

Lighten Up!

by James Baraz with Shoshana Alexander
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“I didn’t know Buddhism was about being happy,” one of the wedding guests said to me after the ceremony. I had just officiated at the marriage of two friends, longtime dharma practitioners. As part of the ceremony, I had invited everyone to join in a loving-kindness meditation for the couple. “May you both be happy, may you be filled with joy and love,” we had silently repeated, our wishes deepening with each phrase as we settled into our hearts. The feeling of love and goodwill in the room grew tangible as the vibrant power of loving-kindness was awakened. After that direct experience of metta, the guest’s conclusion that Buddhism is about happiness was understandable.

I’ve followed the path as student and teacher for three decades, and through all the ups and downs, I agree with him completely: Buddhism is indeed about being happy—in all its permutations, from contentment and well-being to gladness and joy. While practices on the path can be rigorous and challenging, following the dharma leads us along what the Buddha himself referred to as “the sweet joy of the way.” This deep and resilient joy arises from freeing the mind from confusion and fear, enabling us to respond spaciously to whatever circumstances we may find ourselves in.

Despite pervasive images of the smiling Buddha, however, the practice and teachings of Buddhism have had a reputation of being rather more somber than joyful. With so much emphasis on “suffering and the end of suffering” there’s not much airtime for happiness and joy. Some practitioners may even think that expressing those qualities is un-Buddhist. My friend Rick Foster, co-author of *How We Choose to Be Happy*, frequently takes calls from listeners when he talks about his book on radio shows. He says he has come to expect that when a caller begins with “I’m a Buddhist . . .,” almost invariably the statement will continue with something like: “. . . and all your emphasis on getting happy seems to overlook the suffering in life.”

I went through a period of time in my own practice when I might have been one of those callers. For several long years the truth of suffering became my primary guide. “Real” practice meant committing to “get off the wheel”, freeing myself of lifetimes of suffering as I wandered through endless cycles of death and rebirth. The “end of suffering” got entangled in my mind with the “end of living,” which meant tempering aliveness and enthusiasm and fun. Perhaps it was a necessary stage in the awakening process, but the smiling Buddha who had so lovingly inspired me during my first years of practice turned into a stern taskmaster. Practice became a *serious* endeavor.

Playing the guitar and singing had been a joyful pursuit for me since the days of the Beatles. Now I rarely did either, and when I did, I noticed an

underlying sense of guilt. How could I be a serious practitioner and spend my time just having fun? A life-long sports fanatic, I felt conflicted when I'd get carried away yelling and screaming at the television as I watched *my* team play. My poor family and housemates had to deal with my somber persona as I suppressed my natural inclination to celebrate life. I carried this same tendency into my work as a dharma teacher, a slight wariness creeping into my attitude toward those aspects of life that were fun and attractive, that might entice one to remain "on the wheel." This focus on suffering actually had a numbing effect. Shutting down my vitality left me feeling rather disconnected from myself and others, and less able to respond compassionately to the suffering of those closest to me.

Through the struggle and crisis of those years I learned something important—lack of aliveness and joy are not signs of awakening. In fact, just the opposite. As one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, joy is not only a fruit of awakening but also a prerequisite. Joy creates a spaciousness in the mind that allows us to hold the suffering we experience inside us and around us without becoming overwhelmed, without collapsing into helplessness or despair. It brings inspiration and vitality, dispelling confusion and fear while connecting us with life. Profound understanding of suffering does not preclude awakening to joy. Indeed, it can inspire us all the more to joyfully celebrate the goodness in life. The Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu are good examples of people who have seen tremendous suffering and are still able to inspire others with an infectious joy.

We all know what it's like to get trapped in dark, constricting states of mind—and how useless it is, in terms of awakening, to dwell there. That is exactly what the Buddha taught—we don't need to stay stuck in greed, hatred and delusion. Life can be lighter, more workable, even when it's challenging. This lightening up, which I see as an aspect of joy, is the fruit of insight into *anatta*, the selfless nature of reality, and *anicca*, the truth of impermanence. When we are not attached to who we think we are, life can move through us, playing us like an instrument. Understanding how everything is in continual transformation, we release our futile attempts to control circumstances. When we live in this easy connection with life, we live in joy.

Joy has many different flavors. It might overflow from us in song or dance, or it might gently arise as a smile or a sense of inner fullness. Joy is not something we have to manufacture. It is already in us when we come into the world, as we can see in the natural delight and exuberance of a healthy baby. We need only release the layers of contraction and fear that keep us from it.

Methods for opening the mind to joy and happiness are found throughout the Buddha's teachings. One sure way is through skillful practice of meditation. Through seeing clearly we can free the mind of grasping, aversion and ignorance, allowing our natural joy to manifest. In fact, research has amply demonstrated that meditation increases activity in areas of the brain associated with positive emotions.

But formal meditation is not the only way to tap into joy. The teachings say that when we cultivate wholesome mind-states—generosity, love, compassion, happiness for others—we experience *pamojja*, translated as gladness or delight. In one of the discourses (*Majjhima Nikaya* 99), the Buddha says, “That gladness connected with the wholesome I call an equipment of the mind . . . an equipment for developing a mind that is without hostility and ill will.” As I climbed out of my “dark night,” I was delighted to discover that those positive feelings—joy, delight, happiness, gladness—rather than being impediments on the path actually facilitate awakening. They are part of our toolkit for keeping the heart open. Gladness and delight do not merely balance out negative tendencies, they actually heal the aversive mind.

Over the past year I have been leading dharma groups focused on cultivating joy in our daily lives. Participants learned, some of them for the first time, that relating to the present moment with joy is a choice we can make. Discovering this can be, as one person in the group put it, “a truly life-changing experience.” Whether we are paying careful attention to wholesome states when they arise, reflecting on gratitude, or feeling the delight of living with integrity (which the Buddha called “the bliss of blamelessness”), we can access joy by shifting the focus of our awareness to what uplifts the heart. The Buddha spoke of this as “inclining the mind” toward the wholesome. This doesn’t mean disregarding suffering; it does mean *not* overlooking happiness and joy. With so much fear and

sadness in the world, it is healthy to let our hearts delight in the blessings of life. In waking up it's important to remember that in addition to the 10,000 sorrows, there are also the 10,000 joys.

Ajahn Sumedho writes, "Once you have insight, then you find you enjoy and delight in the beauty and goodness of things. Truth, beauty and goodness delight us; in them we find joy." When we open a channel to the wellspring of joy, the waters of well-being that flow into our lives are a gift not only to ourselves. As joyful *bodhisattvas* we serve by inspiring spaciousness, perspective, courage and goodness in the hearts of others. May you be happy and awaken joy in yourself and all those you meet.

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