to prioritize practice. Taxes are the task but practice is the priority, and then celebrating that not only did that work, I got my taxes done with delight and joy, even, but that I could learn, from the inside out and the bottom up, setting the intention to use any life experience at all as an opportunity to practice IS the practice.

Practice – commitment to practice -is what leads to joy. How we can live mindfully in an embodied way. Not simply to notice and name, but to actually monitor and modify. Not only shift channel, shift perspective, but to transform behavior in response. What's happening? How am I reacting to what's happening. Is how I'm reacting skillful or unskillful? Wholesome or unwholesome? In alignment with my deepest intentions for this path of practice, of waking up and growing up, or not. Not to be judgmental but to be discerning. So that I am on the dharma path every moment. Every moment. This leads us to the joy that is independent of conditions; joy no matter what.

Exercise in groups of four: share moment when joy was in practice no matter what was going on.

Closing Meditation

May all beings heal and awaken into the love and awareness that holds and honors the fullness of being.