

A Joyful Heart in Difficult Times

by James Baraz (Inquiring Mind, Spring, 2005)

No matter what kind of day I've had, I know that waiting to greet me on my return home is my Buddha-ful dog, Pal. His irresistible mug pleads with me to get down on my knees and scratch his belly as only I can. As soon as I hit the floor, I lose myself in his playful innocence and love. My armoring releases as I bury my head in his massive, curly-haired body. I remember to breathe and be present for this delight that gives me perspective and lifts my spirit.

In difficult times we might ask, How can we allow ourselves to be playful and feel joy? For me the answer is, we can't afford *not* to. By inviting playfulness into our hearts we move beyond our tunnel vision to see the totality of life and begin knowing not only the 10,000 sorrows but also the 10,000 joys.

The Buddha spoke of the value of a happy heart. He said that when we cultivate wholesome mind-states—generosity, love, compassion, happiness for others—we experience *pamojja*, translated as “gladness” or “delight.” In the discourse “To Subbha” (MN#19) he remarks, “That gladness connected with the wholesome, I call an equipment of mind . . . an equipment for developing a mind that is without hostility and ill will.” Delight is part of our toolkit for keeping the heart open. Gladness and delight do not merely balance out negative tendencies, they actually transform the mind.

Playfulness and humor are the function of an open mind that can dance even in the midst of very challenging circumstances. We have a choice about how we hold experience. My 78-year old Uncle Mark recently injured his spine in a fall and was left without the use of his legs and arms. Yet his attitude through the ordeal, which includes arduous daily physical therapy, has been amazing. When I asked him how he kept his spirits up he told me two things that have made the difference. First, after almost losing his life in World War II, he considers everything

since has been a bonus. The second part of his secret is keeping a sense of humor. “If I didn’t have that I’d be lost,” he told me. Friends marvel at him, while hospital staff is quick to accommodate his needs. My uncle, someone who’s always had an inexhaustible supply of jokes, is using humor these days not just to entertain, but to heal.

In the Buddha’s teaching called Transcendental Dependent Arising, he lays out how suffering can lead to a joyful heart. The list (what’s a Buddhist teaching without a list?) starts by showing how suffering, when held in the light of wisdom and compassion, can be a causative factor for faith. Our hearts crack open as we see we have no control over life. Surrendering our imagined control, we learn to trust that we can meet what is here with wise attention. This is the birth of faith. Faith then leads to gladness, and gladness flowers into joy. So suffering, in the light of dharmic understanding, is actually a precursor to joy. We can choose whether or not to let our suffering lead us into a downward spiral or open our hearts to life, allowing the goodness to shine through.

I remember how on one long retreat many years ago, I found myself getting quite somber. As often happens with me on retreat, I began to hear a song that reflected my mood. The first verse of “Visions of Johanna”, one of Bob Dylan’s most brilliantly depressing songs, continually played in my head. *Ain’t it just like the night to play tricks when we’re trying to be so quiet/We’re sitting here stranded though we’re all doing our best to deny it.* That verse played continuously for one solid week! One day, mercifully, the needle in my mental jukebox (these were the days of vinyl) miraculously skipped to a later verse. As I heard the words, *Now little boy lost, he takes himself so seriously*, the spell was broken. In a moment, my melodrama dissolved. I felt the universe smile at me, and I could be in on the laugh.

Playfulness is not a quality we usually associate with being spiritual. It’s not dignified to let ourselves be silly or light-hearted. In truth, there’s no one way a spiritual person should be. Many years ago, I traveled in Asia with a group of friends visiting great teachers in the

Theravadan lineage. In Burma we paid our respects to a renowned sayadaw who was said to be fully enlightened. One felt the power of his presence and profound wisdom. However, no sign of joy or delight could be detected. His seriousness forced me to examine my views about the place of joy in practice. When the two-year-old in our party made the rest of us giggle with her antics, the master would cover his face with his bamboo fan lest a smile be noticed. The Burmese custom, I was later told, holds that with so much suffering in the world it is unseemly for a great master to show joy. I experienced a real crisis in faith, wondering if I had to squelch my delight to become enlightened.

Fortunately, a few days later our group went to Thailand to visit the great Thai Forest monk Ajahn Chah. This master radiated a joyful smile, weaving in jokes and playful comments with the deepest dharmic truths. Seeing this embodiment of a realized being renewed my faith that playfulness could be an integral part of one's spiritual journey. Often wisdom and inspiration come in a joyful package. The Dalai Lama, who teaches that "the purpose of life is to be happy," has certainly seen more suffering than most of us could imagine. Yet he has an infectious buoyancy and playfulness that delight anyone around him.

In recent years, I've been leading groups called "Awakening Joy." The Buddha said, "Whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon will become the inclination of the mind." In our sessions, we incline our minds to states of well-being, contentment and joy. One participant shared an experience he described as illuminating. "One day, as I was driving into the city, there was traffic. I tend to get really frustrated and contracted when there's traffic; I get on a roll, thinking about everything that's wrong in our society. Suddenly, that day, I stopped and asked myself, 'Now wait a minute. Is there any joy here?' I saw I could just switch the channels. I looked out the window and I saw the water. I looked around and noticed it was a clear day. I opened my sunroof and I said to myself, 'You know, it's not so bad.' I realized there was a switch that I'm starting to nurture that I didn't used to know was there."

Historian Howard Zinn writes, “An optimist isn’t necessarily a blithe, slightly sappy whistler in the dark of our time. To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

If our tank of inspiration is empty and we feel we have nothing to offer, we need to find ways to nourish our hearts. Appreciating the water, the clear day, the warm bellies of our dogs, we generate energy and inspiration. Life itself becomes sacred—something we’re motivated to work for preserving and sharing. As we access appreciation and joy, we are moved to share those qualities with others, making a difference in this world, helping move it from darkness to light.

There are many strategies to get out of one’s head and uplift the heart. Take on a daily gratitude practice. Express your creativity through writing, dance, singing or art. Spend time in nature. Do yoga. Get silly, play around little kids (at least for a little while!), see a Mel Brooks movie. Remember to nourish your joyful spirit in these difficult times. We need it.

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