

Jay Michaelson
Making the Shadow Your Teacher
Week Two: “Opening to Other Human Beings”
April 10, 2017



“I’m an old man now, and a lonesome man in Kansas, / but not afraid / to speak my lonesomeness in a car, / because it’s not only my lonesomeness, / it’s Ours, all over America, / O tender fellows— / & spoken lonesomeness is Prophecy...” That’s a quote from Allen Ginsberg in his poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra, #3” and it’s what I want to talk about in this second installment, the way that opening to the fullness of our experience enables us to open to other people as well. “Spoken lonesomeness is Prophecy,” what a beautiful line from Ginsberg, then only in his 40’s. [At the time he was] not really an old man and lonesome one in Kansas, but [he was] saying something deeply profound about how we open to one another as human beings.

You know, one of the great misconceptions about dharma practice and meditation practice in particular is that it’s just about me, it’s just about my experience and becoming more narcissistic, having ever more interesting spiritual states that prove how enlightened I am. Don’t you hate those people? I find them incredibly annoying, and I used to be one myself, so I feel free to criticize my former self. It’s a natural part of spiritual practice—we discover something beautiful in ourselves or in the practice itself and we want to share it with others. We do that by talking about how great I now am, but of course, authentic dharma practice is the opposite of that. It’s opening profoundly to other people.

In many spiritual traditions, including my Jewish one, an encounter with another who opens us to ourselves, and our relationship with that person, are forms of revelation. That’s true in the dharma, as well. When we are able to share our spoken lonesomeness as prophecy with another person, and we can’t do that all of the time, but when we’re able to have that kind of intimate relationship, it enables a certain kind of human connection that is rare and precious. When we’re able to share those parts of ourselves, as Ginsberg says, when spoken lonesomeness is prophecy, with another person, that’s a deeply valuable and rare experience. We can’t do it all of the time in our busy lives, but sometimes we can.

I’m struck by one of the factors that comes up again and again when the Buddha talks about the factors of awakening and how we actually mature along the spiritual path; the factor being noble

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friends and noble conversations. You see it again and again and again. It's not that we're meant to just go off into our own meditation silos and do our own thing, but we're meant to be in conversation, in relationship with one another. There's the triple gem, the buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, the community. That community can be the community of dharma practitioners or it can be our close friends and other relations. It's meant to be the community of people who support us in our practice. We support them, and we grow together as a community.

That requires a certain kind of vulnerability and awareness of our own shadow. We've talked a little bit about making your shadow your teacher on a personal level, how we can open to the fullness of our experience. But there's also opening to the experiences of others, and that's a central part of the dharma path, as well. Not being false, having that kind of openness and authenticity that enables us to be the kind of person who can be a noble friend, who can have a noble conversation. We can't always have those relationships in our work lives, for example, or in our family roles. We can't always open up about everything that's going on for ourselves. Sometimes it's really not about me, or you, but sometimes we can.

It's that kind of openness that enables spoken lonesomeness to become prophecy. If Allen Ginsberg is too lofty a source, I'll remind you about Bleeding Gums Murphy, the blues jazz musician on The Simpsons who told Lisa that the blues isn't about making yourself feel better, it's about making other people worse. I think Bleeding Gums Murphy is a really important dharma teacher. There is something beautiful when we can have the experience of sadness, loss, grief, or even rage with another. Sad songs, of whatever genre, can move us to a solidarity with other people who may be in other conditions and can open our hearts to those whose lives are very different from our own.

Bleeding Gums is right, it's not just about making myself as the [one expressing] feel better, but also communicating the shared human experience of suffering with another. Bleeding Gums put it in a better way than I did, but I think the teaching is the same. In that community, when it's possible to feel our feelings together, when it's possible to explore the spiritual path together and

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do spiritual practice together, what actually takes place? What's the alchemy that takes place in those contexts? It's not, again, about wallowing or always sharing or over-sharing, but it's about being *with* the various forms of mind-state and heart-state that animate our lives, and sharing that with others.

Another piece of the buddhadharma that sometimes doesn't get a lot of attention is the mindfulness of emotion that we do all of the time in our meditation practice. We're sitting quietly and something comes up and we're aware that something has come up. It could be bliss, glee, joy, pleasure, insight, rage, grief, or anger—anything along the spectrum. There's a teaching in the Satipatthana Sutta that [says that] you can notice these mind states inside and outside, meaning internally but also in other people. What does that mean exactly? Sometimes we can see somebody expressing a certain emotion so that we can understand that that's actually taking place. But sometimes that actually leads to wrong assumptions, "so it looks to me like that person over there is having a difficult time." When actually, that person over there might be having a really powerful moment of opening to some bit of grief or loss that she was trying to experience but now can release.

What does it mean to be mindful of other people's mind states? I think part of the answer to that question comes in seeing those mind states for what they actually are, which is cause and effect, not self. One time on a retreat, one of the teachers said something, which [made me think], "I didn't like what they had to say," and I disagreed with it and it made me really angry. I went into my interview with the teacher who I was interviewing with in that retreat, and I started explaining why what this teacher said was wrong, and why I was right to feel angry. And I was so good, and they were so bad, and I was going through this whole process of justification.

My teacher skillfully interrupted, cut me off, and said, "The conditions for anger were present." That was really helpful. Not, "You're right to be angry," or, "You're wrong to be angry," or, "Let's have a conversation about whether this person was right or wrong." Just, "the conditions for anger were present" and anger arose. All of these mind states, which we share with other

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people, with other human beings, are cause and effect, not self. They're shared factors of mind and heart. We can see that when we're actually in those noble conversations with one another, that the conditions for sadness are present and they arise, or the conditions for anxiety, or the conditions for joy or for love.

It's really beautiful to see that the same conditions that cause anger to arise *inside* also arise *outside*; we're not disconnected from that flow. So if somebody says something [because of] causes and conditions that I don't know, and I hear it, and due to my own causes and conditions, my own karma if you like, I process it in a certain way and become wise. Or something resonates or something doesn't resonate, and then maybe I express it in a way that is or is not skillful to the next person. It's learning to see that whole process unfolding as not separate self, not as me versus the world, not as a matter of the subject matter of what someone is saying, but as the conditions that we all share for various states of heart arising.

That, for me, is how opening to the shadow in ourselves also helps open us to relationships. There's that profound sense of solidarity that can actually arise. You know, in difficult political moments, it's easy to divide the world into us and them, especially when the them are busy doing the dividing into us and them, and it's easy to want to say, "Well, those are the other people and they think this way and they're wrong, and I'm this kind of this person and I think that way." There can be something really shifting, in a very positive way, of letting go of some of that duality, to understand the causes and conditions for people's anxiety and people's pain. Not justifying, explaining, or providing excuses for wrong choices, discrimination, or for acting out of anger, but to understand that this is part of the shared human conundrum. There are ways in which our society and in which the human species itself seems to breathe in and out, expansively into love, a little bit contracted into fear, and sometimes even into hatred.

It can be difficult to let go of the us/them theory of human existence, because it actually implies that I too am culpable, I too notice the factors of greed, hatred and delusion, in my own choices, in my own life. I'm not fully liberated or fully awakened; I see the same factors that can cause

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someone else to act out of anger [that cause me to] make an unskillful choice in myself. By opening to that, by not pushing it away, by being willing to do this kind of courageous work of seeing what's inside, I can also see what might be inside of other people as well, and tear down those walls instead of building them up ever higher.

One time I was leading a meditation session and I was at the time practicing a kind of meditation where the eyes are open. I was sitting at the front of the room, facing a lot of people meditating, and I had an experience which meditators might be able to relate to, which is that somebody moved. When we're meditating, doing our best and we're with a group of people and someone moves next to us and they make a noise, it's natural for the conditions for anger to be present. They just arise. It's actually kind of a comedy when you see it because, of course, a person's just making a slight sound, but instantly the mind wants to react and say all kinds of things. If you follow the thoughts you can get completely lost just because a person moved during a meditation sit. That's a natural cause and effect, not self, arising as part of the shadow.

But what happened this time was a little bit different. I was looking out at the group of people in the room and this person moved and naturally, immediately without any interference from myself, something really surprising happened which was that compassion arose instead of anger. My first thought wasn't, "Oh, this person's moving and they're making noise and ruining the sit," but actually, to my surprise my first thought was, "Oh, they're moving because they were in discomfort or they were really distracted, or they were suffering in some small way. I hope they feel better, I hope they're able to get back on track in their meditation sit and not be too distracted by the fact that they moved."

This was actually a profound opening for me because I could see for myself that sometimes compassion could arise naturally. Although, once again, [this was just] a simple bit of insight—I find most of my most powerful insights are actually really banal, they could go on a bumper sticker—in this case seeing that compassion and empathy could arise naturally in in me was deeply profound, and it came from being open to my own experience, to this other person's

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experience as I could understand it. Seeing in the other person what I might be able to see in myself, that this act of movement, a simple movement during a meditation sit wasn't necessarily just being inconsiderate or being a bad meditator, but was an expression of suffering.

A small amount of suffering, not something big and serious and life changing, but maybe some knee pain or some back pain, but something that I could relate to. The mindfulness of emotion is not being just a narcissistic, "This is about me" exercise, but actually opening to what might be going on for other people as well. That to me is the real gateway that we can pass through on the way to a greater liberation, more wisdom, and maybe some more compassion.