

~ *An Overview of the Joy of Living Levels* ~

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I wanted to talk about some of the key concepts, the key discovery and the key consequence of each of the Joy of Living levels.

In the first Joy of Living level, the discovery that we make is awareness. This is the discovery that begins the golden thread that goes all the way through the Joy of Living levels on into the Path of Liberation on to the end of the path, whatever that might be. Mingyur Rinpoche starts by introducing us directly to awareness itself by virtue of the introduction to what he calls *open awareness*. To use the ocean and wave analogy, this is an introduction to the ocean, the vast, clean, pure expanse that is our inheritance. It is our abiding quality, our abiding nature, always there, not better or worse, can never be made better or worse, is not less than the Awakened Ones, this is who we truly are. Immediately we have that introduction.

Then we are introduced to the waves of the ocean, the waves of the ocean that, when unrecognized, can obscure this fundamental awareness. The waves in and of themselves, we learn, are not other than awareness. As the ocean and waves are both wet, they are both water, they are not other than awareness. But we get faked out by them. We think that is us. The classic analogy that Mingyur Rinpoche so cleverly and beautifully uses, effectively uses, is this idea of *monkey mind*. Monkey mind is that mind that is beguiled by the phenomenal world and is constantly manipulating the phenomenal world, and in doing so we tend to lose touch with this basic, abiding quality of being. We confuse monkey mind, the surface, the playful display of mind that Rinpoche talks about—we confuse that as being me and we lose connection with this awareness.

That is the discovery. The journey in that is the journey of meditation. The first meditation technique, as you know, is what is called, classically and in the tradition, non-meditation. More subtly, non-distracted, non-meditation. We do not need to go into that, you understand

it well. Also, we need to work with monkey so that the distractibility, the agitation of monkey—not that it goes away, but it is no longer obstructing or faking us out. It is not a blockage to our connection with, and recognition of, this abiding awareness. Mingyur Rinpoche talks about using meditation supports, meditation techniques, as a way to give monkey a good job. Which I think is about as profound a description of what meditation is as I have ever heard, actually.

Monkey giving monkey a good job means all of the things that up until now had been experienced by us as troublesome. In other words, the objects of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, the five senses, that up until now had pulled us away, we are going to use as a support. By bringing this awareness to whatever those things are, those become a support for developing meditative awareness. If we started with open awareness, awareness not focused, awareness resting upon itself, now we are going to use the active quality of this awareness and give monkey some jobs so it begins to naturally tame. To the degree the waters are somewhat clarified and tamed, to that degree, this abiding awareness becomes increasingly accessible to us in a more ongoing way. We can then use all the objects of the five senses as well as monkey itself, which is thinking and emotions.

From that point of view, then, everything that up until now we had experienced as being problematic, now becomes our friend. One of Rinpoche's signature ways of presenting this is that traditionally until now, we have either tried to push away monkey, or monkey becomes our boss. Here we are going to turn the tables and use whatever arises as a support for waking up. In the classical presentation, the poison becomes the medicine. This is the profound discovery and practice of the Level One. There are many, many consequences to this. But one of the great consequences when we travel and teach this material is, I hope, for us individually, as Rinpoche says, one of the consequences is we do not need to change ourselves. We need to recognize who we already are. For me, this is an incredibly beautiful and elegant way of presenting this whole path.

Then as we move into the level 2 [teachings], having discovered mind and its world, Rinpoche uses the nice analogy of having gone into a room. We put the light on in the room, now we can

begin to discover the qualities of this room. As we begin to work with our meditation practice, one of the first qualities that begins to develop is the sense of warmth. Mingyur Rinpoche, in the first disc of the level 2, gives a really beautiful introduction to loving kindness and compassion. When we talk about warmth, we are talking about loving-kindness and compassion—loving-kindness meaning wanting to be happy for oneself and others; compassion meaning wanting to free of suffering for oneself and others. I think most of you have seen it, I will not go through it because only Mingyur Rinpoche can do justice to it, but he points out that each movement that we make, every time we move, every time we do something, every time we open the refrigerator, we are always either looking for some kind of happiness or trying in some ways to adjust our world so that there is less difficulty, suffering, anxiety, whatever it might be.

The consequence of this understanding is that everything that we do, however confused it might be, is in the service of reducing our suffering and finding happiness. So even monkey's craziest stuff is an attempt. The extension of that is that everything is an extension of our basic nature, our basic love, our basic compassion. As Rinpoche says—he is very visual on the Joy of Living discs—you do not have to think of suffering here, and then somehow we are going to destroy the suffering. With this understanding that everything is an instinctual attempt, however confused, but an instinctual attempt to find happiness or a relief of suffering, we do not have to destroy suffering. We have to recognize the love and compassion right *in* the suffering, anxiety, discomfort, disease, whatever it might be.

This is, again in my mind, a really elegant way of understanding that loving-kindness and compassion is an inherent quality, is an authentic expression of this awareness that we have discovered, and not some sort of practice that we have to slap on this bad monkey—some moralistic sedative we have to use to get monkey in order. Our very suffering, our very difficulty, is itself the nature of loving-kindness and compassion. We recognize that, partly just as the view because it is introduced to us, and then we begin to train in it. We can train in it by virtue of working with the Four Boundless Attitudes, which you know well: Loving-Kindness, Compassion, Joy and Equanimity. Rinpoche goes into further teachings—taking and sending,

tonglen practice, and turning our particular suffering into compassion itself. A beautiful presentation.

This is one of the discoveries when we begin to explore this awareness. But again here the thread is continuing working with this authentic love and compassion, which is a naturally abiding quality of this awareness. It is not something new. We are flexing a muscle that we have already found to enhance it. The idea here, as you know very well, the quality of this open awareness, just like water is wet, the quality of open awareness is the wetness that is warmth—loving-kindness and compassion—and then wisdom.

Then we move into the third Joy of Living level, wisdom. There is no particular reason why wisdom and compassion go this way. It is taught this way. In some traditions it is taught the other way around, wisdom comes first.

What is the discovery of wisdom? The discovery of wisdom in the Joy of Living level 3 is monkey's instinctual habit of going out and grasping whatever it finds and pulling it towards it, or pushing away from it, or denying it, ignoring it. This is the beginning of the three root afflicted mind states. This grasping creates a kind of prison for us that we have created and we have put ourselves into. Does that make sense? This world that we live in is a construct that we have constructed, we have lived into it, and on the basis of how we perceive this world, we struggle with it, and are always struggling with it.

What we are doing with this discussion of wisdom is we are beginning to put the lights on how things truly are. We are going to use some analysis, we are going to look back now to conceptual mind, use some analysis so we can bring to mind what is our default assumption about the way the world is, correct it with some proper analysis and understanding, and then through our meditation rest in that new proper orientation of how things truly are. The logic is that when we go out into the world, if we are assuming that the world and ourselves are a certain way (and they are not), that disconnect is suffering, that is where the disease, whatever it might be, that is where that is.

To the degree that we clarify the true nature of things and the true nature of ourselves, when we go out into the world it is like water pouring into water. There is no suffering. There is understanding, which, by the way, enhances yet again our sense of warmth and concern for those who have not made that discovery, including ourselves.

In the Joy of Living level 3, we are going to use some analytic techniques, we are going to break down whether things truly exist here for me or mine in terms of my world, and we are going to use some classic investigations. We are going to ask, for instance, if things are worthy of being grasped upon, they have to be truly existent. If they are not truly existent, it would make no more sense to grasp at them than for us to try to grasp a rainbow. So we can ask, “Is this thing permanent?” If it is not permanent, we cannot say that it truly exists. Rinpoche talks about impermanence and subtle impermanence. Going into subtle impermanence we realize actually there is no time. And yet there is still something experiencing the fact that there is no time. Mingyur Rinpoche calls this—and so does everyone else—timeless awareness. Through analysis, actually, we are left back into this quality of awareness again.

Similarly, we say if something truly exists, it has to be singular. But if we actually look into it and we begin to break it down—we know this, we have been through this drill, go down and look again, further, further, further, we cannot find it again—again we are left with awareness. Similarly, something has to be independent. If we begin to pull apart the causes and conditions, we see that actually nothing upon its own exists. So bingo, we realize that actually there is nothing to grasp on.

First we understand this intellectually. Then it loosens our grasping. As it loosens our grasping, we begin to have a natural, more authentic experience of how things truly are. Then finally—and this is a disc probably most of us have not seen, Mingyur Rinpoche included, that we are just beginning to use—is a classical distinction that comes across so beautifully in the DVD, which is working with mind, coming back observing mind itself again, and observing mind when mind is still, when mind is moving, and then awareness. At first it looks like still mind, moving mind, and awareness, but then we realize that actually awareness is aware of

still mind, awareness is aware of moving mind, so actually there are two, but then we finally realize that actually there is only one. Which is what? Awareness.

From the Joy of Living level 1, from the very first DVD, or the Saturday morning DVD of the Joy of Living level 1 all the way to the end of the wisdom section, the thread is awareness, exploring awareness.

The last point here is what we are doing, which is that we are not trying to manipulate, sedate mind's expression, in this case monkey and the phenomenal world. What we are trying to do is following in the thread of awareness. We are training in awareness. We are increasing familiarity with awareness so that, as time goes on, our allegiance more and more is coming back to this natural awareness within that vast, clear, open, warm space of awareness. Phenomena arise in their proper perspective. We have become reoriented to who we are such that we have an experience of being that is independent from the display of the world. This is what Mingyur Rinpoche means by joy. A basic, fundamental quality of being that is independent of what arises in our experience. This basic well-being is what Rinpoche calls joy, as in *The Joy of Living*.

So that is it.