

## Sympathetic Joy: The Third Abode, by Roshi Joan Halifax

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### **The third boundless abode (of the *Brahmaviharas*) is**

**sympathetic or noble joy.** Sympathetic joy has three aspects: joy in the good fortune of others; joy in the virtue of others; and altruistic joy, that is, engendering joy to benefit others. The first is that joy we feel when we realize that someone is in a favorable situation, that she is free from pain, that he has moved past his story and is finally relaxed and at ease. It is this kind of joy a caregiver feels when she hears that a beloved family member from far away can visit her dying patient, or when his illness has spontaneously receded from the shore of his life. This is the joy that fills the heart when good things happen to another.

Then there is the joy that one experiences by being in the presence of another's loving virtue. I felt and shared this when one day I visited a friend's child who was dying of cancer. I walked into her room and a smile broke out on this remarkable child's face that caught me in its light. I could not help but shine it back to her. She was pure joy, and at that moment, so was I. Maybe this is co-sympathetic joy, as her beauty and courage truly moved me and activated my intrinsic joy. This is the joy one feels when in the presence of a great teacher, a caring parent, a beloved friend, or a wonderful person. Their good heart activates your good heart.

The third form of sympathetic joy is the generation of joy to benefit others. One day, I walked into a hospital room of a man who had barely survived hypothermia and frostbite. Although he was doing adequately after his ordeal, he was depressed and irritable. Instead of identifying with his misery or consoling him, I found myself seeing through his suffering to a place that was free from it. I met his unhappiness with affectionate joy, and within minutes saw that he seemed to have been "infected" by my state of mind. He began to open up and smile at his unhappiness; then he began to relax and appreciate the care he was receiving. Altruistic joy can absorb and transform the energy of

depression, self-pity, envy, competitiveness, resentment, and anger. It is an expression of compassion in action that is naturally free of narcissism and thoughts of oneself.

Sometimes fostering joy may be difficult when something good happens to another person, or when we meet a person of great integrity, or even when we realize that it may really help to generate joy to benefit another. We just don't seem to have the energy or will to arouse joy. Judgment and envy, comparisons and insecurity: these narrow our world and make sympathetic and altruistic joy difficult to experience. When a caregiver is worn to the bone, she might feel she doesn't have the resources to offer anything but negativity or dullness.

**We can learn and practice offering joy to others, even though there might be a touch of pretending there in the beginning.**

Years ago, Sharon Salzberg assured me that it was okay to do these practices even if we are angry or depressed. From recent research in neuroscience we have learned that these areas of the brain can be intentionally cultivated. Like a violinist whose talent for playing increases with practice, we can also increase our joy with practice.

To someone who doubts that they can offer joy to a dying person, I say, "Why not?! Try anyway. See what happens in your own heart when you guide your behavior in accord with your intention." In the end, it's a lot less fatiguing to offer joy to others than sorrow.

So we can practice sympathetic joy. In sitting with a dying person, take the time to enjoy the simplest gifts of life, and see if a measure of joy can be engendered and shared in the present moment: the light of a late-autumn afternoon that floods the bedroom, the sound and smell of rain in the heat of summer, the notes of a piano concerto floating in from a close neighbor's house. Also look deeply into the person's life and recognize all the good that is there and mark it; this is taking joy in their virtue. Too often we just see pain, suffering, neurosis, a veritable textbook of misery before us. **Look more deeply and find this one's good heart and let yourself meet it with your own.**