



cultivating joy

*What Buddhist philosophy and the cult-classic movie
Groundhog Day can teach us about escaping our rut and
tapping into a lasting sense of peace and joy*

by christina mcMahon

We all have moments when we feel like we are living out the movie *Groundhog Day*. We change jobs, only to encounter a new version of our irritating boss; we date different people, and yet all of our relationships unfold in exactly the same way; we endeavor to save money, but new expenses keep cropping up and the dream house seems ever so far away. Seemingly, our efforts to escape the rut only keep us trapped in it.

It is with good reason that *Groundhog Day* has become a darling of spiritual leaders from various paths. Waking up to the same set of circumstances day after day is like the Sanskrit term *samskara* (not to be confused with *samsara*, which means the cycle of rebirth determined by karma). In yogic philosophy, *samskara* is often explained as a troublesome pattern that keeps haunting our lives despite our attempts to shake it. For some people, a *samskara* can take the shape of abandonment, a pattern that seems to play out with parents, lovers, and close friends alike. Others may experience it as degradation, or the feeling that our efforts are constantly undervalued and unrewarded. As we know all too

painfully, the possibilities for ruts are endless.

While *samskaras* appear to be annoyingly tied to our external circumstances, they are actually valuable indicators of the mental habits that are holding us back. In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray's character Phil Connors is a misanthropic Pittsburgh weatherman who feels destined for stardom. He disdains his annual assignment of covering the Groundhog Day event in the tiny borough of Punxsutawney since he believes it is beneath him. Yet it is precisely this superiority complex—his personal *samskara*—that is making his job seem tawdry and his love life empty, since nothing and no one can ever measure up. It is only when Phil learns to transcend that mindset that he is allowed to move on to the next day. Before then, he seems doomed to wake up everyday on February 2nd to the same cheerful Sonny and Cher song and miserable daily conditions.

Mainstream interpretations of the movie suggest that Phil exemplifies the adage “try, try again.” Yet if we look closer, it is actually his obsessive trying that is keeping him

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stuck. His careful calculations at trying to please Rita, Andie MacDowell's character, may work at first, but become repulsive to her when she sees the artifice in his actions. Likewise, his attempts to use food and sex to satisfy his physical cravings only make him depressed and suicidal.

Buddhist thinkers correlate Phil's journey with achieving enlightenment after many lifecycles of spiritual seeking (one day equals one incarnation). By shedding his samskara, he changes his karma and releases himself from the cycle of rebirth. Yet there is much that *Groundhog Day* can teach us about getting out of ruts in this lifetime. Clearly, the film urges us to perceive our present circumstances in a different light. Rather than greeting every day with a weary expectation of sameness, we open our eyes wider and see opportunity. We see newness and fresh chances for happiness and fulfillment.

While this theme recurs in countless classic stories and movies (*A Christmas Carol* or *It's a Wonderful Life*, for example), the beauty of *Groundhog Day* is that it teaches us a method for doing so. This is what other spiritual analyses of the film have missed: ultimately, what pulls Phil Connors out of his rut is his

conscious cultivation of empathetic joy.

Empathetic joy is the third of the Four Immeasurables from Buddhism, which also encompass loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity. These are positive qualities we can nurture through meditation and our intentional practice of them in everyday life. While empathetic joy, or *mudita*, is typically defined as delight in others' happiness or good fortune, it can also mean celebrating the virtues of others. In my mind, these are distinct yet complementary concepts, and my focus here is on the meaning related to virtue.

When we practice empathetic joy, we become a kind of virtue detective; we train ourselves to seek out the goodness in others. This is an important corrective to the critical eye that many of us cast on those we meet in everyday life. Towards the beginning of *Groundhog Day*, Rita remarks to Phil how charming it is that the people of Punxsutawney love their annual ritual. He replies: "people like blood sausage too. People are morons." His unforgiving attitude towards human beings becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; he dooms himself to a wretched day with them. His tunnel vision is blocking out the goodness around him, keeping him mired in cynicism.



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Perhaps the least known of the Four Immeasurables, empathetic joy is actually the easiest one to train. It comes naturally to celebrate the virtues of our loved ones. They are dear to us because they show us kindness: they throw us birthday parties, listen when we have a bad day, and usually greet us with a smile. By starting with them, we open ourselves up to honoring the goodness in everyone, including ourselves. This is the first step out of our rut: learning to see our own worlds differently. And the best news about empathetic joy is that it can be a pure pleasure to cultivate. We don't have to be Buddhist or even spiritual to do it (Phil Connors certainly wasn't). If you *are* spiritual, empathetic joy may greatly enhance your path.

Consider the turning point in *Groundhog Day*. After Phil pours his heart out to Rita about his predicament, she accompanies him to his room to lend a sympathetic ear. As she drifts off to sleep, Phil looks at her admiringly and says, “I think you're the kindest, sweetest, prettiest person I've ever met in my life. I've never seen anyone that's nicer to people than you are.” Indeed, we have already glimpsed her benevolence as she compliments a waitress on the diner's sticky buns

and beams good-naturedly at everyone she encounters. Rita's character is the key to understanding the movie, since her virtuous life becomes a blueprint for Phil's own transformation. When he wakes up again, he decides to become a more loving person, which gradually turns his whole world around.

When we recognize we are stuck, a valuable question to ask is: How do people who are not in this rut behave? Notice that Phil does not seek to make himself exactly like Rita. Rather, he decides to live his life *as if he had the kindness inside of him* that he detects in her. That manifests in all kinds of ways—changing tires for elderly women, buying a bowl of soup for a homeless man, bringing coffee to his cameraman. While this habit of virtuous action is indeed our goal, we first need to train the mindset.

This is why a short meditation session every day, or even a couple of times a week, can work wonders. I suggest doing it first thing in the morning, so that the good feelings you generate can steer you through the rest of your day. If you're not a morning person, it also works great during your lunch break or just before you go to bed at night.

There is a practical reason for choosing

Meditation for Empathic Joy

Ideal Practice Times: Morning, upon waking, midday, or evening before bed.

1. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Take three deep breaths, mentally tracing the path of the air as it circulates through your body. Then just focus on the breath as you inhale and exhale at a natural pace for a few moments.

2. Now think of someone you love, whose character you genuinely admire. Relax into this person's presence. Conjure up memories of them at their best: opening the door for a stranger, helping you navigate a difficult situation, offering someone an early morning ride to the airport. In your mind, you might say: “I'm so happy I know you. Your kindness inspires me, your goodness is my guide.” Take a moment or two to bask in these warm feelings.

3. Next call to mind an image of yourself at your best. Recall something you did as a child that makes you smile: shyly offering a homemade Valentine's Day card to your teacher, defending a schoolmate, surprising your mother with a clean room. Once you generate some warmth in your heart at that memory, bring to mind something good you have done recently. Re-create the circumstances vividly in your mind, delighting in your own goodness.

4. Let those images fade, and select a memory of a stranger you noticed acting kindly towards another person. What did you admire about their actions? If this person were standing before you, how might you commend them for their virtue?

5. Finally, bring to mind someone with whom you don't see eye to eye. Perhaps there's been an argument, or they just rub you the wrong way. Brush that away gently, and think of them performing a kind action, however small. If nothing comes to mind, use your imagination: as a child, they certainly petted a puppy or kitten fondly at least once, or helped a ladybug to safety outside. See if you can celebrate their loving instinct at that moment. Thank them for their kindness.

6. Now direct your attention to your heart area and notice any warm feelings you have generated in the meditation. Extend them outwards to all beings everywhere in the world. May we all experience pure joy, and tap into the wisdom we need to live out our highest potential and be our most loving selves.

7. Go back to your breath for a moment, watching it flow in and out of your body. As you open your eyes, set the intention to notice goodness throughout your day.



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specific people to focus on in this meditation. As Buddhist author Alan Wallace points out, it wards off the superficiality mentality of “I love humanity, it’s people I can’t stand.” Clearly, the practice becomes more challenging as we move to that final person. And yet it’s the difficult person that maximizes our opportunity for personal growth. If your rut is work-related, you might slot someone in who hassles you at meetings, or competes with you at every turn. Despite this behavior, their potential for goodness is ever present. After all, no one is wholly “good” or “bad.” Does this person’s spouse or mother see them in the same light that we do? These varying perceptions are evidence that the negative qualities we may initially glimpse in someone are not innate. In reality, they are much more complex than we could ever have imagined. If it initially feels forced to recognize this, just stay with the practice and eventually you may notice a shift. You might be surprised at how a transformed attitude towards that person in meditation translates to a real-world shift in your relationship. When we expect the best

from other people, they tend to deliver.

Recognizing our own virtues is also key to becoming un-stuck. While Phil Connors was at his worst, he could not attract Rita in because he did not see himself as worthy. After commenting on her kindness, he says to her: “I don’t deserve someone like you.” This is often the trouble when we are in a rut. We are so blind to our own inner goodness that we don’t feel eligible for a loving life partner, beautiful house, or ideal work environment. If we take ourselves out of the running for these things, how can we expect others to put us back in? When Rita accuses Phil of only caring about himself, he replies: “that’s not true. I don’t even like myself.” And so he remains in his rut.

In *A Return to Love*, Marianne Williamson writes that when we behave in loving ways, we gain more confidence in our own ability to love and be loved. By using meditation to honor our highest potential, we transform our own self-image, which can only usher better circumstances into our lives. And here’s the encouraging part: when we seek



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out the company of people like Rita—people we recognize as good-hearted—it already says a lot about our own evolution. It reveals our own inner striving for goodness. By becoming more intentional about empathetic joy, we simply give ourselves a little cheer-leading along the way.

Attending to our own virtues does not mean being vain about them. To avoid that pitfall, Alan Wallace recommends keeping in mind the people who have influenced our characters. In most Buddhist practices, this means our spiritual teachers, either those who instruct us personally or enlightened beings who came before us. Yet virtually anyone can play the role of teacher, since everyone holds the potential for enlightenment. Once when I was doing this meditation, I reflected on my own good habit of conscientiously making anyone new to a situation or group feel welcome. I realized that my mother had taught me this through her own example. Immediately, feelings of gratitude to her came into my meditation—a sweet complement to the

empathetic joy I was already trying to cultivate.

Empathetic Joy in Everyday Life

The fun part comes when empathetic joy begins to color our daily lives, becoming as natural to us as breathing. Again this is something we can train, and it happens in two parts.

We become consistent about admiring the goodness in others

Living empathetic joy means “developing the capacity to participate in another person’s finest hour and doing so spontaneously and sincerely,” according to author Natasha Jackson. This could be as simple as smiling warmly at the person who graciously holds the elevator door for someone rushing towards it. The first step is mentally marking that moment by thinking to yourself, “that was nice of you.” If you feel comfortable, you might even say it to them out loud.

In this way, we can coach our minds to

notice virtues over flaws. While it may seem simple, doing this practice 20 times a day can really brighten your mood. Abraham Hicks tells us that if we hold a good thought for at least 17 seconds, it is more likely to attract in similar positive thoughts. So when you think appreciatively about another’s kindness, try to maintain that good vibe as long as you can. This is how we form new habits.

We become vigilant about our own opportunities for kindness

Phil Connors has a certain advantage here in *Groundhog Day*. Because he knows exactly what time the little boy will fall out of the tree, he can be there right on time to catch him. Given that we lack this kind of foresight, we simply need to remain alert to moments we are called to serve. A meditation practice that trains us how to live moment to moment will help tremendously in this respect. This is why I find it helpful to do a few minutes of breath focus before moving onto a visualization meditation like empathetic joy. The

breath focus is a dry run for the presence of mind we need throughout our day in order to notice opportunities to be of service. If we remain caught up in our own mental “to-do” lists, we are often oblivious to these chances.

These need not be grand gestures. We don’t have to join the Peace Corps or start a social justice campaign in order to serve others—although these are good things to do too, of course. You might simply make it a habit to wave another car across the intersection before you, even if you got there first and even if you are running late (those seven seconds are not going to make that much difference). Again, it’s important to mark this in our minds. We might think, “That felt good. I’m glad I let the other person go first.” These subtle congratulations encourage us to stay the course.

When Phil Connors begins to derive more joy from serving others, he opens himself up to other kinds of joy as well. Following one *Groundhog Day* ceremony, he blithely quotes Chekhov into the news cameras while salut-



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ing the good people of Punxsutawney, bringing tears to everyone’s eyes. He thus escapes the rut of his work life. He also begins to experience what psychologist Abraham Maslow called “peak experiences.” One evening when he is sitting in a diner happily reading a book, he simply gets lost in the beautiful classical music playing. This inspires him to learn the piano himself. Since he no longer experiences everyday life as one gigantic rut, he has become more attentive to his own intuitive urges to be creative.

Once his habit of virtue is firmly established, he easily draws Rita to him, since we always attract in that which we are. By then she has become merely icing on the cake. He has already released his need to be with her, which had been keeping her away. Rather than trying to manipulate the world around him to yield him what he wants, he has relaxed into the joyful flow that comes from turning our attention to others. This is what ultimately allows him to wake up to February 3rd. The night before, Phil went for \$339.88 at the bachelor auction, an indicator that his

worth as a human being has gone up. When this kind of shift happens within us, there’s not much we can fail to attract into our lives.

As with any new practice, when we decide to cultivate empathetic joy, we must be patient. Old habits are not easily shed. By the end of *Groundhog Day*, we get the sense that Phil has been there not for weeks or months but years. It is not to our advantage to feel guilty when we miss an opportunity to celebrate another’s virtue, or to be of service ourselves. When that happens, we might simply think, “It’s okay. I’ll do it next time” (there won’t be any shortage of opportunities). The goal here is *process* and *progress*, no matter how slowly we think we’re moving.

Recall that in *Groundhog Day*, Phil starts stepping in the same slushy puddle every day. “Watch out for that first step, it’s a doozy!” calls the annoying Ned Ryerson. So true for the initial phase of any effort at self-transformation. The puddle scenes have striking parallels to this passage from the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche:

*I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in. I am lost... I am hopeless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.*

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again.
I can't believe I'm in the same place.
But it isn't my fault
It still takes a long time to get out.*

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there. I still fall in... it's a habit.
My eyes are open. I know where I am.
It is MY fault. I get out immediately.*

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
....I walk around it.*

I walk down another street.

Shortly after Phil recognizes that he’s stuck in a rut, he begins navigating that puddle like a champ. By the end of the film, we do not even see him taking that route. Likewise, it is our loving awareness of our own weaknesses that opens up the door to greater self-acceptance and, eventually, joy.

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