



Chapter 35 – An appropriate response – Appreciative Joy

“Joy arises when we celebrate the happiness of another, for in that moment our hearts grow wider than the small self.” ~ Jack Kornfield,

“When we learn to delight in what is good in ourselves, we are no longer driven by lack. Joy becomes the expression of enoughness.” ~ Christina Feldman

The joy of well-being

Having embraced Gotama (the Buddha’s) third realisation that ‘Freedom’ from cravings, aversions, compulsions and confusion can be personally experienced and verified, we now cultivate the appropriate heart response for this third stage of our journey – ‘Appreciative Joy’ (*Muditā*).

This is the third of the four *Brahma Viharas* (Divine Abodes) of Buddhism, the qualities that form the resilient ropes that bind our raft together. Recognising moments of peace, non-craving, and skillful action is inherently joyful and ‘Appreciative Joy’ is the heart’s spontaneous gladness when it witnesses growth, virtue, and freedom.

Dimensions of Joy

Appreciative joy is a quality we intentionally cultivate – an outward-facing gladness that responds to the well-being, successes, and small moments of goodness in our own lives and in the lives of others. It softens the heart, steadies the mind, and reminds us that joy does not only arise from our own achievements, but from recognising and honouring the flourishing of anyone we encounter.

In contrast, ‘Energising Joy’ (chapter 47) is more spontaneous – a natural uplift, zest, or rapture that can emerge as our practice deepens and as the hard edges of grasping begin to fall away. Energetic Joy is bright, buoyant joy often arrives unbidden, a side-effect of letting go rather than something we strive to create. For now, our task is simpler and more foundational: to build the resilient, warm, and ever-renewable heart of appreciative joy, trusting that energetic joy may

bloom in its own time as our practice matures.

‘Appreciative Joy’ is the capacity to genuinely rejoice in and appreciate well-being, both our own and that of others. This gladness is crucial because it functions as a form of wholesome reward. When we see that unwholesome states have been abandoned, gladness arises. This joy and gladness are not distractions but confirmations that reactivity has paused. This felt lift arises from *letting go* rather than from *getting*, distinguishing it from the joy of compulsive pleasure.

Why cultivate Appreciative Joy?

Because each moment we pause to recognise something good – a small freedom, a skilful choice, a gentle shift in behaviour – we strengthen the neural pathways that make these wholesome states more familiar and more likely to reappear. Appreciative Joy directly counters the mind’s habitual tilt toward negativity: it softens despair, loosens the grip of cynicism, and dissolves envy or self-pity by reminding us that goodness is not scarce. At the same time, it fuels a steady, wholesome motivation (Noble Desire– Chapter 21), encouraging us to keep moving along the path by taking joy in our own progress and in the flourishing of others. And gradually, it broadens our whole perspective – shifting our attention from what is missing or wrong toward what is possible, nourishing, and deeply connected.

The importance of ‘Self-Appreciation’

Appreciative Joy is the wholehearted celebration of happiness, success, virtue, and freedom wherever it is found, free from comparison or self-interest.

Crucially, this includes ‘Self-Appreciation’ – learning to genuinely appreciate our own positive qualities, efforts made on this path, moments of peace, and small successes without false modesty or self-criticism. For many on this path, this can be challenging due to ingrained patterns of negativity, but it is essential for building self-worth and sustainable motivation. As the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön writes: “*Rejoicing in yourself – your courage, your humour, your wisdom – is not arrogance but sanity.*” When we accept ourselves fully, the light of joy begins to shine, leading to self-respect and sufficiency.

Appreciating the smooth sailing of our raft

In our RAFT to Freedom metaphor, Appreciative Joy is the joyful celebration of the Captain, Navigator, and Crew when the vessel catches favourable winds, experiences smooth sailing in moments of non-craving, or sees the safe shore drawing nearer. This shared joy strengthens the 'Appropriate Response' rope, making the entire structure more resilient and the voyage more uplifting and sustainable.

To understand Appreciative Joy more fully, it is helpful to recognise its 'near' and 'far' enemies – the distorted states that can masquerade as joy or stand in direct opposition to it. The far enemies are envy and jealousy, the tightening of the heart that resents another's good fortune or feels threatened by it. These states pull us away from connection and reinforce the belief that happiness is limited or competitive.

More subtle is the near enemy, which takes the form of exuberance or giddy excitement rooted in pleasant experience. Although it feels positive, this excitement is often tied to attachment, craving, or the hope that pleasure will last. Unlike true appreciative joy, it depends on conditions being just right. Authentic Appreciative Joy, by contrast, is steady and selfless: a quiet, spacious gladness for well-being itself – wherever it appears, in ourselves or in others.

How to practise Appreciative Joy:

1. Start with someone easy:

Bring to mind someone whose happiness naturally brings you gladness. Dwell on their good fortune and let appreciation arise.

Offer them warm-hearted phrases such as:

“How wonderful you are in your being,
I delight that you are here.
I take joy in your good fortune,
May your happiness continue and increase.”

~ Sri Lankan blessing translated by John Peacock

2. Extend to yourself (Self-Appreciation):

Reflect on your own efforts, qualities, and small successes.

Offer yourself powerful self-affirming phrases such as:

“How wonderful I am in my being,
I delight that I am here.
I take joy in my good fortune,

May my happiness continue and increase.”

~ Alternative phrases suggested by Christina Feldman

3. Extend gradually:

Widen the circle to neutral people.

When grounded in equanimity, extend even toward difficult people.

Eventually, radiate appreciative joy to all beings, without exception

4. Daily life practice:

Integrate this practice with mindfulness. Notice how Appreciative Joy feels in the body – warmth, buoyancy, softening. Rest attention on these sensations to stabilise the feeling. Look for opportunities to feel Appreciative Joy in others’ successes, kindnesses, or your own positive actions.

Keep a brief gratitude or joy journal to reinforce the habit.

Self-reflections

Explore your relationship with joy and appreciation:

- ★ How easy or difficult is it to feel genuinely happy about successes or positive qualities in yourself, and what internal voices commonly arise?
- ★ How easy or difficult is it to feel genuinely happy for others’ good fortune or success, and to what extent do comparison or envy tend to appear?
- ★ What kinds of events, actions, or qualities most readily spark feelings of Appreciative Joy?
- ★ How can one distinguish between a stable, grounded sense of gladness and a more fleeting excitement or pleasure?
- ★ When attempting ‘Self-Appreciation’, what typical thoughts, emotions, or forms of resistance tend to arise?
- ★ Where in the body is gladness or appreciation most often felt, and is this a familiar or unfamiliar sensation?
- ★ In what ways might actively cultivating ‘Appreciative Joy’ influence overall mood, resilience, and motivation on the path of practice?

Journaling prompts

Use writing to cultivate Appreciative Joy:

- ★ **Joy/Appreciation log:** Keep a log specifically noting moments (internal or

external) that sparked feelings of gladness or appreciation.

- ★ **Self-Appreciation:** Write down three things you genuinely appreciate about yourself today – perhaps an effort made, a kind thought, a moment of awareness, or simply your resilience.
- ★ **Rejoicing with others:** Think of someone who has recently experienced success or happiness. Write a short reflection focusing on feeling genuine joy for them, setting aside any comparison.
- ★ **Appreciative phrases for self:** Practice writing out and repeating phrases for self-appreciation for 5 minutes. Note any resistance or feelings that arise during the practice.
- ★ **Countering envy:** Recall a situation where you felt envy or comparison. Gently explore the underlying feeling, then consciously try to shift towards appreciating your own positive qualities or progress in that moment, or wishing the other person well.
- ★ **Write a short 'thank you' letter:** to yourself for one skillful choice you made this week, no matter how small.
- ★ **Observe the world around you:** for 10 minutes. Write down three examples of simple, ordinary goodness you witnessed (a kind gesture, a growing plant, and so forth.) and how it felt to appreciate them.

Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of Appreciative Joy, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** Cultivating positive emotions like joy and appreciation engages reward pathways (dopamine) in healthy ways, distinct from compulsive urges. These pathways release dopamine and oxytocin, promoting motivation and connection rather than craving. Practices like gratitude and compassion are associated with increased activity in brain regions linked to social cognition, empathy, and positive affect. Positive affect broadens cognitive perspective (Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory) and improves resilience under stress.
- ★ **Psychology:** Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory posits that positive emotions broaden our awareness and build personal resources. In therapeutic contexts, joy and self-appreciation reinforce well-being and counter shame. Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) helps individuals build a sense of inner warmth through appreciation of their own goodness. Celebrating successes is a key principle in behavior change for reinforcing

desired actions, and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) uses positive reinforcement to embed healthier patterns.

- ★ **Philosophy:** In Buddhist ethics, joy is the fruit of integrity. The joy of blamelessness (*anavajja-pīti*) is the serene satisfaction that comes from harmlessness. Gotama taught that “*from freedom from remorse comes gladness; from gladness, joy*”. Concepts of flourishing (*eudaimonia*) often include experiencing appropriate joy and appreciation, and the capacity to rejoice in the good is seen as a mark of virtuous character.

Remember to remember

Appreciative Joy is the appropriate heart practice for the third stage of our journey, allowing us to truly experience and verify freedom by celebrating its arrival. It is the skillful response to recognising Gotama's third realisation – that the cessation of suffering is possible and directly experienceable.

By consciously cultivating gladness for our own and others' well-being, we counter negativity, fuel motivation, strengthen resilience, and make the journey to freedom itself more joyful and sustainable. Joy matures when self-appreciation replaces self-criticism, as when the heart accepts itself, joy becomes the natural rhythm of being alive.

“Rejoicing in yourself — your courage, your humour, your wisdom — is not arrogance but sanity.” ~ Pema Chödrön

“Radical acceptance is the willingness to experience ourselves and our lives as they are. Only then can our natural joy and belonging shine through.” ~ Tara Brach

Sutta References

- ★ **Brahma-vihāra Suttas (AN 4.125): The Divine Abodes**

- **Summary:** Defines appreciative joy as the third Divine Abode, described as pervading all directions with a heart imbued with gladness – abundant, exalted, and immeasurable – free from hostility and ill will, aroused by seeing beings who are prosperous and happy. This is the primary text defining appreciative joy as an intentional, cultivated practice of the heart.

- ★ **Upanisā Sutta (SN 12.23): The Causal Sequence**

- **Summary:** Details the "bottom-up" sequence of states that lead to liberation, showing that freedom from remorse leads to gladness (*pāmojja*), which in turn gives rise to energetic joy (*Pīti*). This helps distinguish the *cultivated* appreciative joy of this chapter from the *arising* energetic joy we explore in Chapter 47.

★ **Itivuttaka 27 (or 2.19): On the Merit of the Divine Abodes**

- **Summary:** States that developing even a moment of loving-kindness – and by extension, the other Divine Abodes – surpasses many other meritorious deeds in brightness and radiance. This highlights the profound power of these heart practices.

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