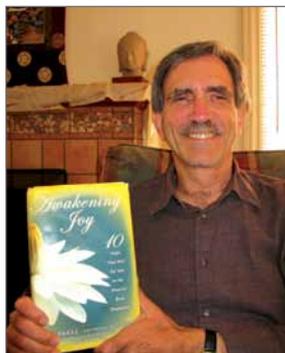


On Awakening Joy & Greater Well-Being: An Interview with James Baraz

“Wherever you are, if you face in the direction of greater well-being, you will raise your level of happiness and well-being.” - JAMES BARAZ



James Baraz has been teaching Insight Meditation since 1978. He is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center and

started the Community Dharma Leader program and the Dharma Friends/Kalyana Mitta Network. He first began teaching his popular Awakening Joy course in 2003, and since then roughly 7,000 people have taken the course either in person or online through the Awakening Joy website (www.awakeningjoy.info). James is now co-author, with Shoshana Alexander, of *Awakening Joy: 10 Steps That Will Put You on the Road to Real Happiness* due out in January, 2010 (Bantam).

James lives with his wife Jane in the San Francisco Bay Area and has two sons and three grandchildren. He leads ongoing meditation and Awakening Joy classes in Berkeley. The following interview was conducted by Walt Opie, Communications Coordinator, on September 30, 2009.

Spirit Rock: How did you first come up with the phrase “Awakening Joy” for both your course and now your new book?

James Baraz: First I called it Awakening to Joy, but then it seemed more appropriate to just call it Awakening Joy—the joy that’s already there. Joy is one of the factors of enlightenment, one of the Brahma Viharas (Divine Abodes).

According to the Buddha’s teachings, it is one of the qualities that is already inside us and can be developed.

So this is about directing the awareness to develop and awaken that innate capacity that we all have coming into the world—to meet the world and our lives with joy. It’s awakening the joy inside.

SR: Do you think anyone can be happy? Is this something that’s truly available to everybody?

JB: Well-being is probably a more accurate word than joy—or contentment, peace, happiness, aliveness, connection—they’re all about accessing a feeling of wholeness. When you see babies, if they’re comfortable and well fed, they usually squeal with delight at the wonder of it all. So we have this capacity.

Different people have different temperaments. One of the snags that people get into is thinking that joy looks a particular way. Part of the exploration is seeing how that manifests through you. For some people it might be a bubbly effervescence, and for others it might be a very deep contentment that comes out of stillness. For others it might be a quiet knowing and connecting with life—maybe you’re not doing somersaults, but there’s something that radiates out of you that’s quite powerful, that everybody around you can feel.

First you have to define happiness and joy and realize there are many different flavors and see how it manifests for you. Then it’s basic Buddhadharma to incline toward wholesome states and towards well-being. It’s not so much, “Oh, I’m going to get happier and happier,” but if you incline towards well-being, you

do feel happier. That’s what practice is all about—finding what your version of happiness is. Everybody can practice. And mindfulness and dharma practice will support that increased well-being.

Some people have a different set point either genetically or circumstantially. Wherever you are, if you face in the direction of greater well-being, you will raise your level of happiness and well-being. It’s not that you’re measuring against any particular set standard. You’re just seeing that you can incline and face in the direction of greater awakening, freedom, love, goodness.

SR: So wherever you’re starting from, you can increase it?

JB: As Pema Chodron says, “Start where you are.” One of the main practices that I have been doing for the last forty years is looking for the good in life. Not that you hide your head in the sand and don’t see the dukkha (suffering), but the more you can see the goodness inside and around you, it’s like seeing the ten thousand joys as well as the ten thousand sorrows (as the Buddha described them). The more you can open up and have your radar out for that, a bigger container gets created for you to hold all the pain and sorrow in your own heart and for others.

SR: How important is meditation to achieving happiness or to awakening joy?

JB: In the Awakening Joy course, one of the supportive practices besides singing and exercising is sitting—taking some regular time to be still. For those who meditate, it’s an encouragement to keep up your daily practice. For those who don’t sit regularly, even if you just sit with a cup of tea for a few minutes, you

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might find it beneficial. It's extremely helpful and supportive to take some quiet time because it interrupts the momentum of the busyness in the mind.

For me, practice gets you in touch with a place of wholeness inside, and the more you can be still and remember that place, the more access you have that informs everything in your life. If you've done intensive practice on retreat, it's much more available to you in daily practice. But if you are just learning and you sit regularly, that in itself is going to make a huge difference. Then you can be more present for your life and for the wholesome states when you are off the cushion, too.

You're training your heart and mind to cut through all the chatter and the stress, and to have enough space for the joy and wisdom that are naturally in there to shine through.

SR: You were a Buddhist teacher for many years before you developed the *Awakening Joy* classes. How did the classes come about originally?

JB: When I first started practice (around 1974), I was really on fire. I had found what I was looking for and was very happy to be practicing the dharma. My basic personality is one of celebrating life—appreciating and seeing the good. Also, the Indian guru Neem Karoli Baba, through Ram Dass' book *Be Here Now*, touched me in a very profound way. I had carried around *Be Here Now* like a bible for about three years and it really spoke to me. Then I found what I was looking for in a practice orientation (with Insight Meditation).

But at some point I became very serious about my practice—dead serious—and I lost my joy for a while. I misunderstood the messages and tangled up the end of suffering with the end of living. I thought that a good Buddhist doesn't really enjoy life. That wasn't a conscious thought, but it was somewhere inside me. Although my natural inclination was to be passionate—to love sports or to love to sing or dance, there was something that I thought was "un-Buddhist" about it.

Two things happened that kind of woke me up from that trance. One was speaking to Joseph Goldstein (one of my first teachers) and saying, "I'm kind of losing myself." Joseph said, "You have your own expression of Buddhadharma. Express it the way it comes through you." And that felt really good.

Shortly afterwards I went to see Poonjaji, an Advaita Vedanta teacher in Lucknow, India. I had a really profound encounter with him. I was there for a few weeks. He would talk about emptiness all the time, and at the very end I said, "Poonjaji, when you talk about emptiness, you're laughing and there's this buoyant energy that comes out. When Buddhists talk about emptiness, it seems so serious and solemn. Why is your emptiness so much more fun than ours?"

“Forty years ago when I first read about Neem Karoli Baba, an Indian guru who influenced many Westerners, I was struck by something he said: “The best form to worship God in is every form.” To me that teaching was an instruction to see the good in everyone.”

- JAMES BARAZ

He said, “Sometimes when people sit and they touch something very profound, there's this connection between the stillness and what emptiness is about, and they think that the non-stillness is somehow not included in the emptiness. My emptiness rejects nothing. Nothing is not included—so there's joy, and there's sorrow, and there's aliveness, and there's nothing rejected.” I realized that somehow I was missing that, and it reconnected me with my real nature.

I started to take a look at what the Buddha said about happiness. The Buddha was called “the Happy One” and said to go for the highest happiness and all the other states of happiness will follow. The Dalai Lama starts his book *The Art of Happiness* with, “The purpose of life is to be happy.” I was kind of missing that. So I went back and looked at the teachings and said, “What does the Buddha actually say?”

Then in 1999, I entered a really happy period. I had almost lost my vision and had three different eye operations. The third operation was a charm, and I could see really well. I was so happy, so grateful. And besides feeling grateful, I started to explore the landscape of gratitude and what it feels like. The more I focused on it, the more it expanded.

During that same time my wife Jane gave me this book *How We Choose to Be Happy* by Rick Foster and Greg Hicks. They had done research on 300 certifiably happy people and distilled nine different choices that these people had made. They weren't Buddhists, but as I read it, I saw that every one of these choices had a correlation in Buddhist practice.

I said to my Berkeley sitting group at the time, “I want to look at these choices that people make, and put them in dharma terms and practices. We're going to do this together for the next few months.” Over time, just about everybody got happier and happier. And I was saying, “Far out! This is something that can be practiced in a systematic way.”

That's what got me thinking that I wanted to write about this. I wanted to create something that was not exactly like the Foster/Hicks book, although it would use a lot of those principles. I wanted to ask, “What are the essential practices that would bring about happiness and joy?” As I was writing it, I wanted to test the theories and practices, so I started doing a course in 2003.

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The first courses were two small groups of about twenty each. Then I did it again and the next time, there were one hundred people. And the next time, a few groups did it remotely from far away—one in Sacramento and one in Vancouver—and I said, “This works long-distance, too.”

The next class had two hundred people. The next one had five hundred, and it just kept on growing from there. Then the book became about the course. I started to see that there is something in this that makes the practices and teachings accessible. And even for people who aren’t steeped in dharma practice, it could be helpful, too.

SR: Can you talk about the impact this class has had on people?

JB: That’s been one of the more amazing, rewarding and surprising aspects of the course. I remember when I first started getting emails from Germany or a letter from somebody in South Africa saying this is really making a difference. I remember this guy Arthur in Maine who said, “I’ve been practicing (the dharma) for 20 years, and not really thinking much about joy, and this class has put a whole different spin on what practice is about. I am really here for my life, and it’s making all the difference in the world.”

The benefits are amazing. There is one woman who had been in chronic pain and quite depressed for some time. Her friends were keeping their distance and her boyfriend didn’t know whether their relationship was going in the right direction. Then she took meditation classes from me, and she did the *Awakening Joy* course twice. Later she wrote me and said: “Everything has changed. Setting your intention makes all the difference in the world. My friends are noticing a difference. My boyfriend proposed to me.” They got married and she just gave birth to their baby earlier this year.

Somebody else said, “Wow, I see a light on my path when it was dark before.”

Often people who are going through a lot of pain are looking for some way to go on. I remember a woman came to the class who had lost her son in the war in Iraq. She wondered how she could find meaning in this so her son didn’t die in vain, because he wouldn’t want her to be unhappy for the rest of her life.

There was something about holding his death in a bigger picture of compassion and understanding, and in seeing that everybody goes through these losses, which is one of the hardest things to go through that one can imagine. In one of the main chapters of the book, we talk about working with suffering as a path to joy, which is a basic Buddhist teaching. When she started to look for this, she said, “How can I find meaning in

this? How can I feel all my grief and yet go on living as a legacy to him as well?” It was quite moving, and she came to that understanding and decided to use the course as a support.

SR: You worked closely with Shoshana Alexander on the book and she is credited as co-author. How did you end up working with her?

JB: Shoshana is one of my oldest dharma friends. We met on the second retreat I ever did, in Toledo, Washington in 1976, and we attended the first three-month course at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) together. I have had an ongoing conversation with her about real happiness for the last thirty-three years. She’s a very gifted writer and has helped craft some of the best works in Buddhist circles. She is steeped in dharma practice and has this gift for drawing the best out of you. Plus she brilliantly understands the written word, and her own deep dharma practice has gone into each of these works. She wrote *The Findhorn Garden*, which is a classic.

SR: Looking at an advance copy of the book, I see there is a foreword by Jack Kornfield and a preface by Ram Dass.

JB: Yes, Jack wrote a lovely foreword and Ram Dass wrote a lovely preface. That

for me was one of the high points—to get the blessing of Ram Dass.

SR: Has Ram Dass known about your course all along?

JB: Oh, yes. I signed him up for the course. I said, “You want to see what I am doing?”

He said, “Yeah, sure.”

When I first started to write, I asked, “What do you think about this?”

He said, “I think it’s a good idea to write about joy. I want to see that.”

And when it was finished, I spoke to him and said, “I finished the book now, and I wanted to ask you about something.”

“Oh, you want me to write a blurb?”

“No, not exactly. I want to go for more than that.”

Ram Dass said, “What do you mean?”

“Well, I was hoping you would consider writing a preface for it because you and Maharaji (Neem Karoli Baba) have been major factors in this.”

He thought about it, and said, “Oh, that means I’ll really have to read it.”

“Normally I race right through some of the things I have to do with my young son—picking up toys, getting him ready for bed. But the other day I discovered something that was delightful. I actually stopped to enjoy fully the happiness in his eyes and the smile on his face. I felt it with my whole body.”

- A COURSE PARTICIPANT

And I said, "Yeah."

He said, "OK, I'd be happy to. I'd be honored to write a preface. Send me the book."

So he actually read it. And he liked it.

James Baraz teaches a regular Thursday night sitting group in Berkeley. His next session of Awakening Joy classes will be offered in January, 2010. Please join James and many of the teachers and musicians who make guest appearances during the Awakening Joy courses for a dana (donation) day at Spirit Rock on Saturday, January 30, from 9:30 am – 5 pm. This event will also serve as a book release celebration.

