Jay Michaelson
Week One, *Making the Shadow Your Teacher*
"Opening to Experience and Unconditional Happiness"
April 3, 2017

This is Jay Michaelson for *Tricycle* magazine's dharma talks. I teach in the Theravada Buddhist lineage and also in other traditions—including Jewish traditions—and widely in LGBTQ communities. I've taught meditation and spiritual practice for the last 20 years.

A lot of times there's a certain misconception around what it is that we're doing when we meditate or when we do our practice. The idea is that maybe we should be more relaxed, only have happy thoughts, and only have good things happen to us. The first noble truth of the dharma is that there is suffering, or in the contemporary idiom—that stuff happens. What do we do when, in Jack Kornfield's words [from his book] *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, things [don't] necessarily come out the way we wanted them to?

We're in a difficult time for a lot of people these days, and I think it's time to think about making the shadow your teacher. It's not that the bad stuff happens despite our spiritual practice, but rather [that] the material of our lives provides the ground for that spiritual practice to unfold.

I hope you'll join me for these next four sessions, [which will be] based on my book *The Gate of Tears: Sadness and the Spiritual Path,* as we explore the kind of happiness that does not depend on conditions. Over these four sessions we'll be exploring how opening to the fullness of our experience enables other kinds of openings to take place, opening to our whole selves, to each other, to relationships, to justice, and even to liberation itself.

In this first week I want to talk a little bit about what I mean by opening to all of our experience, and the happiness that does not depend on conditions. In difficult times such as these it's hard to know how to act both wisely and responsibly. We want to make sure we take care of ourselves while not being indulgent or narcissistic in difficult times, perhaps for our community or even for our country. I think these timeless teachings on happiness that come from Buddhist traditions can be really helpful at this time. One of the Buddha's many names was "the happy one."

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I've always struggled with that a little bit because [of what] it really means to be happy in the face of suffering. Surely we don't mean just being happy and joyful at all times. We don't want to be happy when people are suffering. We don't want to be happy in cancer wards or in the context of war or oppression. Surely there must be a different kind of happiness that's meant here.

We also know that in the Pali canon and in other Buddhist scriptures there's a keen awareness of the fact that happiness as a state, as a mind state, comes and goes. It's not something that we can cling to. We can't only have the good things in life and have our lives be sweetness and light. There is that cliché that you sometimes hear that spirituality is against social justice work or against political engagement because spirituality makes you feel good. You don't want to meditate too much because you might get too happy and not care enough about the dangers that our planet faces and that our community faces.

Surely that's a misconception. The last thing that the Buddha [was trying] to say was [that] we should cling to happy experiences and only pursue those kinds of happiness. When [the Buddha] was called "the happy one" it must have meant something else. I want to tell you a little bit of a story. I was once on a three-month retreat in Nepal, a very rigorous retreat in a very strict Theravada Buddhist lineage. [It was] one of the most powerful experiences of my life but also one of the most difficult. We were hearing a combination of recorded dharma talks from the senior teacher and live dharma talks from the teacher in the retreat center where I was in Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. Some of those nights were really long. It was a more primitive retreat center compared to western cushy standards. It wasn't quite as luxurious as I, a privileged westerner, was used to. Sometimes at night I had some recorded dharma talks that I would listen to just to give me a little bit of encouragement.

One of those was by Ajahn Sucitto, a well-known Thai forest monk. He had a very simple teaching that affected me in a really profound way. He said that a lot of us are going through our lives like donkeys with a carrot dangling just in front of our faces. We really want that carrot. Sometimes the carrot is easy to dismiss: I want that new car, I want that new thing, or I want to

become more famous or something like that. But there are also real, right carrots that we care about [such as] love, relationships, health, and financial stability. It's not that the carrots are bad, but we're constantly chasing after those carrots, trying, trying, trying, trying to get that little bit of happiness when, in fact, the greater happiness comes from setting down the burden.

When I heard that teaching, the very simple teaching about the donkey pulling the cart and setting down the burden, [I realized that] I myself was carrying the burden of doing this retreat right. It was hard to arrange the conditions of my life to enable myself to go on a long retreat in Nepal half way around the world.

I was working really, really hard. It was just that simple settling back, that reminder that actually happiness comes not from the object of happiness, but the happiness that does not depend on conditions, the happiness of relinquishing the burden. Put another way, the happiness that comes from letting go of the resistance to sadness, anger, loss, grief, loneliness, or other difficult shadow emotions. There's a joy in relinquishment that's deeply profound and perhaps more joyful than joyous experiences themselves, just the settling down, the setting back, the putting down of that burden of constantly pushing away.

Ajahn Sucitto taught me a word in that dharma talk, *atammayata*, which is basically not creating more formations in the mind, not making more of the world than it already is, leaving things alone. It's a way of encapsulating that kind of happiness that comes from allowing. Now, this doesn't mean accepting, wallowing in, or being fatalistic about our sadness, struggles, grief, loss, and certainly not injustice.

No, on the contrary, it's just that simple allowing so that you can see clearly and then act clearly. There's an acceptance that takes place. Sylvia Boorstein, another contemporary Buddhist teacher, says, "it's not what I wanted but it's what I got." That acceptance doesn't mean I'm not going to do anything about it. It's an acceptance simply of saying this it is what it is, or in Ajahn

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Sumedho's (Agan Succito's teacher) words, "right now it's like that." [Simply,] can I see clearly and then act clearly?

That settling back can happen in a lot of ways. There are small moments that happen many times every day, even every hour, [for example] when you receive that email that you don't want to receive [and] you can feel the anger, sadness, confusion, or anxiety rise up. [Instead] you can actually do some mindfulness at your computer screen when the email arises. It doesn't mean that you will necessarily respond more skillfully, but maybe you will. Try that settling back, allowing the difficult emotion, the anxiety, anger, or irritation to just take place without having to push it away by acting. [You might think,] "If I send that response to this email then I'll feel better, I'll get it off of my chest." Well, sometimes it's nice to let it sit on the chest and be what it is.

On a somewhat more profound level there's the settling back that takes place when we're on the meditation cushion or on meditation retreat where, in a single sit, there might a hundred times where a stimulus, movement, or pain wants to move us out of our current experience into something else. "I'd love to scratch that itch," or "I'd love to think that thought," or "I don't want to feel that pain." We can experience this moment-to-moment in meditation.

Without getting too scientific about it, what's happening in those moments is just the development of a certain faculty of metacognition in the mind. We're able to be with the difficult emotion rather than experiencing it taking over us. That's the fruit of practice; a good sit isn't a sit that's just quiet and placid. It's a sit where things come up and we can be with them and allow them to take their space without necessarily acting on them. Again, the happiness that arises from relinquishing that resistance can be deeply profound.

Finally, the settling back can be itself the doorway to liberation, nirvana itself. Nirvana awakening is that letting go, a profound letting go where the mind itself can kind of relax, not just out of its ordinary habits, but of it's very thinking processes itself. On the mundane level to

the profound it's that action of settling back that enables this gateway, this opening to the fullness of our experience to take place.

You might notice that this is actually the opposite of some contemporary understandings of spirituality in at least two ways. First, it's very popular and fashionable these days to have a kind of contemplative practice of getting what you want. [This practice says that] if you think about what you want enough and you really earnestly believe that you're going to get it, then you're going to get what you want.

The universe is abundant and may deliver the fruits of your wildest imaginations or dreams if you intend it enough. I don't want to say that another person's spiritual practice doesn't have validity, but for me, that form of practice has been deeply troubling and unhelpful. It's not the case that you can always get what you want. Mick Jagger was right. Even though we're naturally designed to want more of the pleasant and less of the unpleasant, life just doesn't work out that way.

When I think about the profound suffering that many people have to endure because of oppression or other reasons, I actually find the whole notion that you can get what you want to be really morally disturbing. What I've described here is this gate of tears—the opening to the fullness of our experience I think is the opposite of that. It's recognizing that you can't always get what you want but that it can be profoundly okay. Not that you sometimes get what you need, but that you need less. That you can actually inhabit a space that's full of joy, relationships, love, and awareness that isn't conditioned on getting this or that thing that we may think we want.

Second, just as this isn't the spirituality of getting what you want, it's not the spirituality of "zenning out," relaxing, or chilling. It's funny when you hear expressions like that because all of us who have a meditation practice know that it's the opposite of zenning out and chilling. You sit down and look at your mind, or you are sitting trying to mind your own business, and all of a sudden all kinds of things come up.

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I remember on my first meditation retreat many years ago I thought, "well this is going to be great, I'm going to have this mystical experience. It's going to be beautiful. It's going to be the fulfillment of all of my dreams." Nobody told me that for a week, in silence, I was going to be looking at my stuff. Who ordered that? There's a wonderful Buddhist book by a contemporary teacher called *Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung?* Certainly I didn't ask for these things to show up and yet that's really what makes spiritual practice worthwhile, not zenning out but tuning in, actually awakening to the fullness of our experience.

In a way, this is a very counterintuitive approach to a meditation practice, but I think it's right at the center of what the Buddha dharma was trying to teach us. While, in a sense, opening to the fullness of our experience and allowing the shadow to become our teacher is counterintuitive wisdom, it's also a real maturation of the spiritual path. It's when we stop looking for this or that mind state, this or that experience that will really be it, the big wow, and start digging into the profundity of our ordinary lives.

On another meditation retreat I remember I was doing some eating meditation, just going very slowly. I was about to eat a string bean and I was just overwhelmed with awe at the complexity of this very simple string bean. That wasn't because it was specially cooked or specially sourced, but just because the mind was quiet and receptive enough for these ordinary miracles that are with us all the time.

I think there's a real liberation in feeling what you feel, in having the arising emotions that you want to have, that you need to have. Again, we're not wallowing in sadness or seeking out causes of anger or ill will, but when something arises just seeing that it's arising. I find that really simple but also really profound. There's a deep beauty in experiencing all that we can experience over this one life.

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I'll close this session with a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke who really captures the beauty, not just of sadness, anger, grief and other shadow emotions, but also of the human condition itself:

How we squander our hours of pain.
How we gaze beyond them into bitter duration
to see if they have an end. Though they are really
our winter-enduring foliage, our dark evergreen,
one season in our inner year—, not only a season
in time—, but are place and settlement, camp, soil, and dwelling.