

## **Lighten Up!** James Baraz Tricycle Magazine • Summer 2004

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.....

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 ten thousand sorrows there are also the ten thousand joys.

*Live in joy, in love.*

*Even among those who hate.*

*Live in joy, in health*

*Even among the afflicted.*

*Live in joy, in peace*

*Even among the troubled.*

*Look within. Be still.*

*Free from fear and attachment*

*Know the sweet joy of the way.*

—The Buddha, from the *Dhammapada*, Thomas Byrom, translator