

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week Two: “Facing Life’s Uncertain Certainties”

November 13, 2021



Welcome back to my talk on finding joy in uncertainty. In the first section of my talk, I spoke about finding joy in the uncertainties of our formal meditation practice. Today, I’d like to talk about finding joy in the uncertainty of the certainties—that is, old age, sickness, and death.

First, though, I’d like to spend some time talking about the difference between joy and happiness. In the suttas, joy (*piti*) and happiness (*sukha*) mean different things at different times depending on the context in which they’re presented. For the purpose of this talk, I’m thinking of joy as a physical energy in the body that impacts our actions. When it comes to finding joy in the certainties of life, I think it helps to start every day by repeating or chanting five remembrances:

*I am of the nature to grow old; I have not gotten beyond aging.  
I am of the nature to become ill; I am not beyond illness.  
I am of the nature to die; I am not beyond death.  
All that is near and dear to me will vanish.  
I am born of my karma or actions; I will inherit my actions; whatever I do,  
whether skillful or unskillful, that I will inherit.*

These things are certain. But what is not certain is how they will arrive for each one of us. So how do we bring joy to this uncertainty?

The only thing uncertain about growing old is how we age. All of us age differently depending on our environment, our genetics, and so on. Aging is a natural process, so can we first find joy in the nature of this body? This body, which we’ve been endowed with, which we manifest as, is a miracle in itself. Part of this miracle is its natural process. Despite the fact that society (or at least Western society) does everything possible and presents us with all options to avoid the inevitable, to avoid aging, it’s going to happen. How it happens for us is the uncertainty we’re working with. But if we can find joy in that natural process and just realize, *I’ve been given this body. I will treat it as well as I can through nourishment, through exercise, through meditation. But I still don’t know how it’s going to age. Every day I’ve aged a little bit more, and every breath, I’m that much closer to the inevitable end. Can I treat that as an opportunity for delight? Ah, I’m still here, I’m still here.*

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We can also find joy in the little things as we look in the mirror every morning and wonder who that person is that we’re looking at. Every day it changes. Or we can find joy in those moments where we’re with friends and they say, “You look great.” My habit is to resist that and say, “Oh, come on,” especially with friends I haven’t seen in a while. But of course, they’ve aged too, and they may look great. It’s always surprising to look at those pictures from childhood and then you see somebody 40 years later and see what’s changed. Can we find joy and delight in that natural changing of the body?

As we get older and older, depending on our mental health and our physical health, we just don’t know what’s going to happen, and so we are continually working with this uncertainty. We can resist that uncertainty. But resisting it is no way to find joy in it. If we accept the uncertainty and just be with it, then every moment is an opportunity to be surprised.

Now, we’ll discuss finding joy in the uncertainties of illness. It’s not necessarily certain that we will all get ill. We could just age and fade away. My mother was like that. She lived a very long life and basically just faded away in the last few years of her life, but she never really became ill. She was very fortunate. But of course, many of us are not. I had a student a number of years ago who was already dealing with a very serious illness when she took a class with me. A few months later, I received a call from her relatives asking if I would go visit her in the hospital. Of course, I had no idea she was in the hospital. I went to see her. At the time, she was on a respirator but could talk and was happy to see me, and we practiced. I guided her in a lovingkindness practice. I kept going month to month because it was clear that she was not going to be coming out of the hospital anytime soon.

At the time, she couldn’t eat. She was on a tracheotomy for the last year of her life. It was hard to see that she would ever have a normal life. Yet every time I saw her, there was this gleam in her

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eye. I realized that whether she knew it or not, she was experiencing resonant joy. She was finding joy in the goodwill of others. She was finding delight in the happiness of others. She was also simply receiving the love and compassion from those around her who were supporting her, like the medical workers and doctors. While there were times when she was frustrated, there were other times when it was clear that she was receiving this care with an open-hearted joy. Sadly, she passed away in the hospital, never leaving intensive care. But there was something in her that just showed this spark of joy that really never disappeared.

This is an extreme case. But I’ve also been with people in hospitals who have resisted everything, who have resisted what’s here and what’s true in this moment, and it’s so hard and so sad to watch that. When we are ill, even with a very minor illness, can we actually receive the illness in a way that allows us to be with the not knowing of every moment? Even last week, I was quite sick. In these days of COVID, we’ve been confronted with illness in a very specific way, and often when you sneeze, you might think, “Oh, I better get tested.” At this point, it’s almost humorous. Do we have to think that way? Sneezing isn’t even a symptom of COVID. But still, we’re on edge in that way, and we can be on edge from a place of fear or we can be on edge from a place of curiosity and joy. We can think, “I’ll get tested and make sure I’m OK,” and then we have joy in that moment where we realize, as we expected, that it’s a negative test. These days, at every moment, there is the uncertainty of illness, and there’s an opportunity for finding joy in not knowing what’s next.

The uncertainty of death. We don’t know how we’re going to die or when we’re going to die. If we live with the fact that it could happen at any time, either to us or to our dear friends or family, at every moment of that uncertainty, we can be delighted with what we have. We can be delighted with the fact that we’re here. We can be delighted with each breath. We can find joy in each breath. This is another moment of life. This is another opportunity to be fully present. This is another opportunity to express my love of life and to express my love for others.

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Denying this fact puts us to sleep—denying that there is this possibility that I could die at any moment or my friends could die at any moment. Maybe you have had the experience of friends suddenly dying. I have. It’s in that moment that you recognize, “Did I tell that person I love them the last time I saw them?” When we live each moment as if their death were just around the corner, we wake up in each moment, and we find joy and delight in each of those moments. That’s one way of working with the uncertainty of death and knowing that all that we have will vanish.

This is not only about friends but also about things that we have. How often have you gone through all your things and appreciated them? This is an important aspect of life. We collect things throughout our life, but then we forget about them. Maybe it’s time to go back and remember what it was that brought you joy in the first place from a particular piece of art or plant or a book.

When it comes to our actions, can we bring a joyful effort into our actions and also recognize that how we live those first four remembrances and bring them into our lives has an impact on our actions? If we live from a place of denial of these truths, that’s probably going to have a negative impact on our actions. But if we live from a place of full acceptance of these truths, then we can bring a joyful effort into our actions, and our actions are likely to be skillful.

I recommend that you take up these five remembrances as a daily practice and see how they impact your life and everything you do each day. That’s going to be the topic of the next part of this talk: finding joy in the uncertainties of our day-to-day activities. I look forward to seeing you then.