

Jay Michaelson
Making the Shadow Your Teacher
Week Three: "Practicing Social Justice"
April 17, 2017



Welcome to part three of *Making the Shadow Your Teacher*. I'm Jay Michaelson and we've been exploring some of the ways in which opening to all of our difficult emotions—sadness, anger, grief, and lust—can actually be a fruitful part of the spiritual path. We have also been exploring how that can unfold in meditation and in our daily lives. So far, we've looked at the basic process of being with these difficult emotions and how that can actually unfold, how that awakens the full range of the human experience for ourselves. And then, we spent some time looking at how that can open us to authentic relationship with others.

I'd like to talk a little bit about one of the subjects they don't talk about a lot in dharma halls, which is justice and social justice. There's a bit of a [bad] rap against spiritual practice. Some think that if we do too much meditation or too much yoga, we can get too obsessed with the self, or a little too happy and we won't care about all the difficult things that are happening in the world around us. I have a really different set of experiences around that. I was actually a professional LGBTQ activist for about 10 years in addition to being a dharma teacher, and I found my meditation practice absolutely essential for the justice work that I was involved in every day.

I don't know about you, but I don't actually need a lot of effort to become more angry and more anxious about the world around us, the oppressions that are taking place that may be increasing rather than decreasing in our country. It doesn't take a lot for me to remember the importance of the justice work that I still do now. On the contrary, what is necessary is a kind of recharge to remember that all hope is not lost, and to have the resources internally as well as externally that can actually enable and propel my social justice work.

This works for me in a couple of primary ways. First, I want to share with you a little bit of a story. I was once giving a talk to a very mixed audience of folks, not just preaching to the choir, but to people who had a wide range of political views. And, I was talking about LGBT issues and religion, a pretty controversial subject at the time, five, six years ago. Someone actually interrupted the talk that I was giving and shouted out, "What about bestiality?" Saying that

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homosexuality was the same as bestiality and that same sex marriage was nothing more than lust or something like that.

I noticed immediately just by doing a little bit of mindfulness that there was a lot of reactivity that was present in me. I really wanted to punch the guy who had said that. What an offensive thing to say, to tell me that the love I feel for my partner is no different than the lust someone might feel for a sheep or for a goat. That's a ridiculous claim and an offensive one.

But, fortunately, that mindfulness was present, and I could just notice that, "Oh, I'm feeling a little bit of aversion right now." But, what's the most skillful way to act in this moment? It wasn't really about persuading that one person, who is basically a heckler, but it was an opportunity for me to be the more reasonable person in the room. And so, I calmly went about my business explaining why it's actually two different things. Why lust and love aren't the same, and how I think I know my heart fairly well, and I can tell the difference between the two. And he changed the subject, which meant I had actually won that moment. But, more importantly, there was that little bit of spaciousness that came from just being with the difficult emotion that enabled the justice work to work a little bit more effectively. Not to say that sometimes expressing anger isn't a form of activism that can be really important, but in that moment, it was actually expressing a little more compassion and some reasonableness that was most important.

The second way in which my meditation practice has impacted my justice work actually comes from the Abrahamic traditions, from my Jewish tradition. My favorite line in the whole Hebrew Bible is repeated many times in the first few books of the Bible and the Torah. It's the line that says, "Don't oppress the widow, and the orphan, and the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." I think this is a really profound teaching for a number of reasons. First, it's a wonderful social justice teaching but, second, if we look a little more closely at it, it actually says something about contemplative practice as well.

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That second part of the sentence doesn't really need to be there. This is God speaking after all. God can say whatever God wants. Why actually have reasons for why you shouldn't oppress the stranger, and the orphan, and those who are vulnerable? There's something really profound in that. The notion is that it's natural, unfortunately, for human beings to oppress the weak, for the strong to want to dominate the weak, for us to divide ourselves into the have and the have-nots and blame the other group for problems that affect all of us. It's unfortunately a timeless human proclivity.

Actually I think there are two ethical injunctions in that one sentence. Don't oppress the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. The first part actually comes second. The first part is remembering that you could also be that stranger. Opening up to the difficult parts of our own life makes it impossible to respond with callousness and a lack of empathy to the difficulty that others feel. If we can actually experience, even just imagine, the suffering of oppression, what it might be like to have been a slave, well, that makes it just that much more impossible to oppress the weak or oppress the stranger in our own lives.

I think it's actually really profound that the second part of the sentence modifies the first part, that it might be natural to not care about someone who's different from you, who's a stranger, who's in the out group, who's easy to generalize or stereotype. But, if you could empathize and remember, even imaginatively, what the experience of oppression and marginalization might be like, then you could do the work of anti-oppression yourself.

I found that true again and again in my contemporary justice work. I found that true a number of times in my own justice work. Sometimes, the biggest part of the burden is getting past that barrier of dehumanization or otherization to actually say that, no, this is shared—this kind of oppression and this kind of suffering is something that we could all actually share. And that comes from me in my meditation practice, where I see my own pieces, my own shadow, my own upbringing as a relatively privileged white person in America, impacting how I view or understand other people. It comes from remembering some of my own experiences of

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marginalization being a closeted gay man in my twenties and knowing what it's like to be on the wrong side of privilege and on the wrong side of marginalization. From that comes a possibility of empathy and a mandate to do the kinds of work of justice that are so needed right now.

It's difficult to do that work everyday, actually checking the news all the time and seeing one battle after another, most of which we lose. It's hard to actually remain balanced while doing that work. How do we get engaged in justice work without being changed by the justice work into creatures of anger, or fear, or resentment?

For me, once again, being present with and allowing the full spectrum of human emotion enables a more skillful way of working for justice in the world. I try, and I don't always succeed, in keeping love and compassion for the oppressed in the foreground and my anger at the other side in the background. Not denying the anger and not denying the fear, but just trying to keep a little bit of balance. So that the compassion for those who are marginalized is actually what I'm thinking about, more than my battle with the people who have a different view.

As some folks know, and you can google me right now to find out, a lot of my justice work today is pretty adversarial. I'm a columnist for *The Daily Beast* and for other newspapers. When I'm writing about social justice, law, and religion, I call it like I see it. And, sometimes people have had questions for me about how I can be a meditation teacher on the one hand but write these really acidic columns on the other hand, where I'm using such strong language and resisting and so forth?

Well, for me, it's all about skillful means, *upaya*, the right kinds of means and the right kinds of times. Sometimes bifurcation is actually really helpful to know that, well, what's needed now is to call it as we see it, and to resist, and to stand up in the face of injustice. But, I can also have those inner resources to come back, to come back to myself, to be in the body, to be with what's going on and to recharge in a way that enables more justice work. It doesn't get in the way of it.



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There are at least three ways in which that kind of recharge can work. First, there is the community of solidarity which I talked a little bit about in our last part. That when we're with others who are doing the work that we're doing, especially those who have their lives at stake, there can be a real connection that can take place if we listen more than we talk, if we follow more than we lead, following the populations that are actually directly affected. That kind of community and solidarity is, itself, a kind of happiness, a happiness that arises precisely from being present with what's difficult. That's a happiness that comes from being present with what's difficult and working to oppose the conditions of more suffering.

There's also the happiness that can exist despite persecution and despite the continued presence of moral evil. Sometimes it can feel disrespectful to be happy when other people's lives are in danger in a way that they haven't been in our country for decades. But, if we're really open to both of those pieces, if we're open both to the possibility of joy and to the possibility of oppression and suffering, if we're not denying one but also not denying the other, we can see that this is not new. The kinds of factors of mine that are present now, greed, hatred, delusion, fear, that are present in my own mind, and in yours, and in the people who are on the other side of our current political battles, that these are factors of mine have been present for thousands of years.

Our wisdom traditions are useful in a number of ways. One of them is reminding us that what's not new is the capacity of human beings for great love and for great suffering. There can be a happiness that arises in doing the work of wisdom, compassion, and justice. And that happiness coexists with the true understanding that there are conditions in the world that we must work to oppose.

There's also, finally, the happiness that does not depend on conditions, the resilience that can arise in doing the work of justice, when the happiness of relinquishment isn't just the same as the happiness of a joyous experience. I can actually experience that happiness right in the middle of a difficult moment or a difficult political situation. And that doesn't depend on feeling good or feeling like everything is going to work out, because everything isn't going to work out fine.

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Having that kind of moral maturity, together with the spiritual maturity, enables me to bring the social justice aspect of my life together with the spiritual aspect of my life in a way that does service to both.

In a way, opening to the fullness of our experience and allowing the shadow to be our teacher can enable more engagement with justice and can even fulfill some of the images of the Buddhist traditions that are most puzzling. Think about some of those wrathful deities, for example, in Tibetan Buddhist art. These are wrathful deities. They are not being cozy. They're not speaking in soft dulcet tones. When they're going up against the forces of greed, hatred and delusion, they're wrathful. They're actually experiencing the fullness of their emotions because that's what's necessary in that particular time.

I'm not interested in a Buddhist practice that just makes me feel better while the world actually gets worse, that helps the more privileged feel more comfortable in our privileged lives while ignoring the oppression of others. If that's what contemplative practice was about, I wouldn't be doing it, let alone teaching it. For me, contemplative practice enables a greater intolerance for injustice and for suffering.

When we really experience what suffering is like, whether ourselves or by a deep understanding of another, we can't tolerate it in our world. We can't simply turn away and go off on yet another retreat to make ourselves feel better. If we're going on a real retreat, we not only feel better, but we also feel everything more fully. We feel an openness of heart that can actually be deeply painful. It would be easier if spiritual practice were just about feeling better and going for the good stuff all the time, but it wouldn't be just, and it wouldn't be human, and it wouldn't be deserving of the name "spiritual practice" in the first place.

By enabling and allowing these difficult emotions to unfold in ourselves, seeing them in others, we are motivated. We are energized to do the work of justice that we're called to do now in our communities, in our country and in our world.