

Finding refuge in gratitude

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Isn't it amazing that we can do this? That we're all here together, that this technology exists, that our minds and bodies work? Sometimes, when we begin to reflect on the small aspects of our lives that we take for granted, it snowballs into this overwhelming sense of amazement. We take so much for granted. We wake up in the morning and think, "Oh yeah, another day." We mentally go over our agenda, our plans, and take for granted the simple fact that we can get out of bed and breathe.

Sometimes, life jolts us out of this complacency—maybe through illness, an accident, or a sudden misfortune. We realize that our good fortune isn't guaranteed, that stability is an illusion. Yet, there's a practice called "Mudita," a form of rejoicing in the good fortune of others, which can guide us even through difficult circumstances. Our natural inclination might be to dwell on what's wrong—a tendency ingrained in us by evolution to ensure survival—but we don't have to stay in that space. Focusing solely on difficulties is not helpful and can become a heavy burden.

I remember an experience from last November when Heidi and I were in Belgium, participating in an online retreat focused on mudita. One day, as we walked through a nearby town, an ambulance passed by. Ordinarily, my first thought would be about the distress of the person inside, but because of our mudita practice, my immediate reaction was one of gratitude. I thought, "How lucky they are to have an ambulance, to have people who can help them, to have access to good medical care."

Even in challenging situations, we can find those little glimmers of good fortune. Connecting with these moments uplifts and balances the mind. It's not about denying difficulties but allowing in what is beneficial and cultivating gratitude for it. For example, when I arrived in Australia after a difficult journey, I became ill almost immediately. Yet, I found solace in the fact that I could rest without any obligations, that I had access to medicine and medical support. This gratitude, even in the face of hardship, is part of the practice.

Life is inherently complicated and difficult, as the Buddha acknowledged. He never sugarcoated this truth. Instead, he offered us a path to refuge: choosing where to focus our minds, inclining toward the wholesome and what we can be grateful for. Whether through the practice of mudita, metta (loving-kindness), or simply being present, these practices help us find balance. They allow us to hold our experiences with kindness and without denial, embracing the reality of the moment with a sense of gratitude.

Taking refuge in the Dhamma means understanding and accepting the way things are. It requires patience, kindness, and often, a lot of courage. This practice goes against the grain of our conditioning and the consumer-driven culture we live in, which tells us that happiness can be bought or found outside ourselves. But true refuge comes from within, from the practice, and from the support of our spiritual community.

The Buddha himself emphasized the importance of spiritual friendship, calling it the whole of the holy life. We draw inspiration and strength from each other, knowing we are not alone on this sometimes difficult path. The practice allows us to find moments of peace and contentment, even in the midst of life's challenges. These small moments of release, these "mini-Nibbana" experiences, are precious gifts from our practice.

So, as we continue on this journey, let's not take these moments for granted. Let's recognize them as the profound gifts they are, fruits of our practice, and share them with each other to inspire and uplift. Isn't it amazing?