On the Joy That Was Not Taken

A Meditation on Muditā, the Practice of Appreciative Joy

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November 14, 2026

Today, as I was leaving a parking lot, I noticed a woman wearing a lovely sweater.

I told her I liked it.

She thanked me.

And we continued on our separate ways.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the exchange.

We did not know one another.

We did not stop to discuss our lives.

Neither of us had anything to gain from the encounter beyond the small kindness of acknowledging something pleasant.

And yet, I found myself thinking about it afterward.

How very little is required, sometimes, to make room for joy.

Not to manufacture it.

Not to demand it.

Simply to make room.

There are days when happiness seems very far away.

Perhaps we are tired.

Perhaps something has disappointed us.

Perhaps we have spent so long attending to the difficulties of the world that we have forgotten how many small and beautiful things continue to happen within it.

On such a day, I would like to suggest a little experiment.

Look around.

Find someone.

Notice something about them that you genuinely appreciate.

Perhaps they have a beautiful smile.

Perhaps they have chosen a particularly wonderful sweater.

Perhaps they have been patient with someone who needed patience, or kind when kindness was not required of them.

Perhaps they are simply doing their work with care.

If the moment is appropriate, tell them.

You need not make a speech.

You need not explain your philosophy.

You might simply say,

I like your sweater.

That was very kind of you.

You have a wonderful laugh.

And then allow the moment to be what it is.

You have noticed something good.

You have given that goodness a little room to be seen.

And perhaps, in doing so, you will discover that your own heart has become a little lighter.

There is a word in the Buddhist tradition for a particular kind of happiness.

Muditā.

It is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy, appreciative joy, or the happiness we experience in recognizing the happiness and good fortune of others.

It is one of the Four Immeasurables, alongside loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity.

This is a curious sort of happiness.

It does not require us to possess what another person possesses.

It does not require us to be the person receiving the compliment, achieving the accomplishment, or enjoying the good fortune.

It asks only that we recognize something good and allow ourselves to be glad.

Consider a flower growing beside a path.

We do not need to pick it to enjoy its beauty.

We do not need to carry it home.

We do not need to prove that our own garden contains a finer flower.

We may simply stop for a moment.

There is a flower.

How lovely.

And then we may continue walking.

The flower has lost nothing.

Neither have we.

Indeed, something has been added to our day.

A moment of appreciation.

A little happiness that did not need to be purchased, competed for, or taken from anyone.

Human beings are sometimes taught to regard happiness as a scarce resource.

We compare our lives with the lives of others.

We notice what they have accomplished and remember what we have not.

We see another person's good fortune and wonder why our own has been delayed.

These feelings are human.

We need not condemn ourselves for having them.

But we may gently ask whether another person's happiness must necessarily be a judgment upon our own.

If someone has received good news, must our own news become worse?

If someone is beautiful, must we become less beautiful?

If someone has found a moment of peace, has there been less peace left for us?

Perhaps not.

Perhaps joy is something that can grow when it is shared.

And perhaps the practice begins with something as ordinary as noticing another person's lovely sweater.

There is no need to force ourselves into happiness.

There is no need to pretend that sorrow has disappeared.

Muditā does not ask us to deny suffering.

It asks us to remember that suffering is not the only thing happening.

Somewhere, someone is laughing.

Someone has learned something new.

Someone has finished a difficult task.

Someone has made a beautiful thing.

Someone has been kind.

And we are permitted to be glad.

Even if our own day has been difficult.

Even if our own heart is tired.

Even if, for the moment, we cannot find much happiness in our own circumstances.

We may still recognize a little happiness in the world.

And if we cannot feel glad immediately, that is all right, too.

We may begin simply by noticing.

There is no examination to pass.

No required emotional result.

Only an invitation.

Look around.

Find someone.

Notice something good.

And if you can, let them know.

Perhaps their day will become a little brighter.

Perhaps yours will, too.

Or perhaps nothing remarkable will happen.

You will have offered one small kindness, and the world will continue turning.

That is enough.

For a moment, let us breathe.

Breathing in, I recognize the goodness around me.

Breathing out, I allow myself to appreciate it.

Breathing in, I know that another person's happiness need not diminish my own.

Breathing out, I am glad that happiness exists.

And when we are ready, we may return to our day.

There may still be difficulties waiting for us.

There may still be work to do.

But perhaps we will carry with us the memory of something lovely.

A smile.

A kindness.

A sweater.

And the quiet discovery that we do not have to own a beautiful thing to rejoice in its existence.