

Jon Aaron

Finding Joy in Uncertainty

Week Four: “The Uncertainties of Today’s World”

November 27, 2021



Welcome back to this talk on finding joy in uncertainty. In the first three sections of the talk, I spoke to the uncertainties of our formal meditation practice; the uncertainty of the certainties of aging, illness, and death; and the uncertainties that we confront every moment of our daily lives. Today, I want to talk about finding joy in the uncertainties of the current mess that the world finds itself in. Recognizing the world in its current state of falling apart, is it really possible to find joy here?

Right now, at least, I’m living in relative comfort and ease. I’m not a refugee. I’m not a political prisoner. I’m not facing terror from extremist governments and politics or bombings of my home, although certainly many people in this country are continually dealing with the uncertainties of injustice. Many of us may be dealing with impacts of climate change through floods, fires, and so on. I want to be clear that joy based on these conditions is extremely difficult if not impossible. But even within these conditions, it may be possible to find moments of joy.

Being human, of course, our minds naturally gravitate toward a negativity bias. It’s important to look for joy in the small things, but these are conditional joys. What I’d like to address now is moving beyond the conditional to the unconditional joy, which is really why we practice what we practice. The joy of the dharma and the joy of meditation inevitably lead to unconditional joy. I think it helps to start by putting things in the greater context of time. As humans, we generally think of time as human existence, if even that. We may even just put time in the context of our own existence now or maybe the past few generations. But of course the earth has been around for four and a half billion years, give or take a few. When you condense that into one year, human existence has been about 23 minutes of that one year. That changes one’s perspective quite quickly.

This human existence is a blip in the context of universal existence. This is where we start to experience more emptiness (Skt. *shunyata*), and we start to learn how we can hold both form *and*

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emptiness, the emptiness that we start to experience in the insubstantiality of conditioned things—this body, this house, and everything around us. This is the form of our daily lives. We start to discover through practice and insight the insubstantiality of all of this. Once we recognize and experience those moments of freedom from the idea that things are substantial, we can find joy. Now, we can just stick with that, but that’s escaping from what’s really true and here right now in this relative world. We have to find this balance between form and emptiness, between the absolute reality and the relative reality. Of course, the relative reality is part of the absolute reality, and much of society only exists within this relative, day-to-day existence.

As we grow in our practice, we start to see beyond this existence of form, and when we see beyond this and find joy in *shunyata* [emptiness], we bring this joy to the suffering that exists in this space of form. When we think about it, the uncertainties of the world now are no different than the uncertainties of the world of our moment-to-moment experience. Our habit is to treat them differently: it’s happening to me versus it’s happening to the whole world. But it’s really the same. As we develop acceptance of not knowing in our own practice, our equanimity strengthens, and we see life living through us. We can be surprised by our moment-to-moment response, and we live into this joyful play of life.

A year or so ago, one of my teachers, Kittisaro, introduced a number of us to a retranslation of the famous mantra that comes at the end of the *Heart Sutra*, the mantra related to *prajnaparamita* sitting behind me here: *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*. This mantra is usually translated as “Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone way beyond, great, wonderful.” This other translation comes from a book by Paul Breiter, who was a monk in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah who disrobed and became a lay practitioner. Breiter spent a lot of time practicing with Kobun Chino Roshi, who was the co-abbot of Tassajara monastery in California along with Suzuki Roshi. Breiter wrote a book called *One Monk, Many Masters: The Wanderings of a Simple Buddhist Traveler*, and in this book he shares this translation that he

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heard from Chino Roshi, a wonderful and hilarious teacher who tragically died in the early 2000s. He retranslated the mantra as “Falling apart, falling apart. Everything is always falling apart, and there’s nothing you can do about it. That’s the way it is,” to which I add “Hallelujah.” It’s the “Hallelujah” that’s important. If we just ended with “That’s the way it is,” it might be tempting to say, “That’s how it is, nothing I can do about it,” or to deny that anything is falling apart. But the hallelujah actually opens us to possibility. The hallelujah is what changes that. It’s always been this way. It’s always been falling apart, *and* the potential that exists in that has always been there as well. This is what’s key, and this is where the joy comes in. Rather than turning toward the mess that’s here and thinking, “Oh, no, it’s just getting worse and worse, and there’s nothing that can be done about it,” we can change our view. That change comes directly from our own practice.

When we discover the not knowing of our formal meditation practice, the not knowing of death or illness or loss, and the not knowing of the moment-to-moment existence of our lives and find joy in those moments, we can see the potential in what’s happening now. This is our opportunity, and this is how we bring our practice into the messiness of the world. Appropriate response comes through this recognition and through opening up to the possibilities created by this falling apart. There’s a quote from James Baldwin and his wonderful poem, “For Nothing Is Fixed,” where he states this very clearly.

For nothing is fixed,
forever, forever, forever,
it is not fixed;
the earth is always shifting,
the light is always changing...

This has always been the case, and it will always be the case. The question is can we find joy in this? Can we find opportunity? Can we open to it? Can we see clearly the joy that we experience in our meditation practice and the joy that’s possible when we recognize that death and old age are right over our shoulder all the time? Can we start to see how alive we become when that

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realization happens, how alive we become when we start to experience the world in its current state of falling apart, not from a place of turning away or just throwing up our hands but rather from recognizing what is possible?

The great teacher Joanna Macy refers to the Great Turning. This is the Great Turning. It’s the recognition that there is potential, and that potential arises from joy. That potential arises from love, from turning toward the experience with love and joy. Yes, people are going to die. Systems are going to collapse. There’s going to be massive climate migration, no doubt. There’s going to be political upheaval. All of that is likely to happen, not necessarily in my lifetime or even yours, but soon enough. In that, possibility opens; in that, true potential arises. We have to be willing to turn toward it with acceptance, joy, and love.

Thank you for your attention. I hope you found these talks helpful. I would enjoy engaging with you, so feel free to leave comments, questions, responses in the comments section below. I look forward to hearing from you. Take care and stay safe.