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## Awakening to Joy

A simple method for developing enthusiasm for practice

By Pema Düddul

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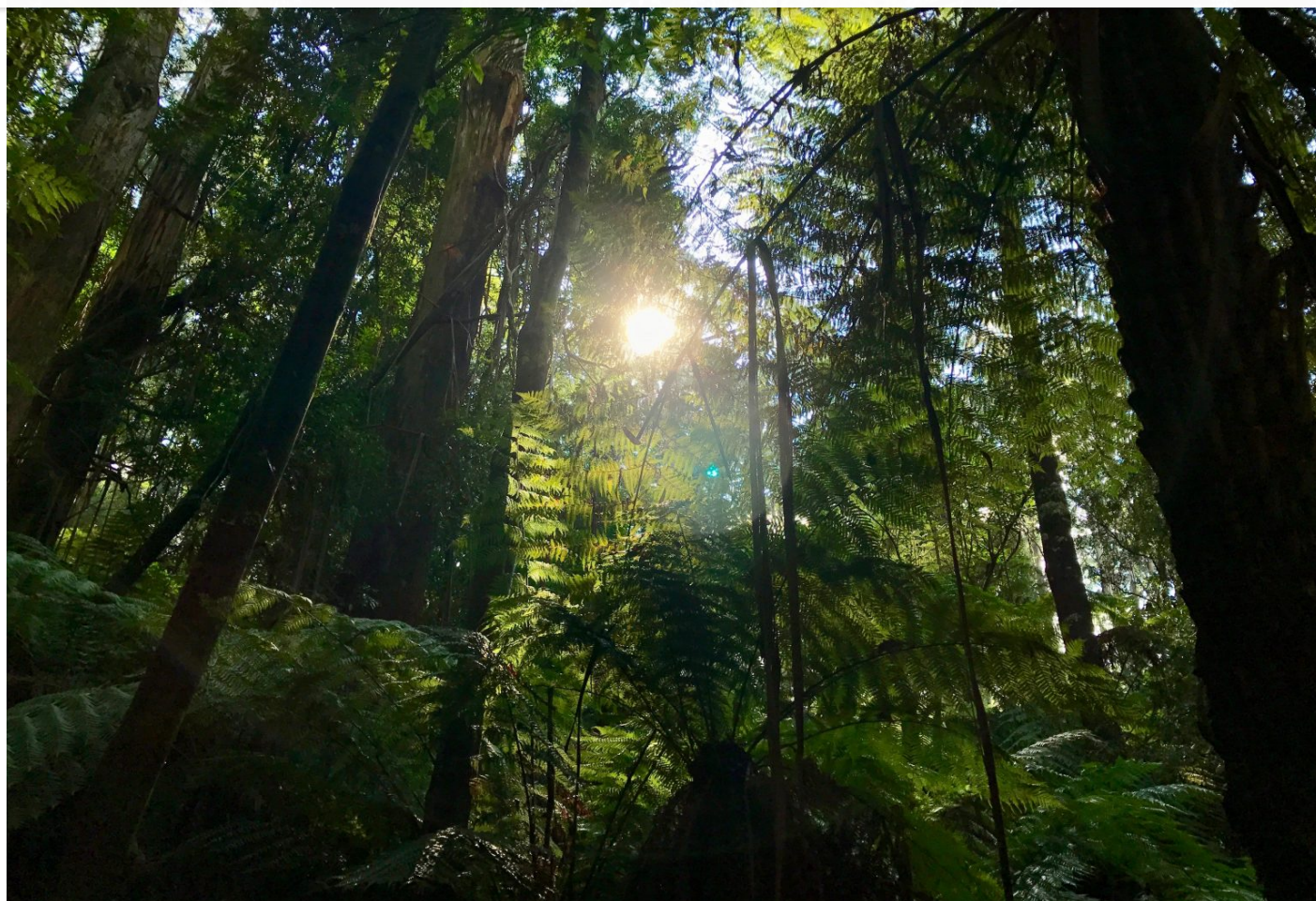


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**This article is part of Tricycle Meditation Month 2022, our annual challenge to commit to sit for 31 days. [Click here to sign up](#) and stay up to date with all of our free Meditation Month offerings, including a variety of helpful articles and a four-part guided meditation series led by Tibetan Buddhist teacher Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche.**



**J**oy is an incredibly important aspect of all Buddhist practice. It is one of the four immeasurables, the characteristics of the enlightened mind. Joy is also one of the seven factors of awakening—the qualities of mind that, when cultivated in a balanced way, lead to total enlightenment. Whether we are beginners or more advanced, it is impossible to accomplish any of our dharma practices without it. Quite simply, without joy there is

to be like a seedling, joy is the water that helps the seedling to grow. Without joy, the seedling will wither and die.”

By starting our meditation practice with joy in our hearts, we begin to associate all dharma activity with joy and we will, in time, begin to look forward to practice. Meditation will become something sweet we look forward to doing each day, rather than a chore or a bitter medicine we feel we have to swallow. This is called joyful enthusiasm for practice. Luckily for us, there is a simple way to awaken to joy and ignite joyful enthusiasm for dharma.

### **The Path of Joy**

This profound yet simple practice was given to me by Jamyang Tenphel, who received it directly from the late Kyabje Togden Amtrin (1922 – 2005), a great yogi and realized teacher of the Drukpa Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism and a Dzogchen master. As far as we know, no other Western students of Togden Amtrin were given this teaching, which means it is precious and rare.

The Path of Joy has become a core part of our practice and is a powerful method to deepen meditation and all other Buddhist practices. The concise pith instruction for this practice is:

Arouse joy and rest in its natural radiance! Not only is this the heart of the path, but indeed it is the heart of Awakening.

Let’s unpack what this instruction means. Although this practice is rooted in core Buddhist teachings such as the [Seven Factors of Awakening](#), it is not about learning lists or getting involved in conceptual thinking or analysis. It is about connecting with an intrinsic quality that is within us already. Our hearts are already naturally joyful. It’s just that this natural joy is crowded out by the constant activity and stress of our daily lives and the constant chatter of our overburdened minds.

The Path of Joy begins with us choosing an object that brings us simple, uncomplicated joy. It can be anything. All that matters is that the thing we choose ignites joy, no matter



our dharma teacher. It could be gazing relaxedly at a beautiful mountain, a slow-moving river, the ocean, or a wide blue sky. If we are more affected by sound than visuals, we can place our awareness on the sound of wind gently blowing through trees, of water flowing soothingly down a stream, or beautiful birdsong.

We don't choose objects that will excite the mind such as music or TV or smart phones, as we are not looking to make the mind more active or agitated. Jamyang puts it this way: "We want to simply rest the mind on an object that touches our hearts in a gentle, relaxed, and carefree way. By connecting with something external that brings us joy, our inner joy is able to shine through." In other words, the outer joy in natural objects is like a magnet that brings forward the much greater, deeper, and more lasting joy that is an expression of our true nature.

We then sit and observe our object of choice for ten minutes or so, without analyzing or thinking about it. We simply rest our awareness on it without clinging to it or grasping at it with our minds. Just sit and rest the mind at ease on the object in the present moment. The great Dzogchen master Dudjom Rinpoche (1904 - 1987) called this type of practice resting our awareness in "present-nowness."

This is not an analytical exercise, or an intellectual game. It's an exercise in allowing joy to begin to resonate within our being naturally, so that when we sit and meditate, our hearts will be open and receptive to whatever arises. We are not trying to force or fake joy, but rather we are allowing joy to arise effortlessly in its own time and in its own way.

After spending ten minutes doing this, we then sit in calm abiding meditation (*shamatha*) for a further ten minutes. When we first begin with this joy practice, we do ten minutes of joy practice, then ten minutes of shamatha. As we grow accustomed to sitting in meditation and simply observing the breath, we extend the meditation component of the session to 20 minutes, and then 30 minutes and so on. Thus, we do ten minutes of joy then 10, 20 or 30 minutes of mediation. By using this format, all of our dharma practice becomes infused with joy from the beginning.

simply rest in joy's natural radiance without contrivance. We then seamlessly enter into calm abiding practice with the glow of joy in our hearts, which will naturally deepen our meditation practice, allowing us to rest in stillness and peace. When we rest in stillness and peace, compassion also naturally arises.

If we are going through a difficult period, and experiencing things like depression or anxiety, we might feel that joy is hard to come by. If this is the case we can try thinking back to the things that used to bring us joy before our current low period. Spend some time dwelling on the objects or experiences that brought you joy in the past. I think of walks in the rainforest. If I am having a rough time feeling joyous in the present, I think back to one of my walks in my favorite forest. I allow myself to feel the joy of that past moment in my body. When we think of past joyful experiences we can bring them into the present by placing our awareness on that joy and allowing the sensation of it to naturally grow. This will support us until the temporary troubles pass and we are able to cultivate joy in the present. Generally speaking in the dharma, we try not to dwell too much on the past, but when our current situation is difficult, it is okay to do so as a temporary remedy. Whatever happens, we should be gentle and kind with ourselves. It is counterproductive to be hard on ourselves in any way, as this is the antithesis of the joy practice.

### **The benefits**

We will find that bringing joy into our hearts at the beginning of our dharma practice opens us up to giving rise to the other immeasurables more easily. For most of us, joy is the easiest of the four immeasurables to develop, which is why it makes sense to start with it. Once joy becomes a regular experience in our hearts and a quality of our practice, we then naturally begin to feel lovingkindness, compassion, and equanimity (generally in this order).

When coupled with simple meditation this joy practice allows our hearts and minds to become more open, flexible, and equanimous. It also makes our meditation deeper and more stable, which eventually leads to the spontaneous arising of love and compassion. This is the ultimate result of the joy practice; it gives rise to the great bodhicitta, which is nothing less than the self-perfected natural state (or *Dzogpachenpo*).

qualities of compassion and kindness eventually become truly *felt experiences*, which is the whole point of dharma practice—to awaken our natural capacity for kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.”

The Path of Joy is a shortcut. Buddhist practice naturally leads to joy, but it can take years before practitioners reach that point. By evoking joy each day before we sit in meditation we are jump-starting the process and getting to the point where practice and joy are inseparable much sooner. As a result, we begin to feel more warmth and kindness towards those we meet, and are more capable of dealing with difficulties with resilience, composure and acceptance. Jamyang puts it this way: “We will feel less discrimination, prejudice and disturbing emotions like anger and fear. Most importantly, if we do this joy practice each day we will feel our hearts opening up more and more until our capacity for compassion and love is truly boundless.” In other words, joy leads to recognition of our true nature, which is the union of realization of emptiness (wisdom) and limitless compassion that is bodhicitta, the awakened mind.



*Join Pema Düddul for The Path of Joy, an online meditation course that starts January 16 (January 17 Northern Hemisphere). Learn more [here](#).*