

Centering Meditation

Allow your body to find a posture that's comfortable, relaxed and alert. Allow yourself to arrive here; letting go of the worries and concerns of the day. Allow yourself to become present here in this moment in this space, in this field of benevolent energy. Notice whatever's happening in your mind right now, thoughts, memories, plans, worries. Just noticing, without judgment. Breathe in gently and deeply, when you exhale let go of the contents of your mind and rest your awareness on your breathing. Notice any sensation in your body, any tension or ache or sleepiness. Breathe in gently and deeply. On a long exhale let go of any tension or sleepiness. Focus your awareness on your breathing, gentle breathing in and out, the life energy of the breath sustaining and anchoring you in this moment.

As your awareness steadies on the breath, see if you can touch into an intention for your own well-being and happiness. It doesn't have to be for the whole Deepening Joy course, or even for this whole evening. Just for this moment, this sitting, see if you can anchor in your deep longing, your deep intention for your own happiness and well-being in this moment.

Welcome and Format

It's very heartwarming to gather with so many people intent on awakening joy, deepening joy, in their lives. The context of this group is the 2011 Awakening Joy course taught by James Baraz and the Awakening Joy book written by James and Shoshana Alexander. I have simply found great wisdom, great integrity, and great heart in the teachings and in the embodiment of James and Shoshana, and hope to be a channel for that wisdom and heart here and help you find and share your own wisdom and heart.

So we've begun with a centering meditation which we will do each time on the theme of the month. As we continue we'll allow a more time for check-ins on how our practices are going. Each time I'll teach a bit about the theme of the month, including some of the neuroscience that may help explain why these practices can be so beneficial and life-changing. I'd like to spend most of the time each time discussing your own experiences and questions from reading the chapter of the book or from focusing on the theme in your lives. And each time we'll do an experiential exercise to anchor our learning in our bodies and in our brains.

Dharma Talk: Intention

In Jack Kornfield's forward to the book, he says: Joy is our birthright. It is innate to our consciousness. Joy is a reflection of our true nature – a pure, timeless, inviolable spirit found in each of us. The transformative practices of Awakening Joy can lead each of us to live with dignity, compassion, and gracious freedom. Your days on earth will be full of blessings.

In the introduction, James proposed three principles at the heart of the Awakening Joy course.

1. Inclining the mind toward joy we learn more about inclining and intending tonight.

2. Developing and increasing wholesome states strengthening habits that lead to more well-being and aliveness and changing habits that no longer serve us. Intentionally noticing and cultivating ways of being like generosity, kindness, patience, forgiveness, tranquility, joy are considered to be Wise Effort, one of the 8 steps of the 8-fold path to Enlightenment.

3. Focusing on the gladness that arises with wholesome states there is an experience of positive, uplifting energy in our bodies, in our beings, when we experience a moment of wholesomeness or wholeness, when we embody and express that state. What the Buddha called the equipment of mind to overcome all ill will and hostility. It's skillful means to notice this gladness when it arises, and not miss it.

These three steps, inclining the mind, developing wholesome states, focusing on the gladness that arises, are a deeper program than, though completely compatible with, the positive psychology movement or the law of attraction taught in *The Secret*. This is fundamental transformation of how we perceive, experience, respond to and manifest joy, happiness, well-being in our lives, and a transformation of our being.

So that in setting intention to incline the mind toward joy and deepen our experience and capacity for joy, we are setting an intention to meet the ups and downs of life with authenticity and perspective. To ride the waves of our experience with flexibility and resilience. Last year's text for the *Awakening Joy* course, and still an excellent resource, is the book *How We Choose to Be Happy* by Rick Foster and Greg Hicks, because the practices of awakening and deepening joy are a choice, a conscious choice made again and again and again, to respond to the experience of the moment of presence that can allow joy to be in the moment also. So the choice to incline the mind and heart toward joy is a choice to train the mind and heart to practices that allow us to experience ease and well-being in every moment, As Carolyn Hobbs book, *Joy No Matter What*. Or Marci Shimoff's book *Happy for No Reason*.

And we are making choices to cultivate the conditions that support experiences of joy, whether that's an activity we choose to do like singing or dancing or hiking in nature or meeting a friend for coffee, or the people we choose to spend time with, friends and partners whose energy evoke and influence our energy, or the values we choose to live by that bring wholesomeness and gladness to our lives. We are making choices that support awakening and deepening joy amidst all the other choices we have to make in a day.

My own teaching on intention – experience and neuroscience. As my colleague and friends, Rick Hanson, says, we are learning tools and practices to train our minds to change our brains to change our lives and the lives of these we meet and touch in a more wholesome, more enlightened direction. I also recommend his book *Buddha's Brain: the Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom*.

When we focus our attention – on anything – we activate the anterior cingulate, part of our pre-frontal cortex, the most sophisticated, highly evolved, most integrative part of our brain. The anterior cingulate is what allows us to focus attention; it's also the part of our brain that integrates our thoughts and feelings. When people meditate over a long period of time, this part of the brain grows new brain cells and becomes more functional. So just by paying attention, becoming present, becoming aware, noticing our experience, tracking our experience (without judgment which would activate the amygdala, the alarm center of our brain and diminish the

functioning of the anterior cingulate) when we focus attention we are activating our brain to be able to register and integrate our experience.

When we set an intention to choose to focus our attention on a particular experience or to create the conditions for a particular experience to happen, then we activate much more of our brain and can begin to intentionally re-wire it.

Here's how that works. Any experience, any experience at all, causes neurons in the brain to fire. When we repeat the experience, the same neurons will fire again. Neurons that fire together wire together. As we repeat our experiences over and over, we are actually causing neurons in the brain to fire together, wire together, and create neural circuits in the brain that make it more and more likely we will respond to the same or similar experiences again in the same way. This is called conditioning; it's nature's way of being efficient so we don't have to keep learning the same things over and over again. The patterns of response are encoded in our brains; this is the human condition. Rick talks in *Buddha's Brain* about raindrops falling on a hillside. As experiences encode in our brain, it's like raindrops washing down a hillside leaving traces that, with enough repetitions, will begin to dig little grooves or channels or gullies on the hillside. Our patterns of response become the grooves or channels in our brains. So that if we focus on negative experience or respond to experience negatively, the unwholesomeness of greed, hatred, or delusion, that will incline the mind toward negativity and cause suffering. If we focus on the positive experience or respond to experience positively with openness, curiosity, acceptance, we will incline the mind toward the wholesome openness and curiosity, and ease our suffering. Rick also talks about the brain is hardwired to notice negative experiences more readily than positive ones; that's how our ancestors survived on the savannah to pass down their genes. We have inherited brains that have Velcro to the negative, Teflon for the positive. So to shift the balance toward the positive we have to really notice and register when it happens.

If we focus on experience of joy, delight, happiness, contentment, whenever they arise, or respond to our experience with those qualities, we will incline the mind toward joy, happiness, well-being. The intention to deepen our experience of joy helps us re-wire the brain to a new default setting and becomes a gateway to experiencing the well-being and peace of our true Nature, our Buddha nature. Joy is one of the seven factors of Enlightenment.

Repetition is key to installing new patterns in our brains. A few moments of practice many times a day is more effective than an hour once a week, more repetition, more neural firing, more neural re-wiring. The Buddha said; whatever the practitioner frequently things and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind.

What gets in the way?

- 1) Lacking role models, never saw the joy of joy
- 2) Believing we don't deserve, not for the likes of me
- 3) Derailed by critical inner committee
- 4) Refusing to choose

There was an interesting article in *Scientific American* last summer about intention that supports the teachings of James and the course. That success of intention seems to have more to do with willingness than will power. Researchers found that a willingness to be open and wondering about what might happen was more effective in helping people reach their goals than focusing on performing a task to get to the goal. Examples of losing weight or learning to play guitar.

Will I do this? or may I do this? works better than I will do this. Will I focuses on possibilities rather than performance I will. Will I allows inspiration from within rather than trying to meet a rigid standard, so helps folks show up and take responsibility rather than setting up for failure.

One more thought about training the mind to change the brain: that is the power of imagination. When we remember or imagine seeking a banana, the same neurons fire in our visual cortex as would fire if we were seeing a banana for real. When we remember or imagine a moment of joy, we can active the same hormones in our body that give us the feeling of joy, the oxytocin, the dopamine, the norepinephrine. We may experience that when we do the experiential exercise later.

Experiential Exercise #1: Drop into Kindness and Love

This is a guided visualization taught by Fred Luskin, author of *Forgive For Good*, for dropping into a space of kindness and love.

Allow yourself to sit comfortably. Focus your awareness inward: notice your breathing slowly, in and out. Breathe gently into your belly, slowly in and out. Breathe a sense of goodness into your belly. Breathe into your belly as though you were safe.

Now remember people or things in your life you are grateful for. Savor the gratefulness throughout your body. Remember moments of kindness in your life, when people have been kind to you, then when you have been kind to others. Savor the feeling of kindness throughout your body. Remember a moment of feeling loved and cherished by someone, then remember a moment of you loving and cherishing someone, even a beloved pet. Savor the feeling of love throughout your body.

Let yourself claim the goodness of your own self now. Let that goodness open into a sense of the goodness of all of humanity. This is the place within that forgiveness comes from. States of kindness, compassion, good will. From here it becomes possible to forgive.”

Then turn to a partner. Take turns sharing the memory of a moment of joy. Feel the gladness of the wholesome arise in your body as you do.

Experiential exercise #2: Brahma Viharas

This is an exercise to cultivate an experience of the Brahma Viharas that I learned from Jack Kornfield, founder of Spirit Rock Meditation Center and author of *Wise Heart*. In the Buddhist tradition that the Awakening Joy course draws from, there are practices to focus on the four Brahma Viharas or Heavenly Abodes or Diving Realms. States of being that are both the outcome of healing and awakening and the paths to the healing and awakening. The four are loving kindness – wishing well for the happiness and well-being of one’s self and others that opens the heart to our true nature and the true nature of others; compassion – which is the stirring of the heart to concern and care for our own suffering and the suffering of others. Sympathetic joy – which is taking delight in our own good fortune and well-being but also taking joy in the happiness and good fortune and well-being of others, and equanimity – the calm, tranquil

holding of all experience without reactivity, without judgment, without shaping or fixing. Equanimity is the anchor for the other three, loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy.

We'll do an exercise to help us evoke and experience these states within ourselves and then share our experiences with each other.

Turn to your partner, or turn inward if you wish. We do this exercise in noble silence. Simply gaze into your partner's eyes, allowing your self to see in them the nobility of their true nature. Their innate goodness and radiance of their being, and silently wish them well, sending them expressions of loving kindness: may you know the deepest happiness, may you have ease of mind and heart, and let yourself know that your partner is sending you expressions of loving kindness as well. Taking in that kindness.

Then allow your awareness to shift. Imagine what human sorrows your partner might have experienced in their journey, what losses, what griefs, what pain of the human condition. Silently begin to send them expressions of compassion: May your sorrows be held in loving awareness, may your sorrow ease, may you feel my care for your suffering. And let yourself know that your partner is sending you compassion for your sorrow and suffering as well. Let yourself take in that care and compassion.

Then allow your awareness to shift. Imagine what human joys your partner may have experienced in their journey. What accomplishments and competencies they might have achieved. What blessings of abundance and love they might have experienced on their journey. And silently begin to send them expressions of sympathetic joy, happiness for their happiness. May you fully delight in your delight; may you feel your joy deeply. And allow yourself to know your partner is sending you expressions of joy in your joy as well. Let yourself take in the sweetness of their joy in your joy.

Then allow your awareness to shift again to expressing wishes for calm abiding to your partner, wishes for equanimity: Whatever happens on your journey, may you perceive and respond to it with a calm ease of mind and heart. May you have deep inner peace. And allow yourself to know your partner is sending you expressions of the wish for equanimity, for calm abiding for you as well. Let yourself take in the calming energy of their well-wishing.

Allow your awareness to shift one more time to simply being in your own being, noticing whatever is going on for you right now. Awareness of your inner experience, and awareness of your awareness.

Closing meditation

Let's sit for a moment as we close. Allow your body to find a posture that is comfortable, relaxed and alert. Allow your mind to quiet. Allow your awareness to focus on your breathing, gently in and out. You can place your hand on your heart if you wish, and gently breathe goodness, kindness, well-being, joy, into your heart center.

Take a moment to set your intention to focus on a practice or several practices that over the coming days and weeks will support you in inclining your mind and heart toward, joy, happiness and well-being.

May our sincere efforts of practice benefit ourselves and all beings.

Homework

1. This exercise comes from How We Choose To Be Happy and creates a “Nourishment List”
 - a. In four minutes write down everything that brings you joy. It can be the simplest thing, like eating a peach, or something exotic, like windsurfing, or anything in between: walking your dog, listening to music, etc.
 - b. Check the items you do regularly in your life.
 - c. Circle the items that are realistic to include more of in your life these days.
 - d. Choose three items from the list you will focus on this week in the spirit of “Will I?”

2. Notice Well-Being When It’s Here

Pay attention to when you are feeling good. Notice a wholesome state of joy when it arises. Notice with interest how it feels in your body and mind so you can directly experience the “gladness of the wholesome.” 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. They’re easy to miss unless we have our radar out for them. This is different from vaguely knowing, “I feel good” Rather, you are exploring with curiosity the landscape of well-being by feeling what it’s like to feel good. When you’re in the middle of an enjoyable moment – while walking, listening to music, watching a sunset, - don’t miss it! Be present for these uplifting joyful experiences. Again, “Will I?”

3. Give yourself reminders to set your intention often throughout the day, when you get in the car to drive somewhere, when you walk from one room to another room, when you eat something, even on the run. Allow yourself to see joy when it arises, make choices that invite and evoke it, and then celebrate it.
4. Ask someone to be your joy buddy for the course. Having a partner to check in with regularly can be a valuable support for the process. Checking in can be done by email, phone or live if you live in the same area. It can be once a week or more/less frequently. Even checking in for 5-10 minutes will help keep you on track as you support each other in keeping the monthly themes and practices in your consciousness. Sharing your experience with another person can help you clarify the effects of your selected practices and draw out other insights you might have. Decide with your buddy a way to check in that really serves you – time, frequency, mode of communication. Don’t give advice unless asked. Just be a patient, supportive listener, authentically sharing from your experience.
5. Finally, when you’re feeling sad or worried or angry or having other difficult feelings during the month, don’t try to pretend they’re not there. If you’re going through a trying period, give yourself permission to be just where you are. The important thing is to be authentic. Honor your experience while not getting lost in the story. Be real, feel what’s here and remember that whatever you’re feeling right now won’t last. It’s always changing. While it’s here, you can use

it to deepen your practice of waking up and opening your heart to all of life. That's the secret of true joy.

Resources

Poetry and Quotes for Intention

INVITATION

Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy

and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air

as they strive
melodiously
not for your sake
and not for mine

and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude—
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in the broken world.
I beg of you,

do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.
 It could mean everything.
 It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
 You must change your life.

- MARY OLIVER

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Tend to the moment, and the hours, days, years, will tend to themselves.
 - Mattieu Ricard

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Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain
 unmoving till the right action arises by itself?
 - Tao Te Ching

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[from haiku journal of friend of Shoshana Alexaner's:]

Deer, quail, and rabbits
 Nature's bounty before me
 Awakening Joy

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Enough. These few words are enough.
 If not these words, this breath.
 If not this breath, this sitting here.

This opening to the life
 we have refused again and again
 until now.

Until now.
 - David Whyte

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The Gardener

It's really hard not to go where my whims urge me to go
 But I know what sort of person I'm longing to become.
 If I want to help anybody in this world before I die,
 If I want the suffering all around us to subside,
 I have got to be more conscious of the things I do and don't do.
 Every little seed in time will flower.

Plant the ones that lead me down a path toward really helping.
I am the garden, but I'm also the gardener.

In this very moment I reap fruit from choices past;
Choices for the future are made now.
Certain habits, deeply rooted, flourish in the heart of me.
Repetition, like the seasons, comes naturally.
Some of it's good; some of it's not;
Right now this is all I've got,
But it doesn't mean it's all I'll ever be.

Choosing which part of me to act from is easier
When I know what I want to become.
I am and garden, but I'm also the gardener.

This planting of seeds is more subtle than it first appears
It's not just about a dollar to the homeless man.
It's about perceiving what's happening in this very moment
And deliberately choosing to extend love.

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- Eve Decker, sung at the Awakening Joy course, January 2010

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Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant.
- Robert Louise Stevenson

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For a New Beginning

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
 And the gray promises that sameness whispered,
 Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
 Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
 And out you stepped onto new ground,
 Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
 A path of plentitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear
 You can trust the promise of this opening;
 Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
 That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
 Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
 Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
 For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

- John O'Donohue
 To Bless the Space Between Us

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Submit to a daily practice.
 Your loyalty to that
 is a ring on the door.

Keep knocking, and the joy inside
 will eventually open a window
 and look out to see who's there.

- Rumi

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Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could, some blunders and absurdities have crept in. Forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?
 - Mary Oliver