

## THE HEART IS A GENEROUS MUSCLE

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*Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.*

—BUDDHA

A WOMAN I KNOW COMMITTED to a six-hundred-mile, seven-day bike ride to raise money in memory of a friend who had died of AIDS. The fund-raising scared her more than the physical demands of the trip, but as it turned out, raising money was effortless. So many other people had loved her friend that she became one of the top fund-raisers that year. When she crossed the finish line, glowing from the sun, her whole family and many of her donors were waiting to cheer for her. All had something to cele-

brate: her achievement in finishing the long ride; the months of training that preceded it; the generosity that brought them together; a chance to honor and remember their lost friend. My friend still draws on the joy generated on that day.

Buddhism has a term for the happiness we feel at someone else's success or good fortune. *Sympathetic joy*, as it is known, invites us to celebrate for others. We stand up and cheer when, after some struggle, a promising teenager graduates from high school. We dance late into the night at a dear friend's wedding. At other times, sympathetic joy can come as a gasp of relief. A friend is sick and waiting for some crucial test results and they come back fine! There may be complications ahead, but for this moment, we can share one of the flashes of connection that hold our lives together.

These are times when sympathetic joy comes naturally, but in a complex relationship, with all its unspoken comparisons and personal disappointments, the heart may not leap up so easily.

After a recent talk I gave on sympathetic joy, a woman I didn't know asked to meet with me privately. When we sat down, she confessed that although she felt terribly guilty, she was so upset that her best friend was getting married that she could hardly sleep at night. "I know I should be happy for my friend," she told me, her voice quivering, "but I haven't been in a relationship for three years, and every time I see her, it feels like pouring salt into a gaping wound. I know she really cares about me, but a big part of our bond has been being single together, each other's Saturday-night date. I know it's crazy and irrational, but somehow I think that because she's found someone, I never will. I'm supposed to be her maid of honor, only I can't imagine how I can make it down the aisle on her big day."

So often we react from feelings of scarcity, as if there were rations for things like love and success. Our individualistic society often leads us to believe we're alone in this world and must scramble for every morsel we can grab. When we believe there isn't enough to go around, we cling to what's ours and respond begrudgingly if



someone close to us gets something that we, too, might like to have. Like the woman distressed by her friend's marriage, we may recognize that our feelings are irrational. We may even be able to trace them back to some source in childhood. But that doesn't necessarily free us to leap for joy on our friend's behalf.

### DISCERNING THE BLOCKAGES

YEARS AGO, I used to spend winters in California to escape the harsh weather on the East Coast. One March, as I was about to return, New York was hit by a huge late-winter snowstorm. I decided to postpone my trip home, and I called my doctor's office to cancel an appointment I'd made. The assistant kept saying she could barely understand me—was the connection going down?

"Oh, I know what's happening," I said. "I'm walking on the beach in Malibu, and the waves are so loud they're drowning out my voice."

"You're on the beach at Malibu?" she said. "I hate you."

Of course, she was joking, but it was the kind of joke that felt like a little slap. She and I shared the same desire—to escape winter in New York, but now it seemed like a zero-sum game. I was up; she was down. My good fortune diminished her.

There is a word, originally in German, that refers to delight at the misfortune of others—*schadenfreude*. It's the companion of looking at someone's success and thinking, "Oooh, I would be happier if you had a little bit less going for you." Envy and jealousy are almost inevitable when we focus on what we lack—and on what others have.

A friend recently told me about her tendency to measure herself only against everyone else's best. If she thought of Amanda, she didn't think of Amanda's disastrous cooking; she thought of her perfect yoga poses. If she thought of Susan, she didn't think of Susan's chaotic household; she thought about her title at work. When we feel

incomplete, when we don't notice what we have, and most especially when we feel less than fully loved, we need to be especially mindful to catch those tendencies.

I was once co-leading a retreat with my friend Krishna Das, who leads Hindu devotional chanting, plus a yoga teacher. We teachers got along wonderfully, but there was a small contingent of retreat participants who didn't like meditation and therefore didn't like me much. The yoga practice released long-held tensions in his body, one told me. The chanting brought him to a state of bliss. The meditation, in contrast, brought him face-to-face with his impatience, self-judgment, and wandering mind. Rather than thinking of it as a time to develop a more loving relationship to himself in the face of those very things, he was just annoyed and brought along his friends to complain.

One day, I was just worn out by this, so I took a nap after lunch. I was awakened by a loud knock. I opened the door to find a young staff person holding a beautiful bouquet of flowers. She handed it to me, and I thought, *Someone loves me after all*. Then she said, "You're Krishna Das, right?" Sighing, I handed the bouquet back and said, "No, he's in the next cabin."

Fertile ground for jealousy, for sure, but Krishna Das and I are very old, close friends. So I laughed when I told him the story, and I said I hoped he enjoyed his flowers. And when I traveled on to the next place I was teaching, the first thing I saw in my room was a dozen roses from him.

### WHERE DOES YOUR HEART GET BLOCKED?

ARE WE MOST vulnerable around work? Relationships? Finances? Do we shut down when our partner gets promoted and starts bringing in more money than we do? When our best friend gets pregnant after years of trying? What thoughts, emotions, and body



sensations accompany our resistance to feeling joy for someone else's happiness?

I know a number of writers and artists who admit to wrestling with difficult feelings when a friend wins a coveted award or gets a great book deal or a rave in *The New York Times*. "I know I should be happy for so-and-so," they might say. "But their success makes me feel insecure—like I don't measure up." They may also confess to secret relief when a friend gets a negative review or is turned down by the gallery of their dreams.

But, oh boy, can that ill will bubble up when we see them happy. Apparently, they eat at better restaurants than we do, have gym memberships they actually use, and have the most photogenic children on the planet. The comparing mind can soar into the stratosphere, stimulated by these announcements. *Why does she get to be so happy and adored, while I still live alone with my cat?* Without fail, other people's meticulously chosen images will surpass the entirety of our uncurated offline lives.

Or we can be in a bad mood when we log on and decide that whatever this "friend" is celebrating is so below our standards as to be laughable. Upon seeing images from a couple's twenty-fifth anniversary cruise to Alaska, we dismiss their enduring commitment, their spirit of adventure, and their success at accumulating the resources—time, money—that got them to this point. *Ach, we think, I would hate to be trapped on a cruise ship. I'd lose my mind.*

When we're caught up in our own suffering, sympathetic joy is a real stretch. But it's actually a practice that can make a difference even when you're going through difficult times. First, you need to be realistic about your own capacities and let go of any "should"—as in, "I should feel good about their good fortune"—that you hold as some impossible ideal. We need to start with compassion for ourselves and be very kind and patient with our actual internal experience.

Even as we recognize our resentment, bitterness, or jealousy, we

can also honor our own wish to be happy, to feel free. When a friend of mine catches herself operating from a constricted, negative place, she can often release herself from it by announcing the resentment or envy and then proclaiming, "I'm embracing the petty within!" Laughing at your pettiness probably works better than scolding yourself for it.

The more we identify and acknowledge those moments when we're unable to genuinely share in someone else's pleasure and ask ourselves whether another person's happiness truly jeopardizes our own, the more we pave the way for experiencing sympathetic joy.

#### EXPERIMENTING WITH SYMPATHETIC JOY

WHEN BICYCLISTS (LIKE my friend who raised all that money) are riding together, they form a pack loosely shaped in a V. Cyclists take turns being at the front. It's a position of extra labor more than of prestige, as all the riders pedaling behind are drafting off the leader. Just so, when we open our hearts to sympathetic joy, we draft off the happiness of others, taking a little bit of benefit for ourselves. We know that, in the normal order of things, we will get our own turn at the front, but for now, as a member of the pack, we can relax and let the vibration from another's happiness be a sustaining undercurrent in our lives.

So often we are taught to arm ourselves with cynicism and irony, to cut ourselves off, dismissing displays of kindness or generosity as phony or self-serving. It takes a lot to say, "I am going to conduct an experiment to look at things another way."

That is why sympathetic joy is a practice. It takes time and effort to free ourselves of the scarcity story that most of us have learned along the way, the idea that happiness is a competition, and that someone else is grabbing all the joy. By experimenting with sympathetic joy, we



break from the constricted world of individual struggle and see that joy exists in more places than we have yet imagined.

### SHARING JOY AT HOME

MOST OF US make a real effort to support a friend or partner when bad news strikes, even if our attempts sometimes misfire. But some interesting research suggests that how we respond to good news is even more important.

Shelly Gable, professor of psychology at the University of California–Santa Barbara, has studied hundreds of couples to discover what goes right in relationships. In a 2006 study, she and her colleagues described a crucial moment when one partner tries to share his or her excitement over news like getting a promotion or being accepted to med school or winning an award.

Let's look at a situation my writer friends will appreciate. Imagine coming home elated and telling your partner, "I got an offer to publish my book today." How would you feel if the response was "That's nice—it's about time. How much are they paying you?" Or, "Well, I have some good news, too," signaling a 180-degree pivot away from you. Or a casual "That's great, babe," with eyes barely lifted from the cell phone. Gable and her colleagues have actually catalogued responses like these to show how many ways there are to shut down joy—and ultimately undermine the relationship itself.

The generous response, of course, is to give your complete attention to your partner and amplify the pleasure for both of you. "Wow—that's fantastic! Oh my God, you've worked so hard! When did you get the call? What did they say? Is that the person you told me about last week?" Gable calls this an "active constructive" response, where the partners join in savoring the good news—and in the process build their relationship.

In fact, when she followed up with the couples in her study, Gable found that partners' reactions to each other's good news were

better predictors of whether the relationship would last than their reactions to bad news. Trust, intimacy, satisfaction—all were built on the everyday kindness and generosity of sympathetic joy.

### THE CRITIC TAKES A VACATION

GEORGIA HAS KNOWN Dan since he first picked up the saxophone in high school. She remembers his slobbery bleats as he tried to get his mouth around the reed, and she also remembers how he put aside his rock-and-roll dreams when the girls didn't seem all that impressed. Then when Dan was in his thirties, after the breakup of a long relationship, he picked the saxophone up again and managed to get into a band. Georgia, who's a longtime jazz fan with a discerning ear, thought Dan's playing was not very good and sometimes downright bad, but she went to his gigs anyway. Being on stage made Dan happy, especially when people in the audience danced, and she loved seeing the boyish joy he radiated after a show.

"I wanted to be there to see Dan fulfill his dream," Georgia told me with a grin. "And when we're senior citizens, I'll be able to remind him how he got people dancing, and we'll share it all again." This may seem like a small gesture, but Georgia was filling the space between them with love and generosity. If she had chosen to make jokes about Dan's dream, or to give him advice about his playing, or to compare his band to one she liked better, that space would start to fill with judgment and perfectionism. Instead, Georgia took her own expertise out of the picture. She saw Dan clearly enough to know he needed a friend, not a coach.

To celebrate someone else's life, we need to find a way to look at it straight on, not from above with judgment or from below with envy. It isn't someone else's pleasure that causes our unhappiness; we make ourselves unhappy because our negativity isolates us. When we feel most satisfied with ourselves, when we look with compassion



on the totality of other people's lives, we are most able to greet their triumphs with a sincere and robust cheer.

## CHAPTER 17 PRACTICES

### *Roots of sympathetic joy*

The practice of sympathetic joy is rooted in inner development. It's not a matter of learning techniques to "make friends and influence people." Instead, we build the foundations of our own happiness. When our own cup is full, we more easily share it with others.

Before we get into the practice itself, here are a few of the essential benefits:

1. We nurture our sense of connection with the larger whole, noticing that the whole is only as healthy as its smallest part. One day, I overheard a woman in my neighborhood talking with a street person who was usually on our corner. "I had a terrible winter," she said. "I was sick with pneumonia for a long time. But now spring is coming, and I feel so much better. So today I want to share the joy." And she put a roll of bills into the other woman's hand.
2. We develop awareness of our inner abundance. This is the foundation of generosity. When I studied in Burma, I saw that even the poorest people freely made small offerings of food to support meditators, and they seemed delighted to watch us eat. Giving enlarged them. If we have nothing material to give, we can offer our attention, our energy, our appreciation. The world needs us. It doesn't deplete us to give.
3. We learn to notice our moments of happiness and the happiness of others. When I was studying with the great

teacher Munindra in Burma, someone in our group asked him why he practiced mindfulness. His answer that day (for there were many others): "So that when I'm walking down the road, I won't miss the little purple flowers growing by the wayside."

The practice of sympathetic joy is something we can call upon in our everyday lives, although it can also be practiced more formally in meditation. The meditation on sympathetic joy is quite similar structurally to lovingkindness meditation, although the phrases are different. You may try something like, "May your happiness and good fortune increase further." We start the sequence with a particular person who is doing well in some area of their life—and it may be an area of our lives where we are seeking more success. We skip ourselves in the sequence, as the practice is about rejoicing in the happiness of others. We may decide to move on to others in our lives who are experiencing happiness or good fortune, or stay with one individual.

The more we practice sympathetic joy, the more we come to realize that the happiness we share with others is inseparable from our own happiness.