

More Joy

It's important to take joy in your determined effort.

It's important to take joy in the fact that you've stayed with it for as long as you have. I try to take a moment, every now and again, to recognize that I've been practicing the dharma for more than 20 years. I take joy, acknowledging this indisputable fact, acknowledging the blessing of my determination.

However long you've been following the path, if it's been twenty years, ten years, five years, five months, five weeks, five days, you can take joy, acknowledging the blessing of your determination.

You can do it right now.

Pause.

Bring your attention in to your heart center.

Recognize that you've been practicing the dharma for however long it's been. Recognize that it's a blessing to have been able to follow the path for this long.

Connect to a feeling of gratitude.

Take joy. Connect to the quality of joy, the brightness in the heart.

Some students have difficulty with this practice and others similar to it. They think it's self-indulgent. But it's essential that we recognize our accomplishments. Our capacity to recognize ourselves and take joy will lead us toward true happiness in our lives, and when we begin to experience greater happiness, the other people in our lives will benefit significantly. In other words, everybody benefits.

It's said that dharma students, in making an effort to abandon the unskillful and develop the skillful, are "doing what has to be done." It's said we can take joy, knowing we're doing what has to be done. This is a classic Buddhist reflection, another way to cultivate joy.

Taking a step back, you can reflect, recognizing that you're doing what you've got to do, in order to end your suffering, in order to make the most of the time you have in this life, in order to find a greater happiness.

Dharma practice is often difficult. The road will have many ups and downs, twists and turns. You'll hit all kinds of barriers. But when you struggle, you can take joy, realizing that you're on the path, that you're doing what has to be done.

In contemplating that you're "doing what has to be done" you can acknowledge that, in following the Buddha's path, you're helping to alleviate the suffering in the world. You can reflect on the fact that you're helping to create a better world, a more compassionate world, a more peaceful world. You might hesitate to accept this view. You might think it's a bold notion. You might think it's farfetched. But the truth is, it's the truth. In practicing the dharma, you're doing something profound. What you're doing is important. It's meaningful.

As a dharma student you can take joy, recognizing the role you're playing in carrying forth the Buddha's teachings. In following the path, you're perpetuating the Buddha's message, you're keeping the dharma alive. Again, you might think this is an exaggerated or immodest

claim. But again, it's the truth. It's how the dharma is passed on. It's the day-to-day effort made by sincere practitioners that enables the dharma to remain alive and vibrant. It's the determination of individuals, like you, that keeps the dharma going. The truth is, you're doing an extraordinarily important job in walking the Buddha's long road. Your efforts will have an effect on others for years to come.

In teaching dharma students to develop determination, I often talk about "seeing things through to the end." I encourage students to finish what they've started, if it's a period of sitting meditation, a six-week course, an eight-day retreat. When you see things through to the end, you cultivate determination. When you see things through, you come to know a sublime dharma joy. It's joyful to see things through.

Many people suffer from a tendency to quit before they get to the end. In dharma practice, this is highly problematic. There are considerable drawbacks in not seeing things through. We foster a habit of unskillful effort. We condition laziness. We lose respect for ourselves. We feel something rather antithetical to the joy that we know when we see things through.

Having participated in many day-long retreats as teacher, organizer and student, I'm aware of the tendency that students have to leave early. At DMC we hold day-long retreats every month. In teaching day-longs, I emphasize the importance of staying to the end. I explain that there's much joy in finishing what you've started.

I'm glad to report that our students almost never leave before a retreat ends (actually, I can't remember the last time somebody left early). During years of practice, the students in our group have learned to develop the quality of determination. They've learned to take joy in their persistent effort.

At the end of retreats, we bring the day to a close by reflecting on the blessing of our effort, our determination, the fact that we've seen things through to the end. We take joy.

After completing any dharma-related task, it's always a good idea to acknowledge that you've seen things through. It's always a good idea to take joy.

This is how your practice grows.

It's been noted that western dharma students participating in silent retreats tend to bring a grimness to the practice. This sort of grimness, however, isn't a pre-requisite for meditation practice. Far from it. The fact is, it's an impediment. According to the Buddha, it's essential to approach meditation practice with a bright heart. It's essential to practice joyfully.

There must be joy in your heart, in your mind, for concentration to develop and strengthen. This might seem paradoxical. We might assume that we develop concentration so that we can find joy. But the Buddha is very clear about the cause and effect process. There must be joy, he says, if we're going to build concentration, if we're going to cultivate jhana. There must be brightness in the mind. If you think about it, it makes sense. If you don't feel good about yourself, if you're downhearted, you're not going to want to spend time alone with yourself, sitting in silence, in meditation; you're going to want to get as far away from yourself as you can possibly get. If, on the other hand, you feel pretty good about yourself, if there's joy in your heart, you won't mind hanging out, in the present moment, with yourself.

In writing a chapter on "Effort & Determination," I'd be remiss not to talk about the pivotal role that community plays in developing ongoing, persistent effort. As you move along the Buddha's long road, you're going to need support. Without the support of others you're not going to get very far along the path. In years of teaching, I haven't yet met anybody who's been able to continue forward in dharma practice without being part of some sort of community.

You're going to need help. It's the way it is. It's the way the path is. It's the way life is. You're not meant to go through it alone. After deciding to teach, the Buddha immediately formed a sangha, a community of monks. He knew that community was necessary. Without community, people weren't going to be able to stay with it, weren't going to be able to make progress.

We need the support and guidance provided by teachers. We need teachers to instruct us in the basic skills, to teach us to develop skillful qualities, concentration, insight. We need teachers to tell us when we've veered, to show us how to get back on the road, to help us overcome complacency and laziness.

We need teachers to alert us to the long term consequences of our actions. When we take certain unskillful actions, the results of these actions may not be immediately apparent. We might not experience the drawbacks of our unskillfulness until we're further along the road. Teachers, having studied the long term consequences of their own actions, having learned from their own experience, are able to indicate to us that there are drawbacks in particular actions that we might be apt to take.

We need the support of our peers, the wise beings who are traveling the same road we're traveling. Our fellow students lift us up, give us strength. In undertaking any demanding task, like practicing the dharma, we need companions who are involved in the same undertaking, who speak the same language, who understand the process and are willing to share their experience of going through the process. It's extraordinarily helpful, as we engage in the different stages of dharma practice, to know that there are others who are engaging in a similar process, encountering the same sorts of trials and difficulties, the same joys and wonderments. To put it simply, we need others to talk to about what we're going through, as we're going through it.

As anybody who's meditated in a group knows, when we meditate with others we find we're more capable, more able to develop concentration. When we practice with others, our practice thrives. Beginning students notice this right away; they find they're able to meditate for longer stretches, with greater effectiveness, when they meditate with others.

There's a simple explanation as to why concentration strengthens when you practice with others: when you practice with others, your mind brightens. Your heart opens. Joy emerges. It's a blessing to be able to practice the dharma with others. Recognizing this, you experience joy. In turn, your meditation flourishes. The joy is what makes it possible.

There's joy in doing it together. It's one of the great joys you'll come to know as you practice the dharma.