

Schadenfreude

A German term. No one culture has words for every human emotion. Just because a culture does not name an emotion does not mean that it does not exist for that culture. If such an emotion is ignored, it could still lurk insidiously so that we do not even know it or are unable to acknowledge it when it strikes. However, when we do have a word for an emotion, then we are more aware of it, so that we get a handle on it; we can understand it better and so keep it in check.

The Germans have such a special word (without any equivalent English term) for a significantly negative emotion: *schadenfreude* (literally, “harm-joy”), meaning “delighting in another’s misfortune.” The word probably came from the Greek “epicaricacy.”¹ The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), deeply influenced by eastern philosophy, especially Buddhism, says that *schadenfreude* is “a mischievous delight in the misfortune of others, which remains the worst trait in human nature. It is a feeling which is closely akin to cruelty.”²

The Book of Proverbs in the Christian Bible mentions an emotion similar to *schadenfreude*: “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the Lord see it, and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.”³ This is ironically a mixed emotion. A Christian should not rejoice in an enemy’s fall so that God keeps on being angry with him (and punishes him). This is still rejoicing in the enemy’s misfortune, or to hold on to the conception of “enemy,” that is, someone we have trouble with and lack our love.⁴

Scientific studies. In 2002, the *New York Times* cited a number of scientific studies on *schadenfreude*. Many such studies were based on social comparison theory, the idea that when people around us have bad luck, we seem to feel better about ourselves.⁵ Other researchers have found that people with low self-esteem are more likely to feel *schadenfreude* than are people who have high self-esteem.⁶

In a more mundane context, *schadenfreude* is often found in sports. In 2003, a study of the German and Dutch football teams and their fans show that *schadenfreude* can be perceived as being legitimate, that is, in directing this malicious pleasure to a sports rival.⁷

In 2009, a group of social psychologists studied people’s capacity to feel *schadenfreude* in response to negative events in politics. The study reported that the likelihood of experiencing *schadenfreude* depends upon whether an individual’s own party or the opposing party is suffering harm. This suggests that politics is a prime territory for occasions of *schadenfreude*, especially for those who identify strongly with their political party.⁸

¹ See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (1108M-10) & David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, Univ of Toronto, 2006. See *Brahma, vihāra*, SD 38.5 (5.1): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.5-Brahmavihara-piya.pdf>

² Arthur Schopenhauer, “[The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer On Human Nature](#)” (Project Gutenberg file): search for “schadenfreude.”

³ Proverbs 24:17-18, The New Oxford Annotated Bible.

⁴ On unconditional love, see “Unconditional love” (R66) 090107 in *Simple Joys 1* 4.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-ebook-2011-Piya-Tan-low-res.pdf>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_comparison_theory.

⁶ Warren St John, “[Sorrow So Sweet: A Guilty Pleasure in Another’s Woe.](#)” *New York Times* 24 Aug 2002.

⁷ C Leach, R Spears, N R Branscombe & B Doosje, “Malicious pleasure: Schadenfreude at the suffering of another group,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84.5 2003:932–943.

⁸ D J Y Combs, C A J Powell, D R Schurtz, & R H Smith, “[Politics, schadenfreude, and ingroup identification: The sometimes happy things about a poor economy and death.](#)” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45 2009: 635-646: <http://spp.sagepub.com/content/3/1/63.full.pdf>.

Early Buddhism is clearly against anyone inciting any negative emotion or feeling in others. Such negative qualities are all manifestation of the unwholesome roots, that is, greed, hate and delusion. Fear is often included in the set, when these are then called the four biases (*agati*). These are the motivational factors for all of our negative actions.

In **the Tālapuṭa Sutta** (S 42.2), for example, the Buddha explains to the stage manager and dancer, Tālapuṭa, that it is bad for anyone to incite lust, hate or delusion in others, which would induce them to commit bad karma. Any kind of occupation or profession that causes others to have any negative emotion is a wrong livelihood. In fact, the karmic consequence of such an unwholesome act is simply dire: they would be reborn in a hellish suffering state.⁹

Conversely, from this Sutta, it is clear that we are not to rejoice in another's misfortune, much less to incur misfortune in others. In **the Dhammapada**, the Buddha proclaims

Victory breeds hatred.	The defeated dwell in suffering.
The peaceful dwell happily,	giving up victory and defeat. (Dh 201)

Does this mean that Buddhism is against all competitive sports (such as the Olympics)? The teaching here refers to the moral quality of our actions and to right livelihood. If competitive sports are to encourage or measure human excellence, Buddhism has nothing against it. However, it is nevertheless a worldly affair in which a renunciant would not participate because he has voluntarily dedicated himself to spiritual pursuits, which are non-competitive and non-measurable, or cooperative and immeasurable, in terms of mental cultivation and spiritual awakening.

Indeed, lovingkindness (*mettā*) —an unconditional acceptance of self and others — is a vitally important quality that we are all advised to cultivate for our own happiness and health here and hereafter. Loving-kindness is also the foundation of a well known set of meditation practices called the “divine abodes” (*brahma, vihāra*).

The second divine abode is compassion, being kind to others even when they do not deserve it. The third abode is “gladness” (*muditā*), an appreciative joy in the goodness and good fortunes of others. Both compassion and gladness are rough opposites of *schadenfreude*. Gladness, its more direct opposite, is like a mother's joy at her child's happiness.¹⁰ It is a wholesome rejoicing in the success and happiness of others, especially when they deserve it.

To some extent, the rare and “unofficial” English word, “compersion”¹¹ is a synonym of *muditā*, but the word has its problems.¹² **Compersion** was coined by the Kerista Commune in San Francisco¹³ in the late 20th century. It is an empathetic state of happiness and joy experienced when another feels happiness and joy, such as parents' pride in their children's accomplishments (such as when they marry) or our own excitement for the successes of our friends and others. However, it is more commonly used to describe a person's positive feelings when a partner is enjoying another relationship.¹⁴ As such, it is an opposite of envy.

⁹ S 42.2, SD 20.8: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/20.8-Talaputa-S-s42.2-piya.pdf>

¹⁰ SD 38.5 (3.5.2). Vimmi:ESK 191; Vism 9.108/321.

¹¹ This word is not found in any of the major dictionaries, as it is not widely used enough.

¹² SD 38.5 (5.1): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.5-Brahmavihara-piya.pdf>

¹³ Kerista was a new hippie religion started in New York City in 1956, and a later generation based in San Francisco. They were closely associated with the rise of the Hippie movements of the 1960s in the US.

¹⁴ An example of compersion is **Uttarā Nanda, mātā**'s attitude towards her husband: see SD 3.8(4). However, it should be noted that this is a commentarial story. No such story is found in the suttas.

The greatest downside of *schadenfreude* is that it is against the golden rule: we should treat others the way we want others to treat us. We do not want others to rejoice in our pains. In most cases, we would rather that we get some help in sorting out our difficulties. Its opposite, gladness or appreciative joy, is a vital positive emotion that contributes to our living like angels or gods, a veritable heaven on earth, true happiness in our hearts.

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