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Abstract

Pleasure (*sukha*), Bliss (*prīti*), Rejoicing (*muditā*): Varieties of Joy in Indian Buddhist Moral Thought.

Although it is much better known for its refined accounts of suffering (*duḥkha*), the Indian Buddhist tradition has a surprisingly rich and nuanced account of various kinds of pleasure and joy. This talk surveys three prominent examples: *sukha* (pleasure), *prīti* (bliss) and *muditā* (rejoicing), with an eye to their significance for philosophical, and in particular moral thought. I begin by describing two broad categories of mental events that these forms of joy fall into; *vedanā* (hedonic sensation) and *kuśala or akuśala dharma* (skillful or unskillful mental qualities). Doing so illustrates how divergent these mental factors are, despite the fact that it is relatively natural to translate each of them with the English term “joy” or one of its synonyms. Next, I examine all three factors, illustrating their positive and negative qualities according to Buddhist moral psychology. *Sukha* (pleasure) is seen as extremely dangerous for ordinary people because of its tendencies to incite craving (*trṣṇā*), but in certain circumstances it appears to play a positive role in increasing well-being. *Prīti* (bliss) both increases, and then finally hinders concentration, and also possesses epistemic value in helping an individual understand the deepest Buddhist truths. *Muditā* (rejoicing) is one of the four divine abidings (*brahma-viharas*) of compassion (*karuṇā*), love (*mettā/maitrī*) and equanimity (*upekṣā*) which act as cardinal virtues in much of the Buddhist tradition. In this talk, I allude to its relevance for addressing concerns about moral demandingness in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The talk not only draws attention to the rich accounts of varieties of joy in Buddhist texts, but also allows me to illustrate one of the key features of Buddhist moral psychology—its strategy of distinguishing between what appear to be very similar mental states as a way of carefully considering the positive and negative qualities of each.