

Awakening Joy: Cultivating “Gladness of the Wholesome”

Buddhist meditation has been my salvation. It has helped open my heart and led me to greater peace than I ever knew possible. However, after several years of practice I began to find I was approaching the Dharma with a grim and solemn attitude. At one point in my practice I mistook the teachings to mean that to enjoy life was un-Buddhist. Being passionate by temperament—whether with sports or music or meditation—this caused me much confusion. Although I had learned something about getting less caught in attachment and accepting things as they are, gone were the vitality, aliveness and enthusiasm for life that were so much a part of who I knew myself to be. During this period, I remembered with nostalgia the earlier days, when there had been such zeal and gratitude for the transformation that I felt was taking place. I had somehow lost my joy along the way and wondered if there was even a place for it in the spiritual journey?

In my narrowness of vision I had a missed basic point: Buddhism is really a path that cultivates genuine happiness. After all, the Buddha was known as The Happy One. In fact, in the first sentence of his book *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama says, "The purpose of life is to be happy."

I don't think my experience is so unusual among earnest Buddhist practitioners. Although one can see a smile on every Buddhist statue, joy is sometimes overlooked as being an integral part of the spiritual journey. We hear about getting off the wheel of samsara and may think that the aim of practice is to

reject enjoyment of life's blessings. But that is a misunderstanding. The way Ajahn Sumedho puts it, "Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower you should contemplate its decay, or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse...That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha and anatta, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty. Once you have insight, then one finds one enjoys, delights in the beauty and the goodness of things. Truth, beauty and goodness delight us; in them we find joy."

When I finally emerged from my dark period and reconnected with my natural joy, I decided to take a fresh look at the teachings to flesh out what I considered an under-emphasized but key component of practice. By shifting the emphasis from the usual stated Buddhist goal of ending suffering to that of developing happiness, we find a wealth of teachings and practices that offer a powerful prescription for awakening joy, not only in deep meditative states but in our day-to-day life. For instance, joy is one of the Factors of Enlightenment, as well as one of the Divine Abodes. Various other teachings on well-being can be found throughout. These states are referred to in Pali in several ways: *pamojja* (gladness/delight), *piti* (rapture/joy), and *sukkha* (happiness/contentment). When I found these teachings I wanted to share them.

A few years ago I began offering a course called "Awakening Joy,"

presenting these Buddhist principles of happiness online and in Berkeley where I live. With over 2000 people having now gone through the Awakening Joy program, I've found that whether one is a seasoned meditator or not, the teachings are profoundly effective in changing the default setting of one's mind and heart towards greater well-being and joy.

Joy comes in many different flavors. For some, it's an energetic radiance; for others it's a quiet feeling of connection. We each have our own way of expressing this state of well-being.

We do not have to create joy. It is an innate quality already within us, however hidden or dormant it may be. As innocent babies we all have a natural joy. We all can still squeal with delight given the right circumstances. When we're not overwhelmed with stress or suffering, this natural state becomes revealed (as often happens on meditation retreats).

The good news is happiness can be consciously developed. A key teaching of the Buddha states: "Whatever the practitioner frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind." We are either making skillful grooves or unpleasant ruts with repetitive habits of thought. They become deeper still when we act on those thoughts. Through inclining the mind toward wholesome states and then acting on those impulses, we begin to shift out habitual thinking. Research has shown that through repetition we strengthen positive neural pathways in the brain.

By nourishing our spirit in healthy ways we create the conditions for well-

being as well as the ability to be balanced with all experience. In one discourse (MN #99), the Buddha points out that when we are performing a wholesome action, for example a generous or kind act, a feeling of gladness naturally arises. He says, "That gladness connected with what is wholesome I call an equipment of mind for overcoming ill will and hostility."

Cultivating wholesome states of well-being in our lives begins with clarity of intention. The clearer we are about our aspiration to open to joy (or happiness or well-being), the more we fuel the process. "Everything rests on the tip of one's motivation," says a Tibetan wisdom teaching. Embodying the metta phrase, *May I be happy* orients our life in a profound way. As we practice facing in the direction of true well-being, with strong intention and patience, we begin to awaken joy.

Alice, a woman with a history of chronic pain accompanied by depression, got very clear on her intention to create more joy in her life. After six months practicing with the support of the group and a 'joy buddy' she reported, "Setting the intention to be more alive and to experience joy has been incredibly powerful. I find that I am less afraid of my constant physical pain. My friends are noticing also that I am having fewer episodes of extreme despair. My long-time on-again-off-again boyfriend proposed. I was very surprised, as I thought he still had doubts about the future of our relationship. Later he explained that he had seen so much progress in the stability of my moods and my ability to live life that he no longer doubted my commitment to 'getting better'."

With clarity of intention, we next use the basic tool of a joyful heart, mindfulness, particularly with regard to noticing wholesome states when they arise. It's easy to miss them unless we have them on our radar. When we feel grateful or happy or calm or compassionate, it registers more deeply if we are present right in the middle of the experience. Paying close attention to when we are feeling good—noticing with interest how it feels in the body and mind—helps us become more directly familiar with the "gladness of the wholesome." Brain research corroborates that when we pay particular attention to positive experiences (or wholesome states) they are registered more deeply in our brains and mind.

What about when we go through hard times? How does inclining towards well-being work then? As the First Noble Truth teaches, *dukkha* is part of life. Awakening joy does not mean living in denial. Tragedies happen. Someone we love goes through major difficulty or dies. We get a bad diagnosis. These are all part of the fabric of life. It's not a question of *if* the hard stuff comes but *when* it comes. We can't slap on a happy face and simply think we should get over it. Our feelings need to be acknowledged and honored.

It helps to understand that the very act of opening up to suffering is part of our practice of awakening joy. Truly happy people are not happy all the time. The Buddha taught that our relationship to what's happening is what determines our suffering or our happiness. We can learn how to open to difficulties honestly while letting ourselves still be nourished by the goodness in life. While going

through a particularly challenging period in her life, Diane practiced staying connected to what was good as well. She described her experience this way: “I have been bombarded with an exceptional number of difficult experiences in the recent weeks. While I haven’t been joyful in the conventional sense, I have maintained awareness of my intention to cultivate joy. I’ve been very aware of compassion and loving kindness in each situation; and I’ve been conscious of allowing positive feelings and happiness to co-exist with the sadness that has naturally accompanied these situations.” When we open up to the joys—the beauty and goodness around us—it gives us a larger container in which to hold the suffering.

Whether we are in the 10,000 joys or the 10,000 sorrows there are many ways to cultivate qualities of well-being. We can choose to do our dharma practice—cultivating generosity, integrity, gratitude, letting go—with the conscious intention of awakening joy. The choice is ours. As Michael, a lifelong self-proclaimed aversive type put it, “I understand now that I have a lot more to do with experiencing joy than I thought. To be joyful had always seemed like luck, or some sort of accident even, and I felt like I was a victim of life’s circumstances. I now see that I have more ‘control’ over how often I experience joy. I can choose to be happy and choose to be unhappy, even miserable. Joy seems to occur more often as a result of this realization.”

By developing and increasing wholesome states, we not only create the conditions for happiness and joy in this moment, but also create the conditions

for awakening a liberated heart. Cultivating goodness, aliveness and joy within us also has a ripple effect. As we access these qualities in ourselves, we help awaken it in others. Our own practice then becomes our gift to everyone we meet.

James Baraz is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock. In addition to teaching classes and retreats in vipassana he's been leading his online "Awakening Joy" course for the last four years. (See www.awakeningjoy.info.) He is currently writing a book, Awakening Joy, with Shoshana Alexander to be published by Bantam in 2009.