

Shrink Rap Radio #239, June 11, 2010, Awakening Joy  
**David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka "Dr. Dave" interviews James Baraz**  
(transcribed from [www.ShrinkRapRadio.com](http://www.ShrinkRapRadio.com) by Jamie Johnson)

**Excerpt:** *"...Actually the more you start looking for what's good, the more you see it everywhere. And so it's a very potent way to incline your mind towards the goodness inside and around you. And besides knowing that you're grateful for something when you feel it or when you're in touch with it, then taking a moment to actually feel the gratitude, that's a whole other level of connection. That's where the mindfulness comes in. Saying, "Oh I'm so grateful to so and so for who they are" and then as you are in touch with it, taking a moment and feeling that gratitude. Exploring the landscape of gratefulness. Very potent."*

**Introduction:** That was the voice of my guest James Baraz speaking about his new book, *Awakening Joy, 10 Steps That Will Put You On The Road To Real Happiness*. James Baraz has been teaching meditation since 1978 and the Awakening Joy Course since 2003. He leads retreats, workshops and classes in the U.S. and abroad and is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. James is co-author with Shoshana Alexander of *Awakening Joy*, a new book based on the course. In addition, James is on the international advisory board of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. He lives with his wife in the San Francisco Bay area and has two sons and three grandchildren. Now here's the interview:

**Dr. Dave:** James Baraz, Welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

**James Baraz:** Nice to be here, Dave.

**Dr. Dave:** I'm so happy to have this chance to speak with you and I'm surprised our paths haven't crossed before now. I mentioned your book to one of my good friends and he told me that he was right at the point of recommending it to me. My friend, Burt Caplan has been in one of your Joy workshops in the past and I learned that you used to conduct groups in the Angela Center in Santa Rosa which is near where I live and also I believe you are one of the founders of the Spirit Rock Meditation and Retreat Center in Marin. Is that right?

**James Baraz:** That's right.

**Dr. Dave:** So I know lots of people who have gone there for 10 day retreats and so on which unfortunately I haven't done. I've always been just on the precipice of almost doing it. And also I've interviewed people that you know, for example like Sylvia Boorstein. I've interviewed her on this series and you mention her frequently in your book along with I interviewed Richard Davidson who you cite and also Paul Ekman.

**James Baraz:** All very good people.

**Dr. Dave:** So it feels like we're sort of moving in parallel, intersecting worlds.

**James Baraz:** Sounds good!

**Dr. Dave:** My friend who took your workshop also reports that in fact you come across as a truly joyful person. So it's good news that you practice what you preach and that it works.

**James Baraz:** Well, I can't say and as I say in the book people who are really happy aren't happy all the time. So, not to have an idealist image that I have a smiling face all the time but mostly I'm pretty appreciative about life and feel pretty grateful and generally see the good.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, that's good. I've really been enjoying reading your book. It's like a refresher course on truths that I already know but sometimes kind of drift away from. So it's really been a great thing for me to be reading before I go to bed at night.

**James Baraz:** Oh, great. I'm so happy to hear it.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, you've been teaching meditation and conducting workshops on joy for, I guess, about 30 years. So tell us a bit about your life before that and how you ended up on this path.

**James Baraz:** Ok, first and just to clarify, I've been teaching meditation and philosophy of meditation for 30 years. The Joy course and that particular, the teachings that are summed up in the book, that I've been doing since 2003. But it's been coming through those teachings before then. But in a more formal way, that's when I started doing that stuff. My live before I started teaching or getting into the meditation stuff?

**Dr. Dave:** Yea

**James Baraz:** I grew up in New York City. I was a school teacher for a number of years, mostly 5<sup>th</sup> grade and 6<sup>th</sup> grade in New York. Then I moved out to California in '77, did a couple of more years teaching. And got into other endeavors, a little business experience, actually had been teaching for the last 30 years the meditation stuff. As far as who I am, who I was when I was first exposed to the meditation philosophy. I was pretty confused, insecure guy looking for answers. So I wouldn't say I was joyful, although I loved to have fun. But I didn't quite know how to cut through all my insecurities and stuff, until I found the meditation.

**Dr. Dave:** I appreciate your sharing that because I imagine that some numbers of listeners are probably in that state at this point. They'll be interested to know that's where you started and that they could end up somewhere else.

**James Baraz:** I was going to say that, as I often say to people who sign up for the Joy course or who are looking for some answers in meditation and the philosophy like me, if

you have a lot of suffering inside you're often more motivated to really go for it. That was my case when I first met my teacher whose name is Joseph Goldstein. And he was saying it's actually possible to not be run by my neurotic thought patterns. I never entertained that possibility before. But I was so focused on doing that that I just went for it. If you've got a lot of suffering or you're looking for answers to get through your angst, sometimes you're really more motivated and radical transformations are possible.

**Dr. Dave:** Ok, good. What led you to write this book at this particular time?

**James Baraz:** Although I was so incredibly grateful for the meditation and the philosophy and this way of life and attitude of just being with things as way they are without getting lost in your judgments. Now, I had a long, what's called a honeymoon period. I did a lot of retreats, a lot of meditation, actually started some teaching as well but at some point I got very serious as sometimes can happen with those on a spiritual journey. And as I like to say, Dead Serious and I lost my joy for awhile. When I kind of came back to reclaiming that natural joy that's inside of us I wanted to see what I had misunderstood and I looked at the teachings that I'm familiar with, Buddhist philosophy primarily. And I wanted to see where real happiness lies and how I could both practice with that inclination and share with others because I had been teaching by this time. The more I looked the more I saw there were possibilities of utilizing the practice and some basic principles in a very accessible way where you don't have to do a 10 day meditation retreat but in your daily life you can apply these principles. And I wanted to share that with all the people that I teach as well.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, and I think we'll come back to a little bit of what you just said there too. It touches on something I wanted to speak with you about. I have to say I really appreciate the self disclosure you do in the book. From the cultural references, I got the sense we're about the same age and I was able to identify with so many of your personal stories and life challenges that you share in the book. I really feel like you're a brother. For example, your stories about the retinal tear which I've also experienced and reluctant fatherhood, were both ones I have my own versions of.

**James Baraz:** Yea, I've always been inspired by people who can just be themselves and say, ok this is how I've gotten confused and this is how I've learned through my hard lessons and maybe that's possible for you too because basically what I try to convey to people is that they are enough just as they are. If they get beyond or cut through the confusion, there's real goodness in there. Being willing to open up to a whole show, and say ok this is how I get confused, this is wisdom with goodness underneath it all.

**Dr. Dave:** Now, you just mentioned you come from a Buddhist perspective and touching on that little piece that I wanted to respond to, I'm not sure why but some reason I've never associated Buddhist particularly with joy. Sure, I suppose the experience of enlightenment might be one of joy but somehow the message that's come through to me has had more emphasis that life is full of sorrow and suffering. So tell us about your Buddhist take on sorrow and joy and the relationship between the two.

**James Baraz:** Well, that's exactly the blind alley that I got into I lost my joy because there is a lot of emphasis on working with suffering. The First Noble Truth is there's suffering in life and there's a cause of suffering is the Second Truth. There's an end to suffering, the Third Truth. And the Fourth Truth is there's a path that leads to the end of suffering. That's a lot of emphasis on suffering. And one can easily get the idea that this is about just somehow working with all suffering involved. But really the Buddha was called the happy one. And he said go for the highest happiness and you'll have all the other happiness' which are there to be experienced. And in the teachings, the teachings are replete with various kinds of states of well being from joy to rapture to contentment to ease to peace to happiness, gladness, there are poly words, this is the language of the teachings, for each of those. Joy is one of the four divine abodes. It's one of the seven factors of enlightenment. It's one of the main concentration states. So although it doesn't get a lot of air play, that's what the Buddha was talking about when he said the end of suffering, he was talking about going for happiness. But the way that the words have come down to us, that message can be lost and that's exactly why I wanted to share this other take on the same teachings, that this is really a path of happiness

**Dr. Dave:** Yea, I really like that. Now, in your book you outline ten steps. And the first one is inclining your mind toward joy. So what do you mean by that, inclining your mind toward joy?

**James Baraz:** Right, well, in this philosophy, everything starts with intention. Not just this philosophy, I think in life. You might wish that you can feel good or feel happy or hope that it happens but until you get clear that you want to put well being or happiness at the center of your life it's easy to postpone it, thinking oh, when I become successful, then I'll be happy or when I meet the right partner, then I'll be happy or when I make a lot of money, then I'll be happy. And there's this kind of carrot in the future. This starts with saying I, an honest self commitment to putting happiness at the center of one's life. When I say joy, when I'm talking about joy, I'm using that word to describe all the states of well being from happiness and ease and contentment. Really, the word well being is what I'm talking about. We all want to be happy. Every one of us wants to be happy. And if somebody says "well, I don't want to be happy", that's their being happy. Whatever turns you on. But there's a place in us that's really looking, rooting for our well being. It might be misguided. It might do things that don't exactly lead there. But everyone of us has this place that is motivating us continuously for looking for some way to soothe ourselves or to feel better. And so this is activating our, that pure place that's rooting for our wellness and for well being but getting clear on where real happiness is, which is often not where we're told or learn that it is. And once you see and say, I really want to go for well being or happiness then the key step is making the decision to do your part to help bring that about. And that's what I mean when I say inclining the mind. It doesn't mean well, I got to be happy in a week from now, in a week from now I'll find real happiness. It's letting go of the time table, letting go of the report card, letting go of any kind of grasping at making it happen but rather inviting life to support you. Once you get clear on your own intention and then you do your part and let life, you create the conditions for life to support you and for you to feel that basic well being that's right

inside. So by inclining the mind, it is having that intention to help bring that about, to access the joy that's been inside all along.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, I really responded to this section on inclining one's mind toward joy. Let me share a personal story of discovery with you, if I may.

**James Baraz:** Sure, great.

**Dr. Dave:** Nearly 30 years ago, my wife and I rather unexpectedly had twins and during the pregnancy I was initially upset and resistant to having more children. But that's another story. After the twins arrived, I was really smitten with love. I would go to bed at night and as I lay there I would tune into this joy spot in my heart that they had awakened. And I sort of spontaneously developed this meditation where I would tune into that joy spot and then imagine myself turning up a volume knob, just like the volume on a radio and I would experience turning up the joy until I couldn't stand it anymore. And I still return to this meditation from time to time. I really felt like I stumbled upon something important.

**James Baraz:** Beautiful! That's one of the main things that I suggest to people, getting in touch with how you can access that feeling inside and really just seeing, having the program preset on the dial. Like you know you have a whole lot of stations on the dial and the ones that you punch that you say, "Oh this is where my mind naturally settles", the more you can both access it and recognize it when it's here, just the more it's available to you. So as in the teachings, I mention this in the book, in Buddhist teachings it says very simply whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. And neuroscience says the same things. Neurons that fire together, wire together. And so the more you are pressing that button on the dial then it's like, "Oh yeah, this is a place that I know can open me to well being". Not to hide everything else or deny the other stuff is there but just that becomes a place that you naturally settle in.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, this begins to move us to step two in your process that you outline which is mindfulness. And I've been amazed by the explosion of writing on mindfulness in the last few years so tell us about your take on mindfulness and how it can lead to joy.

**James Baraz:** Ok, well, the explosion whether it's Kaiser doing mindfulness based stress reduction or being more productive at work or whatever it seems that mindfulness or modern neuroscience, it seems that mindfulness is finally getting this spotlight as the key to having a full, rich happy life. Mindfulness is just very simply be present for your life knowing what's happening right now instead of getting lost in the stories of past or future or what you hope will happen or what you fear will happen or your fantasies. Mindfulness is being fully alive, as one colleague says, "Like the signs in the Las Vegas casinos say, you must be present to win". It's the same here as it is there.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, I love that little citation you gave in the book, must be present to win.

**James Baraz:** Yea, so you know if you're not present, you're lost in your stories. Being present means a deep connection to what is happening right now and there's a certain kind of fulfillment that comes with just being present. Just like when you're present, you're going for a walk in nature, you get out of your head and you just look around and say "Wow!" Or you're there with a friend, you're just having a conversation and you're really present for them not thinking about something else. Or if you're on a phone conversation doing your computer stuff, doing email as you're talking, when you're really present and connecting, you're connecting with life besides connecting with that person and that is really the secret to being more alive. Mindfulness also has a few other amazing properties that are the underpinning for the rest of the course in the book that I teach. Mindfulness, which again means being present without getting lost in judgment, happens to have the unique quality of weakening all states of mind that are contracting like anger or fear or jealousy or confusion. And I can get into that if you want, a little bit of philosophy. But basically when you're mindful, your mind is open and not contracting. It's an antidote for those contracted states and it also has the property of strengthening all the wholesome states or the states that lead to happiness and well being like love and generosity or compassion or presence. And it strengthens those states so it directly leads to a feeling of well being the more one practices it, as well. And that means you're not just looking for all the wonderful things that happen but you're here for the whole show. You're not running away when things are difficult. You're willing to open up to it all. And the other key piece around mindfulness, which is why it is throughout the course, is when you do happen to be feeling a state of well being like you're generous or a random act of kindness comes through you that being mindful and being really connected and present with it, amplifies the experience so it's more than just knowing, "Oh, I'm feeling pretty good now" but to turn your awareness and explore what it feels like to feel good. Explore it in your body. What does this feeling of gratitude feel like? Or of generosity or of kindness feel like? Just for a few moments. That actually according to modern neuroscience deepens the neural pathways. As one neuroscience friend says, if you can take in the good like that being present for those wholesome states, he says 30 seconds six times a day for two weeks and you will notice a radical shift in your whole experience of well being. And I just say be present when you're feeling good and just take a few moments, drink it in and that will have a huge effect in your ability to recognize it when it's here.

**Dr. Dave:** Another piece of research that you site is that of Paul Ekman and you suggested that mindfulness reduces the refractory period for recovering from strong emotions.

**James Baraz:** Right, right.

**Dr. Dave:** Say a little bit about that.

**James Baraz:** When we're caught in the grip of an emotion, suppose we're angry with someone, ticks us off, while you're in that emotion everything in your organism will be aligned confirming your hypothesis. That person's really rotten. How dare they make that face that looks like they're confused. They're just, you know, trying to pull the wool over

our eyes. But you are really blinded by your emotion and he calls that the refractory period, that blindness where everything just confirms your inner state of the emotion. Mindfulness, and then maybe it takes a little while to come to your senses, oh, they were just confused or they were yawning or whatever, they were tired. Maybe you see it later on but it takes awhile to come to your senses. Mindfulness shortens that refractory period so you're not completely lost in the grip of the emotion and can see more clearly and assess more accurately.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, yes. You know it's been said that the mind is like a drunken monkey reeling from one thought to another. I love the passage in your book where you say the eye sees, the ear hears, the mind thinks. Thoughts are not the enemy and the mind can be trained. So it's not so much about trying to stifle that drunken monkey? Or stop him from swinging from thought to thought?

**James Baraz:** No, not at all. In fact, I don't like particularly the image of drunken monkey. It seems it's a set up for disgust. Oh, my mind is just so disgusting. Often on our retreats we use the image of training a puppy dog to stay on some paper. You put it on the paper or behind the line so it doesn't jump out into the street or jump on people. And just like training a puppy dog when it runs away it will run away, ha ha ha, in a moment and you just bring it back. Ok, come on stay. And then it runs over here and bring it back, stay. And if you think of your mind as this cute, frisky, energetic puppy dog that doesn't know any better and just needs loving guidance and you come back. Ok, come back over here sweet Rover. That's a whole different relationship but you're not trying to stop the thoughts. That's just a function of how the mind works. What you're doing is seeing through the thoughts and seeing, you know, those thoughts are coming out of nowhere, they go to nowhere and the more you can see how the mind works the more choice you have which thoughts to empower. The gift is you don't have to take your thoughts so seriously. Just image having any thought in the world and blowing it up. Oh, that's an interesting thought. Then you can have a bit more space and say ok, that thought I don't have to give energy to. This thought that says, aww, this feels right or this feels doesn't feel right those are the thoughts you can give energy to. You start to discern where those thoughts are coming from so you have more choice.

**Dr. Dave:** Ok, that kind of relates to something I was going to ask you about because you point out that the Buddha discovered that some thoughts lead to sorrow and others lead to happiness. And so my question was going to be if we can't control our thoughts how do we get more of the ones that lead to happiness.

**James Baraz:** Well, just as I'm saying you don't have to get rid of anything. In fact the more you try to get rid of the troublesome thoughts the more they've got you. Like if I try to say, "Don't think about a pink elephant right now. Get it out of your head." The more you try to get it out of your head, the more it's the only thing that's there. So the trick is not to push anything away but just let the mind be very spacious at letting those thoughts come and go without getting hooked by them or jumping on the train. Whereas the thoughts that do serve you: oh, that's a good thought, that's an important thought, a healthy thought, that's one I'm going to act on or cultivate. So you don't have to get rid

of anything you just have to discern between the thoughts that serve and the ones that don't.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, moving along to step three of your process. It focuses on gratitude and one of the ideas in your book that I really like is keeping a gratitude journal or having a gratitude buddy. Years ago, one of my colleagues shared with me his practice of reviewing the good things that happen during the day. And that's something that I've done rather informally on and off over the years. But the idea of having an email partner to share the practice with was a new one to me and perhaps one of the best uses of email technology that I've heard of.

**James Baraz:** Oh, it's quite extraordinary. As I write there, my wife has every night for the last seven years or so shared with her friend, Bonnie a gratitude practice. And I suggest that people do this regularly, have a buddy to do it with. Jane and I, my wife, share regularly what we're grateful for. It kind of keeps your radar out for the good because you've got to come up with something. And actually the more you start looking for what's good, the more you see it everywhere. So it's a very potent way to incline your mind towards the goodness, inside and around you. And then besides, here's the thing, besides knowing that you're grateful for something when you feel it or when you're in touch with it, then taking a moment to actually **feel** the gratitude. It's a whole other level of connection. That's where the mindfulness comes in. Saying, "Oh, I'm so grateful to so and so for who they are" and then as you're in touch with it, just taking a moment feeling that gratitude and exploring the landscape of gratitude. Very, very potent.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, in fact you say that negative states like anger and bitterness and resentment dissolve in the presence of gratitude. I like that that they dissolve.

**James Baraz:** It's true. In one moment of gratitude...you might be bummed out for the previous eight hours and then you...somebody does something that you really appreciate or that you're really grateful in that moment. Everything that's happened in those hours has just dissolved and here you are..."Oh, wow, life is so good" or "I'm so fortunate, thank you". Even a small saying of thank you, that contraction can't exist in the same moment and it does start to dissolve.

**Dr. Dave:** I imagine you must encounter some workshop participants who have a habitual negative cast of mind, who are pessimistic or cynical. Are such folks beyond hope in your experience?

**James Baraz:** Actually on the contrary my favorite...you probably remember this...but my favorite story in the whole book which has inspired many people is of my mother who was 89 when I was writing the chapter on gratitude She's now 91 ½, as she'll say. She's been seeing the glass half empty for her whole life and Complaining, saying what can go wrong. We have a great relationship She's very dear with a very good heart. But this is how she was brought up I shared with her the gratitude research that says it gets you a healthier immune system and better relationships and makes you happy on so many different levels. Wouldn't that be great if you could learn that? And she said, yes,

that would be great but I don't think I can. Then we did this little game. I was visiting her for a week and every time she had a complaint I would just remind her,"and...?" "Oh yeah, and my life is very blessed." Well, she magically got into this habit. I had a lot of chances that first week to tell her about and remind her "and...?" as the complaints rolled off her tongue. We had a lot of fun and she kept up with it and in the last two years it's been this amazing transformation where she'll say "Oh, I'm so blessed", "I'm so happy", "We're so blessed" and in fact this last year I said, "You are so positive these days mom". And she said, "I'm having so many positive thoughts that it's positively exhausting."

**Dr. Dave:** That's great!

**James Baraz:** And there's actually for listeners there's a great Youtube video, "Confessions of a Jewish Mother". Have you seen it?

**Dr. Dave:** No, I haven't.

**James Baraz:** You've got to check it out on Youtube. As we're speaking, it's up to 17,000 views right now. It's gone viral. My mother talking about how I ruined her life because she was a happy kvetcher, complainer in Jewish parlance and then she got into this gratitude practice and she stopped complaining. And she said, "I hate to admit it but gosh, I'm just happier" and she's saying, "He's ruined my life". It's very funny. So, Confessions of a Jewish Mother". And as I say, if my mother can change, anyone can change.

**Dr. Dave:** Alright, I'm going to definitely check that out. Now you mention some of the research that you sited to your mother and in your book you talk about Martin Seligman, research on the impact of tracking the good things and relieving depression and work by Emmons and McCullough on the benefits of gratitude. And I've been following the progress of the positive psychology movement with great interest myself and I find it fascinating that empirical Western science seems to be arriving at many of the same conclusions advanced by the wisdom coming out of the Far East. What are your thoughts about this?

**James Baraz:** The truth is the truth, whatever package it comes in. And so you know it's not surprising at all the Buddha saying whatever you incline your mind, whatever you frequently think that will be your inclination and neuroscience saying neurons that fire together, wire together. It's just now physically and physiologically corroborating what people have known all along.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**James Baraz:** You focus on gratitude and you feel better. Is that news? Or you focus on complaining and you feel worse. It's just nice that they are empirically backing up what has been obvious for centuries. It's very exciting to see one of the main shifts in the last 15-20 years that the brain can actually change and that the more you focus on health and

wellness the more you will bring that about. It's all what you focus on. Whatever you put your intention on will develop, will increase. So it seems like...I was psych major when I was in college and I loved abnormal psychology. It was my favorite subject and there I'd have the abnormal psych textbook and I'd be reading chapter after chapter and saying, "Oh yeah, that's me" and "Oh yeah, that's me too". There's a syndrome. I forget the name of it.

**Dr. Dave:** Medical student syndrome.

**James Baraz:** Oh, that's it! So whatever you're reading and seeing, all the awful things, "Oh, yeah, that's me". Well, positive psychology is saying how about wellness instead of pathology? And now the more people are looking at where wellness can be found they are finding it. "Oh, that's me too." There's goodness in there too. So one of the underlying principles of the whole course is that I have not just for the course but for the last 30 years kept looking for the good. That what you look for you'll see. If you're looking at how everybody is a jerk and life is going to disappoint you and we're all going down the tubes you'll have ample evidence to corroborate your hypothesis because that's the lens you'll be looking through. But if you look for the good in people and yourself, in life not to deny the other, in fact quite the contrary to have your eyes wide open but it's a bigger content to process all the hard stuff. If you look for the good you'll see it more and more, not only see but you'll bring it out of everybody that you're around.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, and relevant to that I really resonated to your discussion of grace disguised as obstacles, the things that really challenge us. I already copped to being a reluctant father. I kind of had to be hit up side the head with a 2x4 of love for my little babies to kind of bring me around to something that I thought was just going to be a terrible experience. So tell us a little bit about grace disguised as obstacles, which I guess is related to looking for the good.

**James Baraz:** When you look back on your life and you if you're honest with yourself and you see where the most profound impactful lessons have happened, they often have to do with getting through the hard stuff. And realizing that you either have the capacity or the courage or the wisdom or you learn your lessons or you deepen your compassion by going through the hard stuff. The good stuff is fantastic. Be present for it. Don't miss it. Take it in. But often that's not where our lessons come from. So if we want to stretch, if we want to grow we usually have to go through growing pains. And life gives us some challenging lessons to do that, to connect us with the curriculum we're all here to learn that we can be with anything. And so to not say this is some terrible mistake but when you look back on your life and see all the ways that you've been stretched and grown through the hard stuff that when you're going through it in this moment instead of fighting it or thinking this is some terrible mistake, there's the possibility of what can I learn right now? How am I stretching myself? How am I deepening my compassion to everyone who is sharing my life?

**Dr. Dave:** That kind of gives us a natural segway into step four of your process which is particularly relevant right now which is finding joy in difficult times. So many people

are out of work. So many people have lost what they had and so on. How do people contact joy in the face of challenging, difficult times?

**James Baraz:** It's the biggest question of all. A lot of times the skeptics or the people going through hard times say or hear Awakening Joy and say "Oh, I want to sign up for that but I don't think that...you know, prove it to me. I don't think I can do it." Well, it's a very mysterious thing that it's even possible to find a place of well being while you're right in the middle of hard stuff. The word joy might be a stretch. So, just to again retranslate that, rather than thinking that this is supposed to be skipping through a field of daisies when you've just lost your job or you've had something really hard happen to you think in terms of how can I find meaning in this and deepen my aliveness. When you're going through the hard times, you can't pretend that it's not hard. You have to feel everything that you're feeling or at least create a space for you to feel your sadness or fear or anxiety or loss or whatever it is. And that's part of the process to really honor everything you're feeling. And then to see that this doesn't have to define you, that you know, actually if you look at some of the happiest cultures, Mexico is a very happy culture and they are not nearly as materially well off as most of the United States citizens and yet it's a happier culture. And if you look at the cultures that have real happiness, there's not necessarily a direct correlation between good or wealthy circumstances and happiness. In fact quite the contrary, the consumer societies can go further, lower down on the scale of happiness. But there's some kind of resilience that people who go through hard times can develop. When I think of people really who have learned the secret of happiness people who have a depth to them because they're not trying to pretend that everything is okay and they accept the difficulties when it comes and there's a capacity to work with them and deal with them and not be overwhelmed by them that people with a silver spoon in their mouth often don't have. So everything counts, if we have that attitude. Ok, how can I deepen my connection to life through this?

**Dr. Dave:** You say it's not a question of whether hard times will come into our lives but a question of when. And on the face of it, that strikes me as a depressing thought but you say it can be a liberating one.

**James Baraz:** If you are thinking that life is about avoiding the hard times and maximizing your pleasure this will be a futile 24/7 job because difficulties are a part of life. That's the The First Noble Truth. That's how the Buddha starts out his teaching which sounds like a depressing way with the First Noble Truth there's suffering in the life. But he says the more you can come to terms with the fact that there's suffering the less you're going to be running away from it when it comes and the more you can find the capacity to hold it in a fearless way and come to the end of suffering. So you don't have to run away. It's not like you're looking for suffering. In that fourth chapter, Finding Joy in Difficult Times, I'm not saying "Oh, just go ahead and keep on focusing on all the suffering in your life". No, just the opposite. I'm saying be open for all the goodness but when the hard stuff comes not to run away in fear but to open up to this as well. And say ok, this is part of life. I've learned from these challenges in the past. How can I learn from this one too? How can I feel more connected with this truth? And there's a awareness and capacity to hold it all and not be overwhelmed by it.

**Dr. Dave:** Ok. Great. Well, let's move on to step five of your process. And we'll make this the last one rather than giving away your whole book here. In step five, you describe a process that you characterize as the bliss of blamelessness. And a part in this section that struck me is where you write, "In Buddhist teachings thoughts and actions are not characterized as good or bad but rather as skillful and unskillful". Personally I like this because it moves us away from the idea of "sinful" thoughts and "sinful" actions.

**James Baraz:** The word sin, you perhaps know this, the word sin literally means to miss the mark, to miss the mark, to be out of alignment not evil but just you missed the mark of where alignment and true wholeness and happiness is. So skillful vs. unskillful is just in the sense of...skillful in the sense of Buddhist teachings means those actions or thoughts that lead to well being and happiness. And unskillful are ones that lead away from it. So we know inside if we slow down enough to really listen when we're aligned with our values or when we're not. We're all wired up that way unless we're very damaged from early in our life. Most, 99 % of the population, has what is called conscious and we know when we're acting out of, in ways that are going to cause harm. But we, either to ourselves or others but we often don't slow down enough to listen to it. And this is the amazing mystery that we get to this choice point and we say, "If I do this, I don't know...but ahhh what the heck" where I'm justified or "They deserve it". And we don't realize all the mind moments on the back end that we're going to spend saying "Oh, god, I can't believe I did that" or there's guilt that plagues us. Now this is just seeing on the front end, the power of delayed gratification. That if I act in a way that has integrity, that's it's really going to in the long run create much more lasting and deeper well being than if I don't. There's a line I quote in the book. The Buddha says, "For one who leads a virtuous life it's a natural law that remorse will not arise and for one free from remorse it's a natural law that gladness will arise. For one who is glad at heart it is a natural law that joy will arise." You don't have to be a Buddhist to know that. To feel free of remorse, ahhh, that feels so good.

**Dr. Dave:** Now, speaking of not being a Buddhist, I'm under the impression you have people from a whole range of faiths that attend your workshops. I would think someone might be offended by what someone would think of as a denial of "sin" or "evil".

**James Baraz:** Well, I just encourage them to check out for themselves just what it looks like. First of all it's true. A lot of people, many people take the course online, thousands really do the course online and they come from all over the world. Although I draw from Buddhist philosophy, it's from all different philosophies and as far as sin I think of Jesus on the cross saying "Forgive them God, forgive them Lord they know not what they do." That's the essence of it. It's not realizing. It's ignorance. If we knew that this would lead to our own pain or suffering or guilt, if we knew it on the front end we wouldn't do it. If we knew that it's causing harm and that there would be repercussions both within ourselves and around us we wouldn't do it. But ignorance, which doesn't mean "Oh, I don't know that this isn't going to hurt them" but ignorance as to the effects on ourselves of those actions is as Jesus said, forgivable. So if Jesus can forgive sin or say let those without sin cast the first stone. He's a pretty good resource for that one.

**Dr. Dave:** Ok, you have a brief section on facing the top 20 really awful deeds. And some my own top 20 came swimming to the surface. Then you go on to talk about the importance of self forgiveness. Maybe we have some listeners out there who are struggling with self blame. What can you tell us about the road to self forgiveness?

**James Baraz:** Well, it's very much like I was just saying. When you look back on your life and you see that or your plagued with guilt...first of all, when you cringe, when you say "I can't believe I did that" although there's tremendous guilt and as I said in the book, I think I said, I'm somewhat an authority on guilt. It was a part of my lineage.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, you did say that.

**James Baraz:** Cringing and looking back means you've changed. You're not the same person you were then. Which means you learned something and you just didn't realize it then. So self forgiveness means to realize the confusion that you were in when you acted in a certain way that caused harm to yourself or to others. For me like a parent who would hold a child...suppose a child did something wrong and they were beating themselves up and they were just really giving themselves a hard time. Most people would want to just pick that child up, hold it, and say, "It's okay, dear. You just didn't realize. Now you've learned." It's that being that way for that little kid that was confused inside and holding it with the same compassion. That's what that little scared, frightened, guilt ridden place needs inside. Not more scolding. All that does, as I say as being an authority on guilt, all guilt does is perpetuate the cycle where you beat yourself up or do something else that confirms what a rotten person you are. Whereas when there's some compassion and understanding, the confusion that you were in and also acknowledgement of the suffering and pain that you caused, then you're learning and every moment counts. But as long as you're judging yourself and being hard on yourself, you can't learn, you can't move forward. So this is about growing and rejoicing in the fact that change is possible. And the more you can do that for yourself, one of the later chapters is learning to love yourself and this is very much tied into that, the more you can forgive yourself and see the goodness underneath that really wants to be loved and wants to love, the more that all the goodness shines through and the more everybody gets to experience that and the more it awakens that in them as well. So it a gift you're giving to everyone by being kinder and forgiving of yourself and keeping on learning and letting your love shine through.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, James, that's a great place to wrap it up. James Bazar, thanks for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

**James Baraz:** It's a delight, Dave.