

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week One: “The Uncertainties of Formal Meditation”

November 6, 2021



Hello, my name is Jon Aaron. I’m a teacher at New York Insight, and I’ve been fortunate to be part of the New York Insight community since 2001. I’m speaking to you today from our home in Harlem, so it’s likely you’ll hear some urban sounds, which make up the soundscape here.

I’m happy to be with you to share some thoughts on the theme of finding joy in uncertainty.

While the state of the world has never not been uncertain, these days, there’s an acute awareness that much of what people may have counted on in the past will be different or simply not there. Systems that we’ve grown accustomed to, like clean water, predictable weather, or a stable food supply, may not be around much longer, at least not in the same way. The more we are tuned in to this level of uncertainty and to the collapse of ecosystems and societal structures, the more fear and anxiety we might be experiencing, often leading to paralysis—or worse, unskillful actions.

I don’t intend to go into the details of what this collapse might look like. There are ample resources for this. Rather, I would like to speak to how we can bring our dharma and meditation practice to the experience of uncertainty in a way that will lead to what is often spoken of as an appropriate response. Part of that appropriate response arises from joy, and part of the response is joy, which may sound rather surprising to bring up in the context of climate collapse, the rise of authoritarianism, and so on. The real question for me is how can joy support our turning toward suffering, both our own and that of others. We’ll look at this from four ways:

1. How to bring joy to the uncertainty within our own meditation practice;
2. How to bring joy to what I would call the uncertainty of the certainties of old age, sickness, and death;
3. How we bring joy to the uncertainties of every moment of our daily lives; and
4. How we integrate this joy into facing the drastic changes that we know will be coming.

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week One: “The Uncertainties of Formal Meditation”

November 6, 2021



First, I recognize that I’m approaching this from an immense place of privilege. I’m a white middle-class heterosexual cis man in the United States in a world which privileges people in my social location. I want to be clear that when I’m talking about joy within uncertainty, I’m not saying that it’s a spiritual opportunity to live with food insecurity or to not know if you’ll be evicted at the end of the month. The Buddha was quite clear about the basic prerequisites for practice—namely food, shelter, clothing, and health care. Living hand to mouth to survive or scrambling every night to find a place to live is hell. There is nothing liberative or spiritually glamorous about that. That kind of uncertainty is not what I’m talking about. When the Buddha spoke of renunciation as a choice, this is not what he had in mind. The Buddha’s vision is for all beings to be cared for in their basic needs and to be free.

In my talk, I intend to address more existential facts of death, old age, and illness and what it means to move through a collapsing world when your social privilege can’t protect you anymore. Some of us are more trained than others in that because the world was never not collapsed for the most marginalized. But in my case, this is a big shift. My privilege will not protect me, or at least not much. My home might flood or burn, my savings might evaporate in a banking crisis, and it might not be safe to even take a deep breath given the rising pollution that the fire season is causing. This level of system collapse is not something the Buddha experienced in his lifetime. Of course, he did witness societal issues, and he found his way in the midst of many conflicts, but nothing comparable in scale that would ultimately compromise life on earth as we know it. But what he did teach can support us to face this moment with joy.

Let’s get started. What do I mean by joy, and what do I mean by uncertainty? Joy has numerous contexts in Buddhism. It’s an awakening factor. There’s resonant joy, or *mudita*. It’s a jhana factor starting with its first mention in the Anapanasati Sutta. With the exception of joy as a jhana factor, joy can arise as both a worldly link to conditions and an unworldly feeling. In both cases, I think joy is really a physical experience. It’s a physical response. There is an excitement

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week One: “The Uncertainties of Formal Meditation”

November 6, 2021



and an exhilaration. While there are thoughts associated with this response, they are secondary. One quality that's mentioned in describing the Buddha is *sugato*, which is often translated as one who is fulfilled, joyful, and truly well.

Now, what do I mean by uncertainty? In this context, I'm actually combining *dukkha* [suffering] and *anicca* [impermanence], the suffering caused by nothing being fixed and the impermanent nature of all conditioned things. There are, of course, certain things that are certain. These are found in the Buddha's five reflections: we will grow old, we will become ill, we will die, and so on. But we don't know how that will play out. I'll come back to these in a later segment of these talks. For now, though, I'd like to explore finding joy in the uncertainty of our formal practice.

I don't know about you, but when I first came to meditation, I was anxious. I was excited. I had a great deal of anticipation. I was looking forward to the first instructions. For the first few minutes of practice, I came to my breath, the mind briefly settled, and I did feel a bit of joy. But then, of course, the mind went back to its normal ways and, as the Dhammapada says, was thrashing about like a fish out of water. That joy dissipated almost immediately. The question came up, “What was I doing wrong? This can't be right.” Then I went into doubt and the thoughts started proliferating.

I'm sure this is familiar to many of you, and having taught for many years, I know it's common that we bring an expectation and an excitement into our practice. We want it to be a particular way. The mind had a fixed idea of what it should be like: certainty. At some point, there's a shift, and we start to realize the first teaching of the Buddha: all conditioned things are impermanent, and once we see this with wisdom, we can turn away from that suffering. We immediately confront the impermanence and uncertainty of our own mind. We can start to work with this through our formal practice. As I explain to students in the first of almost any class, whatever we experience in meditation, we experience elsewhere in our lives. That's really the beauty of

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week One: “The Uncertainties of Formal Meditation”

November 6, 2021



formal practice: we get to create a safe space in which we can experiment and begin to see our minds' habits without acting from those habits. We start to realize that as we practice, these habits can change, so we learn to drop expectations and be open to experience.

Of course, obstacles get in the way. There are the common obstacles of sloth and torpor, agitation and worry, sense desire, aversion, doubt, and so on. But what I'm talking about actually precedes those obstacles, which is the obstacle of the attitude we bring into practice. Can we bring to practice this joyousness of jumping into the unknown? Can that joy then create more curiosity and allow those sparks to keep the joy coming so we learn to be with the unexpected, continually wake up to these surprises, and jump into the don't-know mind not with trepidation but with excitement?

Of course, some people are coming to practice already in physical pain or emotional pain, or as they're sitting, the emotional pain and the physical pain can arise. So how do we find joy here? This is certainly more challenging. But it's the same curiosity. It's the same investigative function of mindfulness. If we hark back to the awakening factors, investigation itself leads to energy and joy. For instance, we can investigate the physical pain. When we bring curiosity to it, we can start to discover that between those sensations that we are naming as pain, there are other sensations that are not necessarily pain, and we find joy in that discovery. We can also start to see that our whole body is not in pain and that we can pendulate back and forth between those parts of the body that are calm and resilient and those parts of the body that may be in pain.

We can do the same thing with emotional pain. We start to realize that the emotion is experienced in the body, and then we find parts of the body that are not having that same experience and we can pendulate it back and forth and observe that change. In those moments, we can find a certain joy in the uncertainty and in the constantly changing nature of things. We can start simply by finding the joy in each breath. We can receive each breath with gratitude; we can receive each

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week One: “The Uncertainties of Formal Meditation”

November 6, 2021



breath as an opportunity: “Oh, here I am, another moment to be fully present.” Then we can start to see the contrast between conditional joy and unconditional joy.

Urban life presents interesting opportunities for this. We can be sitting in a peaceful meditation hall, or perhaps we’ve found a place in our home that’s peaceful and calm, and we settle into practice. The conditions are perfect. And then a car goes honking by. Initially, we may be jolted by that. But as we practice, the car honking just becomes another experience. In those moments, we’re actually experiencing unconditional joy, a joy that’s not linked to any particular environment. We can be fully present with whatever is being experienced.

“All conditioned things are impermanent. When one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering. Like a fish pulled from the sea and cast upon the shore, this mind thrashes about trying to throw off Mara’s sway, hard to hold back, flighty, alighting where it will. It’s good to tame the mind. A tamed mind leads to bliss.”

Our formal practice is a practice of taming the mind. In those moments where the mind is tamed, joy arises. This is the joy the Buddha was talking about. This is the joy in practice. This is the joy of being with uncertainty from a place of surprise and not knowing. Rather than stepping back from that, we dive into it. There are so many opportunities to practice this in our formal practice. As we’ll see, as we discover those moments, we can then bring that to all the other areas of our lives.

When we come back for our next section, I’ll be talking about finding joy in the uncertainty of the certainties of old age, sickness, and death. I hope you’ll join me.