

Awakening the Buddha

Alan Watts (annotated in parenthesis, by Sifu Sylvain Chamberlain, TLK)

At a certain point, many people experience something strange they didn't see coming. Things that once delighted them, activities that once filled them with enthusiasm and pleasure, suddenly seem to lose their savor. The music doesn't move them anymore. The food doesn't taste as it used to. The company of friends feels hollow. Even the pursuits they once considered their greatest passions, reading, walking in nature, creating things, all of it becomes somehow flat, colorless, without the spark that once made life feel worth living. And naturally, when this happens, people become frightened. They think something has gone terribly wrong.

They believe they've become depressed, that they're ill, that there's some chemical imbalance in their brain that needs correcting. Or they think they've simply become cynical, jaded, that life has worn them down, and they've lost their capacity for joy. And they ask themselves with genuine desperation, what's happened to me? Why can't I feel anything anymore? But what if I told you that this loss of joy, this apparent flatness of experience, is not necessarily a problem at all? What if this state that seems like death is actually a kind of birth? What if the disappearance of joy as you knew it is simply making room for something else?

Something you haven't yet recognized because you're still looking for the old feelings, the old excitements, the old ways of being moved. Let me explain what I mean. You see, most of what we call joy or pleasure in ordinary life is really a kind of relief. It's the satisfaction of a want, the filling of a lack, the scratching of an itch. You're hungry and then you eat. And there's pleasure in that. But notice the pleasure depends on the hunger. Without the hunger, the eating is just mechanical. You're lonely and then someone pays attention to you and there's joy in that. But the joy depends on the loneliness. Without the sense of lack, the attention doesn't move you. This is what **Shakyamuni Buddha** was pointing out when he said that life is suffering or more accurately that life is **unsatisfactoriness**. Not that everything is miserable, but that this constant cycle of wanting and getting, of lacking and filling, of itching and scratching is inherently unstable. It's based on a sense of *incompleteness*, of something missing, of not being quite enough as you are.

*(I have discussed this in my discussions on identification and the **Self**. In brief, the idea that we are an independent entity requires that we identify (describe) all that is not "self" in order to define our identity as unique.)*

And so we spend our lives chasing these little moments of relief, these brief satisfactions when a want is filled. We call this happiness. We call this joy. But it's really just the temporary sensation of discomfort. It's like someone hitting you on the head with a hammer and then stopping. And you feel relieved. And you call that relief pleasure. But the question nobody asks is why were you being hit with a hammer in the first place?

Now, what happens to some people, and this is what's happening to you if you're experiencing this loss of joy, is that they begin to see through this game, they begin to recognize that all these pleasures they've been chasing are really just escapes from discomfort. And once you see this, once you really understand it, the old joys don't work anymore. The scratching doesn't satisfy the itch because you've realized that you're creating the itch in order to enjoy the scratching. It's like a drug addict who takes a drug to feel good, but the drug itself creates the need for more of the drug. The relief the addict gets from taking the drug is really just the temporary cessation of the withdrawal symptoms caused by the drug itself. Once you see this pattern, the whole thing collapses. The pleasure loses its appeal because you've seen through it. This is what's happened to you. You've seen through the game of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. You've recognized perhaps not intellectually but in your bones that all these joys you were pursuing were really just elaborate ways of running away from yourself from the present moment from what simply is. And so now you're left in this strange state. The old pleasures don't work. The old excitements don't excite.

You've lost your capacity to be distracted, to be taken out of yourself by experiences and sensations. And this feels like death. It feels like something essential has been taken from you. Like you've become a ghost going through the motions of life but not really living it. But here's what you must understand. This state is not an end. It's a transition. It's the space between the old way of experiencing life and a new way that you haven't discovered yet. You're in the gap. And the gap is terrifying because there's nothing to hold on to. The old structures have collapsed, but the new hasn't yet emerged.

*((This is actually a very good description of **Samsara**. As we lose our footing in attachments and accrual of things identified, we “feel” a loss that can produce panic. This is another reason why it is important to chant every day; so that the “gap” Mr. Watts speaks about is a very brief transition as our awakened consciousness picks up the slack to lead us to Buddhahood. To leave behind what Shakyamuni called “habit energy”).*

Let me give you an analogy. Imagine you've been living your whole life in a room lit by candles. The candle light creates all these interesting shadows on the walls, dancing shapes that fascinate you. You spend your time watching the shadows, being entertained by them, finding meaning in their patterns. This is like the ordinary joys of life. They're real enough in their way, but they're really just flickering shadows created by the limited light source. Now, what happens if someone opens a door and bright daylight streams in? At first, the light is so bright, it's almost painful. You can't see anything clearly. Everything is washed out. And all those fascinating shadows that kept you entertained, they've disappeared, vanished in the bright light. And you might think, "This is terrible. I've lost all the interesting patterns. Everything's become bland and featureless. But you're not seeing clearly yet. Your eyes haven't adjusted to the daylight. Once they do, you'll realize that you haven't lost anything. You've gained everything. You're seeing reality directly now, not just its shadows. And this direct seeing is so much richer, so much more real

than the shadow play you were watching before. But it's a different kind of richness. It doesn't have the same quality as the shadows. It's not entertainment. It's something else entirely.

This is what's happening when nothing brings you joy anymore. The old shadow play has stopped working, but you haven't yet learned to see in the daylight. You're in that transitional period where the old is gone, but the new isn't yet clear. And this period can last quite a while. It's not something you can rush. Your eyes must adjust at their own pace. Now, the usual response to this state is to try desperately to get the old joys back. People throw themselves into new hobbies, new relationships, new experiences, hoping to rekindle that spark. Or they turn to stronger stimulation, louder music, more intense sensations, more dramatic experiences, like someone whose taste buds have become dulled, trying hotter and hotter spices to feel something, anything. But this doesn't work. In fact, it makes things worse because what's really needed is not more stimulation, but less. What's needed is to stop running, stop seeking, stop trying to fill the emptiness with experiences and sensations. What's needed is to simply be with what is without trying to make it into something else.

*(This could easily explain the beginning Buddhist practitioner's experience after receiving their personal **Mandala** and enshrining it in their Altar and **Butsudan**. Once connection is made with the Buddha mind through the Gohonzon pathway from chanting with the mandala, the motivations and rewards of life become illuminated more and more over time.)*

And here's the extraordinary thing that happens when you do this. When you stop trying to manufacture joy, you discover that there's something present that was always there but that you never noticed because you were too busy chasing after pleasures. It's not exactly joy in the old sense. It's more like uh an okay-ness, a fundamental sense that everything is all right. exactly as it is. Not that everything is perfect or pleasurable, but that it's complete. It's enough. It doesn't need anything added to it. The old joys were based on contrast. Good times versus bad times, pleasure versus pain, excitement versus boredom. But this new state, this okay-ness doesn't depend on contrast. It's there all the time. Whether things are going well or poorly, whether you're comfortable or uncomfortable, whether you're experiencing pleasure or pain, it's like discovering that you've been living in a house your whole life, rushing from room to room looking for something, and then suddenly realizing that what you were looking for was the house itself. It was there all along. You were standing in it. You are it. But you couldn't see it because you were too busy searching.

Now, I must warn you about something. When I describe this state as an okay-ness or a fundamental sense that everything is all right, you might think this sounds rather dull. You might think, is that all there is? Just being okay with things. That doesn't sound very exciting. And you're right. It's not exciting in the way the old pleasures were exciting. It doesn't have that quality of peak experience, of highs and lows, of drama and intensity. But here's what you must understand. Excitement is exhausting. Drama is exhausting. The constant pursuit of peak experiences is

exhausting. You can't live at that pitch all the time. What happens is that you have these brief moments of intensity and then long periods of deflation while you wait for the next high. The lows get lower and lower and you need stronger and stronger stimuli to achieve the same highs. This is the addict's pattern. And most people are addicted to experience, to sensation, to the drama of their own lives. They're constantly generating problems so they can solve them, creating tension so they can release them, stirring up emotions so they can feel alive. And they call this joy, but it's really just agitation. What you've lost when nothing brings you joy anymore is your addiction to this pattern. And like any addict going through withdrawal, you feel terrible. You feel empty, flat, dead. But what you're really experiencing is the absence of agitation. And at first, the absence of agitation feels like death because you've been agitated for so long that you've forgotten what it's like to simply be at rest.

(I think it helpful to know that this "rest" Alan speaks of is actually an illusion until one realizes that all life is momentum, and that this "rest" is really a moment-to-moment experience of the "now" or the momentum as it occurs; enveloping you and the cosmos in all its brilliant complexity and process of life. The more one considers this point of view, the more one can sense the grandeur and overwhelming nature of life and our enlightenment to it.)

Let me tell you about a man I knew once. He was tremendously energetic, always doing something, always pursuing some new project or pleasure. He traveled constantly, collected experiences like some people collect stamps, was always reading, always learning, always seeking out new sensations. And he was proud of this. He thought he was really living, squeezing every drop out of life. Then something happened. I don't know exactly what, perhaps just the accumulation of years, and he lost his enthusiasm. All those activities that had seemed so important suddenly seemed pointless. Travel bored him. Books couldn't hold his attention. Food all tasted the same. And he became quite depressed about this. He thought his life was over, that he'd become old and worn out. But then after some time in this state, something shifted. He told me that one day he was sitting in his garden doing nothing in particular, just sitting there. And he suddenly realized that he was completely content. Not excited, not entertained, just simply content, present here. And he understood that all his previous rushing around had been a kind of running away. He'd been afraid of this simple being here. So he'd filled his life with constant activity and stimulation to avoid it. And now that all the activity had dropped away, he discovered what he'd been running from. Just this this moment, this breath, this being alive. And it was enough. More than enough. It was everything, but it wasn't exciting or dramatic. So his mind had dismissed it as nothing, as emptiness, as death. Only when he stopped demanding that life be exciting did he discover that life is extraordinary in its ordinariness. This is what I'm trying to point you toward.

When nothing brings you joy anymore in the old way, you're being invited to discover a different quality of experience. Not the ups and downs of pleasure and pain, but something more subtle, more constant, more fundamental. But you can't force this discovery. You can't make it happen. In fact, trying to make it happen is exactly what prevents it. It's like trying to fall asleep. The harder you try, the more

wakeful you become. You have to give up trying. You have to surrender to not knowing, to not feeling, to this apparent emptiness. And this is perhaps the most difficult thing anyone can be asked to do because we're so afraid of emptiness.

(I find this statement a bit odd, given Mr. Watts' well known affinity to Zen Buddhism. The next paragraph hints at Zen thinking in a more constructive way. I offer this correction, as a Lotus Sutra, Bodhisattva teaching, a Nichiren inspired Buddhist, that it is our "effort" in the invocation of our Buddha consciousness that hurtles us forward and through that apparent "emptiness" to the clarity of all phenomena and the immense fulfillment of the Process of Life throughout the Cosmos.)

We think emptiness is death, is meaninglessness, is the absence of life. But actually, emptiness is potential. It's the space in which something new can emerge. As long as you're full of seeking and striving and trying to recapture old joys, there's no room for anything new. You must become empty. Not empty in a negative sense, but empty like a bowl is empty. Empty so it can receive. Empty so it can be filled. But not filled with the old things. Filled with something you don't yet have a name for.

Now I know this is not what you wanted to hear. You wanted me to tell you how to get your joy back. How to feel things again the way you used to. But I can't tell you that because what you're experiencing is not a problem to be solved. It's a transition to be gone through like a caterpillar dissolving in the cocoon before it becomes a butterfly. The caterpillar is finished. It can't go back to being a happy caterpillar. But it's not yet a butterfly. It's just mush. And if the mush could think, it would probably be quite distressed about its condition. You're the mush right now. And I'm telling you, this is not a mistake. This is the process. Stay with it. Don't try to escape from it. Don't try to manufacture fake joys to fill the emptiness. Just be with what is. Be with the flatness, the colorlessness, the apparent meaninglessness. Let it be exactly as it is without trying to fix it or understand it or make it into something else. And gradually, not according to your timetable, but in its own time, something will shift. Not back to the old way, but forward into something new. a new way of experiencing life that doesn't depend on contrast that doesn't require stimulation that finds sufficiency in the bare fact of existing.

This is what the mystics have always pointed to. Not some ecstatic state of constant bliss that's just another form of the old seeking, but a deep okay-ness that persists through all states, pleasant and unpleasant alike. A recognition that you are in the deepest sense all right. Not because everything in your life is going well, but because your life, your existence is fundamentally complete exactly as it is. The old joys were like trying to improve a sunset by throwing more colors at it. The new recognition is that the sunset is already perfect, doesn't need improvement, doesn't need anything added to it or taken away from it. It's complete in itself. And so are you. And so is this moment and so is your life. Even in this seemingly joyless state. But I must emphasize again, you cannot make this recognition happen. You cannot achieve this state. Any effort to get there pushes it away because effort implies that something is lacking, that you're not already complete. The recognition can only come when you stop trying, when you give up, when you surrender completely to what is. And even then it may not come or it may come and go or it may come in such a subtle way

that you don't even notice it at first. It's not dramatic. It's not exciting. It doesn't feel like you thought enlightenment would feel. It's more like coming home. Like taking off tight shoes, like exhaling after holding your breath too long. So what do you do in the meantime while you're in this state where nothing brings joy? You do what needs to be done. You brush your teeth. You eat your meals. You go about your daily business. But you do it without the expectation that these activities should make you happy. You do them simply because they're what's here to be done. Not with resignation or bitterness, but with a kind of neutral acceptance. And you watch, you observe this state you're in without judging it, without trying to change it. You become interested in it, curious about it, not in a clinical way, but with the kind of interest you might have in watching clouds move across the sky. Just watching without needing the clouds to be different than they are. And most importantly, you stop comparing. Stop comparing your current state with how you used to feel. Stop comparing yourself with people who seem to be having a good time. Stop comparing this moment with some imagined future moment when everything will be better. Just be here now with what is. This is not resignation. It's not giving up. It's actually the opposite. It's ***fully showing up for your life as it actually is rather than constantly wishing it were different***. And paradoxically, it's only when you stop wishing things were different that anything can truly change. Because what's blocking the new experience, the new way of being, is your insistence that things should be like they were before. Your nostalgia for the old joys, your memory of how things used to feel, your expectation that life should return to that familiar pattern. All of this is preventing you from seeing what's actually here.

Now, let me give you one final thought. Perhaps the reason nothing brings you joy anymore is that you've outgrown joy as you knew it. Perhaps you've become too big for those small pleasures, too deep for those shallow satisfactions. Not because you're better than other people, but simply because your consciousness has expanded and the old containers can no longer hold what you've become. A child is delighted by candy. A young person is thrilled by romance and adventure. A mature person finds satisfaction in accomplishment and recognition. But there comes a point for some people when all of these things are seen through. When they're recognized as temporary, conditional, ultimately unsatisfying. And then what? Then you're thrown back on existence itself on the bare fact of being alive, of being conscious, of being here. And this can seem like nothing at all compared to the excitement of candy and romance and accomplishment. But actually, it's everything. It's the ground from which all those other things arose. It's what was there before you learn to seek pleasure and avoid pain. It's what remains when all the seeking stops. And it's not nothing. It's not emptiness in the negative sense. It's fullness. It's wholeness. It's completion. But it's so simple, so ordinary, so undramatic that the mind overlooks it constantly, always seeking something more exciting, more stimulating, more special. What you're being asked to discover is that there is nothing more special than this, this moment, this breath, this simple fact of being alive, not because it makes you feel good, not because it's pleasurable, but because it's real. It's what is. And what is is enough. It's always been enough. You just forgot for a while.

So when nothing brings you joy anymore, don't despair. You haven't lost your capacity for feeling. You've lost your addiction to a particular kind of feeling. And in that loss, there's an opening, a possibility, a doorway into a different way of being human. Walk through that doorway. Not by trying to walk through it, but by standing still and discovering that you're already on the other side. You've always been on the other side. You just didn't notice because you were too busy seeking. Now you have nothing to seek. And that's not a loss. That's the greatest gift you could receive.

(NaMuMyoHoRenGeKyo!)

A transcript of Alan Watts with annotation by Sifu Sylvain Chamberlain