

whole life ^{times}

February/March 2011 | FREE

GREED VS NEED

laugh man
Tom Shadyac
changes direction

HAPPINESS is a decision

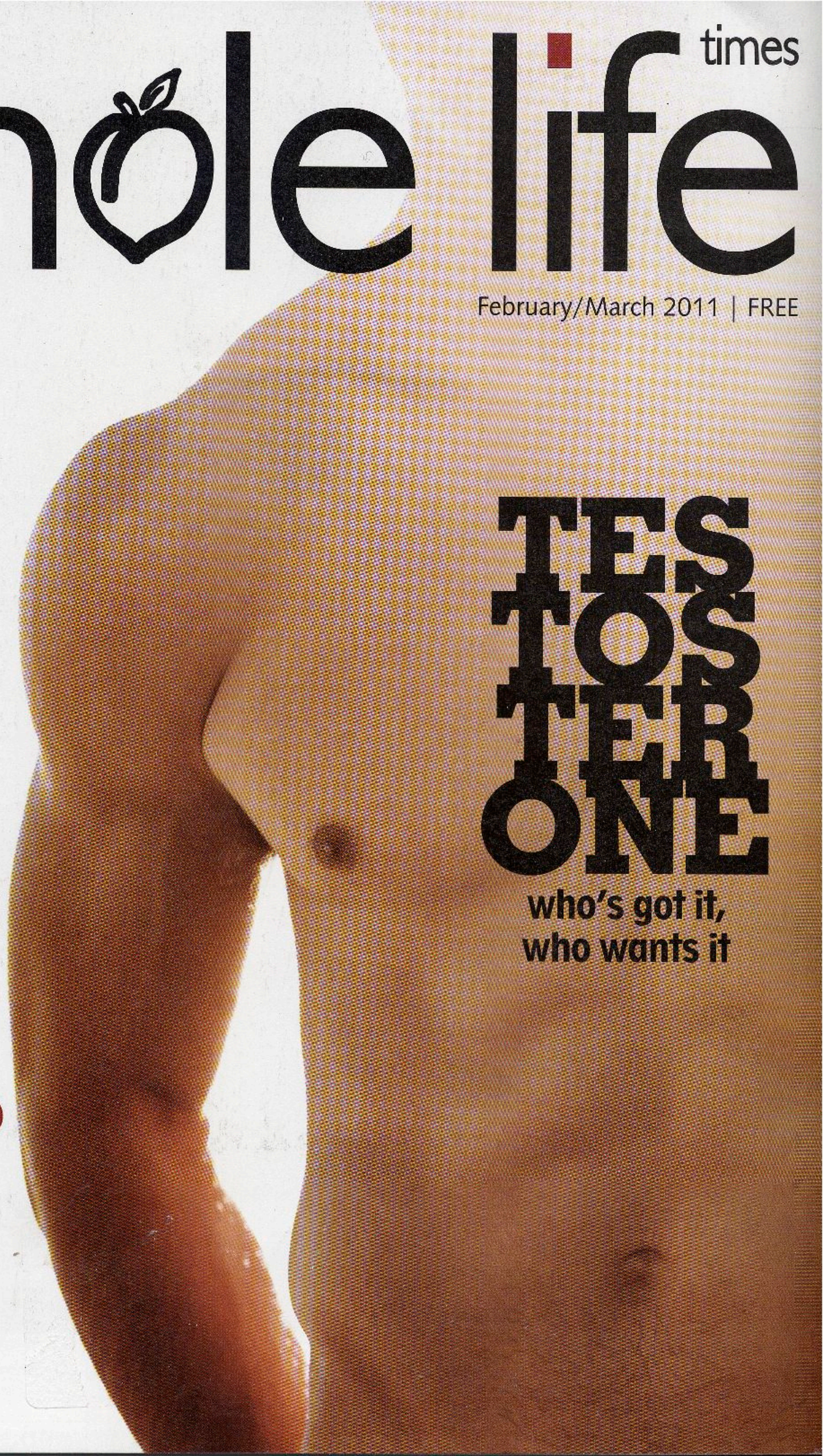
ONLINE
DATING
for green (or violet)
singles

YOGA
for "stiff white guys"

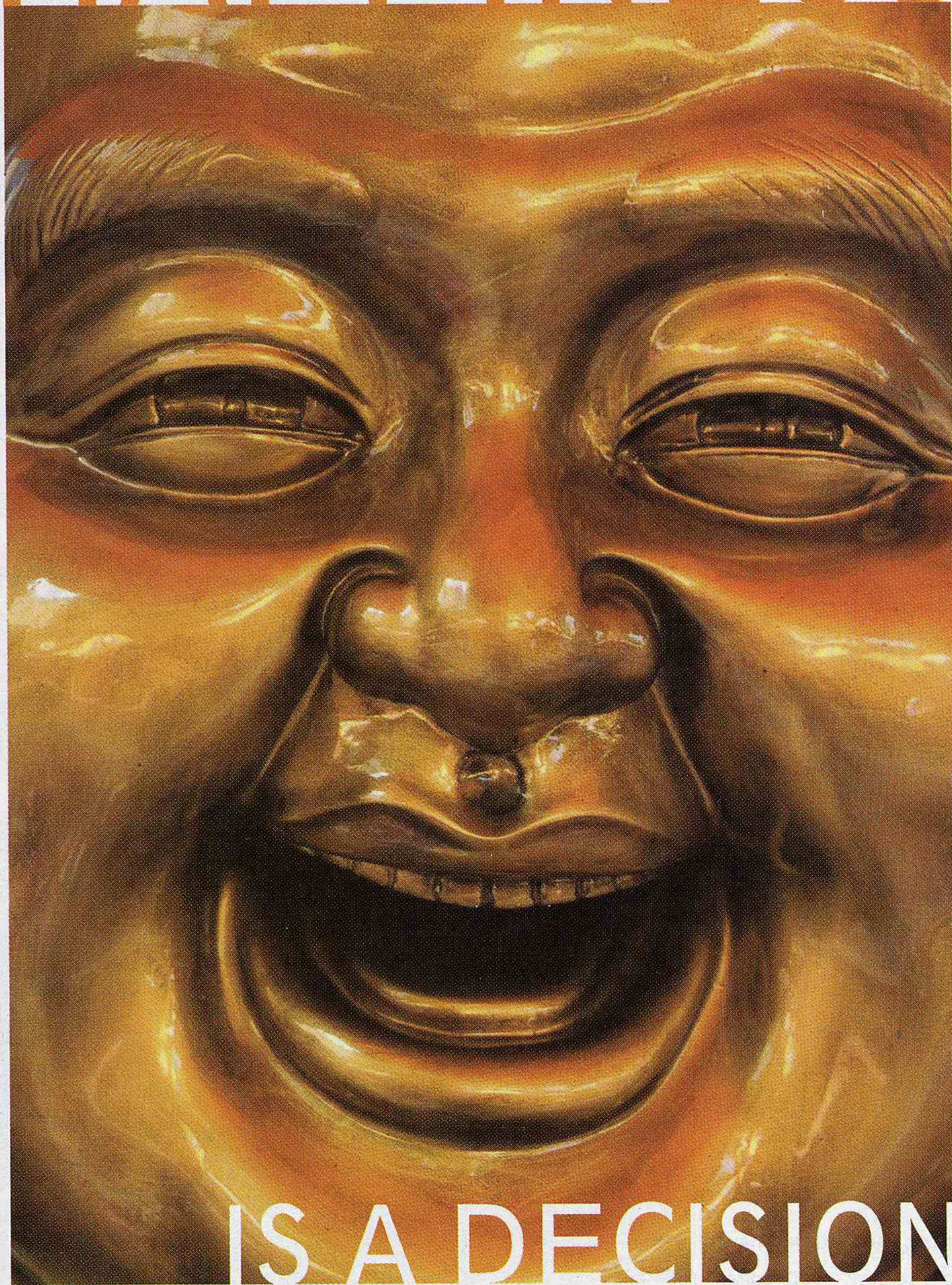
RUNNERS
DON'T QUIT

TES TOS TOS ONE

who's got it,
who wants it



HAPPINESS



IS A DECISION

Buddhist teacher James Baraz

By Diana Rico

How many of us imagine we'll finally have joyful lives when we land the ideal job, lose ten pounds, win the lottery or find The One? And why do we feel so let down when the happiness we tie to outside circumstances dissipates? "There's no end to the wants," says James Baraz, coauthor (with Shoshana Alexander) of *Awakening Joy: Ten Steps That Will Put You on the Road to Real Happiness* (Bantam Books, 2010). "In our culture more is better, sooner is best. But we don't see that this is not the way to happiness."

The way to happiness is something to which Baraz, a founding teacher of the famed Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, has given a lot of thought. His book is an outgrowth of the Awakening Joy course he began offering in 2003. More than 7,000 students have taken the experiential course that begins every February, lasts for ten months, and is offered both on-site in Berkeley and online. Although it is grounded in Buddhist

principles and practices, Baraz says one need not be a Buddhist—or indeed a follower of any spiritual path—to learn the simple techniques and apply them to one's daily life.

Baraz himself is his own best advertisement for the Awakening Joy way. I first met him when he gave a dharma talk at my Buddhist sangha in the summer of 2010; his warm, radiant light could be felt from across the room. Since then, in several telephone conversations from his home in Berkeley and while he was on the road leading retreats, I have found him to be deeply kind, wise of heart and inspiring—someone who makes joy seem not only accessible but inevitable. It's no wonder meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg has called Baraz's book "a direct, pragmatic and valuable manual for a better life." That's also an apt description of what it's like to talk to the longtime meditation teacher.

WLT: I love that you write, early on in the book, about how the decision to be happy is one that anyone can make. Could you talk about how happiness is a choice, not dependent on outside circumstances?

James Baraz: When one is stressed, the thoughts tend toward negative, and so the stress and the fact that we're looking for what's wrong become habitual, and we don't realize our neural pathways have moved into that groove. We think stress is just the way people live. But think about how, when you're on vacation and you're relaxed, you're more loving, you tend to see the good around you. We have a choice to activate that natural inclination towards well-being if we can create the conditions that allow that to emerge. When you decide, "OK, I'm going for it," and you're willing to do what it takes, then magic can happen. That's what the whole joy course is about. Are you open to trying something for a moment? Close your eyes and think of a person or situation that is a blessing in your life. See them in your mind, feel them in your heart. Just sit with that feeling a little while. Now silently say thank you. What do you feel now?

WLT: I feel like I'm flooded with light. I pictured my niece, whom I love, and at the end I found myself bowing to her.

JB: The Buddha has said there's a gladness connected with that wholesome state. If we practice it, it becomes our default.

WLT: But we live in a time when suffering and difficulties seem to be everywhere. How do you reconcile cultivating joy in the face of what a lot of people would call harsh reality?

JB: Life is more than good times—it's got the 10,000 sorrows and the 10,000 joys, like they say in Buddhism—but

**“you’re letting
your heart
break open
to something
even deeper
than the pain”**

when things get hard you have a choice to contract in fear or bitterness or confusion, or you have also the possibility of bringing a wisdom and kindness and tenderness to the suffering. In doing that you’re letting your heart break open to something even deeper than the pain. And when your heart is opening and it sees suffering [in others], the natural expression

of that is to care. There’s something very sweet and profound about letting our hearts be touched and then being a compassionate, loving presence for others. That’s an incredible source of well-being, making a contribution to the world. It ennobles us. So difficulties are the very thing that can enrich our lives if we learn to work with them when they’re here.

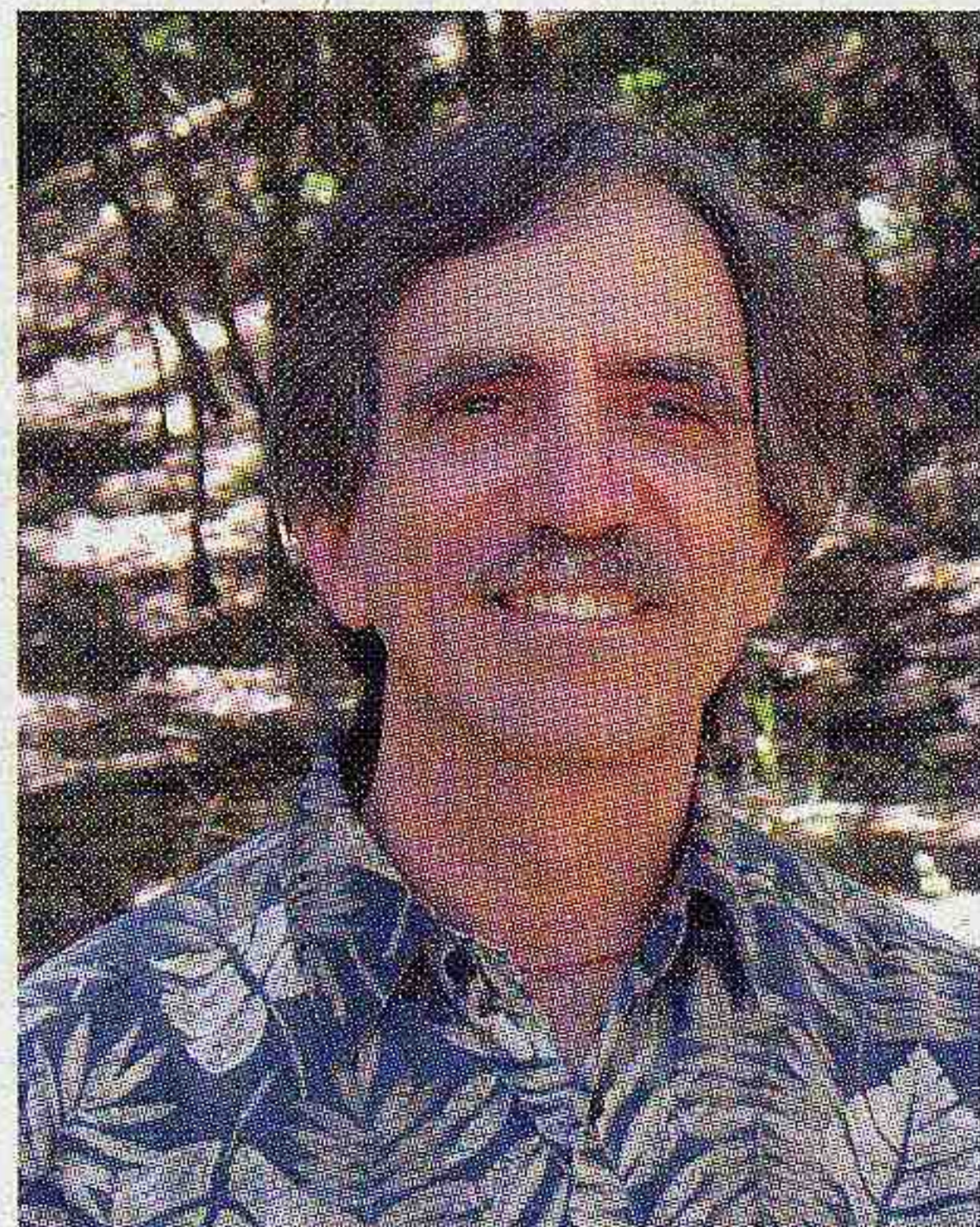
WLT: Do you think that one individual choosing joy can make a difference in the world today?

JB: Absolutely. I think that’s the whole idea! What you do affects everybody around you, for life. When you’re around somebody who uplifts your spirit because of who they are, not only do they uplift your spirit, but then you in turn uplift the spirits of everybody else in your life. It’s contagious. There are actually neuroscientific studies that say you affect I think it’s [people] three degrees removed from you. In the same way that we can bum each other out and say, “Isn’t the world terrible?” we can also uplift each other.

And that’s where I think your own well-being isn’t just for yourself, but it affects everybody around you.

WLT: You teach the course in ten months, but the teachings seem like something you integrate and continue to practice for the rest of your life. Taken together, the ten lessons really describe a journey of opening the heart.

JB: I completely agree with you that it’s a journey of opening the heart, opening the mind, opening. The first step is the intention to be happy, and inviting, allowing, and recognizing well-being when it’s here. That doesn’t mean forcing anything—it means letting go of an agenda—but just facing in a direction of more well-being and doing your part to allow that to happen. And that decision to do your part is everything. Because life is going to do what it does, but if you are on the lookout for well-being or have that vision of wanting to create it, that’s the key to the process. ☺



James Baraz

For more info, go to awakeningjoy.info/aboutTheCourse.html

ROCK WITH SPIRIT

The Dalai Lama has visited Spirit Rock meditation center, Thich Nhat Hahn and Ram Dass have taught there, but perhaps most important, thousands have visited this peaceful center in the San Geronimo Valley of northern California for spiritual retreats. Any time there is extensive spiritual activity on a piece of land—in this case, 410 acres—a palpable spiritual energy can be felt by those willing to tune in, and surely Spirit Rock is no exception.

The physical center is completely in tune with its surroundings. With extensive green practices, from solar energy to drought-resistant plants, every effort was made in its creation to honor the environment.

Spirit Rock sees itself as a place that “always looks in two directions: inward and outward.” As human beings we need to reflect within through silence and mindful attention. And we need to bring the fruits of that reflection to bear in our daily lives. The practice of mindfulness and insight meditation (vipassana) taught here supports retreatants in finding the inner peace, compassion and wisdom to make a positive difference out in the world.



Photos, this page: Walt Opie