

Jay Michaelson
Making the Shadow Your Teacher
Week Four: "Skillful Liberation"
April 24, 2017



Welcome to part four of *Making the Shadow Your Teacher*. The practices that we've been looking at so far are not just about stress reduction, or feeling better, or being more adjusted in our lives. It's helpful to remember, as dharma practitioners, that the practices of liberation lead to *liberation*. This is not just the path of being a better-adjusted human being, although that's certainly laudable. This is the practice really of changing something profound in the nature of the mind, even the nature of the brain.

You know, the Buddha was not a neuroscientist, but we do understand now a little bit more about how the process of meditation actually changes the brain. It aligns with something really important, which is one of the definitions of liberation in the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhist texts, which is that liberation awakening nirvana is the intuitive knowledge of the four noble truths.

That's worth looking at a little more closely. You know, I can tell you the four noble truths right now if you don't know them. You can just look them up in a book. Maybe you should just be able to google your way to enlightenment. Well, it doesn't quite work that way because map is not territory, and there is a difference between knowing in a simple sense, and intuitively knowing.

We can understand this in a sort of pop-neuroscience way, which might be helpful for practice, that when the different neurons fire together, they wire together, and that the practice of meditation is actually changing the brain. That's a neurological correlate to the intuitive knowledge of the four noble truths. You really get it in the Yiddish term, as in your "kishkes," in your guts. The mind actually changes as a result of meditation practice. Now we understand that the brain changes as well.

What does this intuitive knowledge of the four noble truths have to do with making the shadow your teacher? Over the last few weeks, we have looked at ways of coexisting with difficult emotions. In that moment, and it could be just as simple as not scratching an itch in a particular

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meditation sit, or it could be as profound as being in a conflict with the person in our lives, and not acting from a place of reactivity in that moment. Something profound is shifting in the mind, and perhaps even in the brain.

As we develop a little bit of metacognition, we're able to be with the difficult emotion, rather than be taken over by it. That's the work. That's the profound work of meditation practice and of dharma practice more generally. You know, over the last few weeks, we've seen that this isn't just an individual process as well. It takes place and has consequences in our relationships with others, and in our relationship to justice work.

Finally, I want to conclude this week in talking a little bit about the most profound happiness, the happiness that does not depend on conditions that can arise in small moments of liberation, both in meditation and in daily life. Let's just review briefly four different ways of working with the shadow, of making the shadow your teacher on this pathway to liberation. The path is actually the destination.

Spiritual practice is funny. We talk about it sometimes as a journey, but in a journey, we're trying to go from point A to point B, whereas, in this journey, we're actually trying to arrive. In the spiritual path, each step is the destination.

As we work with some of these shadow emotions, what can we do in our daily lives and in our meditation practice to work with them more skillfully toward liberation? First, as we've discussed, is mindfulness in emotions, noticing what they are. As the spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle once said on Oprah, "The whole meaning of practice, the whole meaning of life, is what's going on right now, and can I be with it?"

What's going on right now? Seeing clearly. Seeing clearly what's actually happening, and can I be with it? Not fall in love with it, not push it away, not grab on to it, not even be glad it's there, but just be with it. Can I actually see clearly, and accept what's happening, and then decide how

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to act clearly? Knowing the object for what it is, in formal meditation terms, [is] not the story for what it is, not the justification for what it is, but just, "Oh, this is joy. This is love. This is sorrow. This is loneliness. This is anger. This is fear."

Just relating in this way, which occurs again and again in our meditation practice and in our lives is the core part of passing through what I've called "the gate of tears" into liberation. Cultivating that attitude that we talked about in the first part of *atammayata*, of settling back and not making more of the world, and making more mental formations. Settling back, you can even notice the way in which we note the presence of these difficult mind states. That is worth the price of admission. That capacity to settle back mentally, just a little bit, from the resistance to the difficult objects that arise all of the time.

Second, there's the skillful means of noticing how these difficult emotions arise and how they pass. You know, there's that joke about the guy who goes to the doctor and says, "Doctor, it hurts when I do this," and so the doctor says, "Well, don't do that anymore." That's actually a pretty good little dharma teaching. When we notice how we get triggered, slowly, gradually, and skillfully, we can actually get triggered a little bit less. Perhaps by putting ourselves in different situations, or just knowing as we're going into them, "Oh, I'm likely to get triggered right now."

In the last talk, I talked about justice work. You know, when you go out on a march, or you make a phone call, or you take a stand, you're probably going to be triggered a little bit. Going in it with that understanding makes it possible to be in difficult situations, and act skillfully without being taken over by them.

Third, as we've talked about before, seeing clearly also means seeing as non-self. Seeing the difficult emotions and the pleasant emotions as cause and effect, as shared factors, which all of us as human beings can experience in our different ways, as cause and effect, non-self. There's a little bit of a depersonalization that can take place in this process, in a good way. We can see that anger arises, and it arises in me, and it arises in you, and it's not the most pleasant feeling, but I



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know it in the body. I know how it feels. I can see when it's there. I can see when it passes. It's cause and effect. The conditions for anger are sometimes present.

Sometimes I go into contexts where I know the conditions for anger are going to be present because that's what my work in the world actually requires. The shadow arises when it arises. It's not that you're a bad meditator, or a bad Buddhist, or a bad human being. You're actually just a human being.

You know, even if you poke a little paramecium with a probe, it's going to react in a certain way. That's just the nature of life on earth. Our practice is just to be more wise, more compassionate. Constantly being a little more gentle with ourselves as those causes and effects unwind.

Fourth, and finally, there's seeing Mara as Mara. You know, Mara is this sort of embodiment, this demonic embodiment of all of the shadow. Mara assumes a lot of different forms. Sometimes it's doubt, sometimes it's restlessness, sometimes it's desire, and sometimes it's just a lack of ability to do anything. Sometimes seeing Mara as Mara can be really helpful, and even naming it, not being deceived, "Oh, there you are. You are Mara. I'm not going to send the email when I'm under the influence of you. I'm actually going to wait a few minutes."

That's a simple example, but imagine a more profound one when we're trying to be there for other people who might be grieving or experiencing loss. Mara shows up as my own feelings that I'd actually like to express, which may or may not be helpful to that other person. Well, you know, seeing that as Mara, "It's fine to feel my feelings, but expressing them in some way when I'm trying to show up for someone else, might not actually be that skillful." On the cushion and off the cushion, seeing these difficult emotions as Mara, accepting them, not pushing them away, allowing, surrendering, acknowledging, but not necessarily acting on them in a way that could be destructive to myself or to another person.

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There's a beautiful pair of awakening stories in the Pali canon, one of which is very famous, and the other which is not well known at all. The famous one, of course, is the awakening of the Buddha. In this sort of classical depiction of that awakening, the Buddha is having his final encounter with Mara, who shows up in the form of doubt.

Mara says right before the Buddha retains full enlightenment, "Who do you think you are? Who do you think you are to attain enlightenment? You don't have the merit to attain what no one else has attained. You're not worthy of this awakening experience." And the Buddha, in that iconic posture, points to the earth, which I think itself is a profound teaching, points to the earth and says, "Actually, the earth is the witness for all of my past lives, everything that I've done, and all of my diligent practice. This isn't about me deserving or not deserving. This is about cause and effect, and the conditions for enlightenment are now present." In that profound *yes*, the Buddha becomes fully awakened. That's a really beautiful story. It's a story that teaches us to perhaps own what we have done, the good that we have done.

There's another awakening story though, which is less well known. After the Buddha died, there was a convening of all the arahants, all of the fully enlightened masters, who had heard the Buddha's teachings, and now they were going to come and record them for future generations. The person who was the most valuable to be at this meeting was the Buddha's constant friend and companion, Ananda, but there was a problem. Ananda had not actually become an arahant, notwithstanding spending decades with the Buddha, he never quite got there. He had passed through the other three stages of enlightenment in that particular map of awakening, but he wasn't fully awakened. He wasn't fully an arahant.

Now the pressure was on. The arahants said to Ananda, "You know, we need you at this meeting because you have the best recollection of everything the Buddha said, but this meeting is arahants only. You'd better get practicing because we really need you to be there." Just imagine what that's like. Even if we take this just as a legend, that for decades you've been the closest companion to the Buddha, and you haven't quite gotten it. Yet now, all of your friends, who have

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gotten it, are right around you saying, "It's time. It's time. We need you. You got to finish your spiritual path right now."

Well, Ananda practices really diligently, really does his best to try to work his way, and does his meditating, and meditating, and meditating. It's the night before the meeting of the arahants, and he's still not fully awakened. One of the versions of this story, there are several, is that Ananda actually gets up and realizes this is not to be. "This is not going to be my path, I'm not going to be fully awakened," and sits down. Ananda is shifting his posture from sitting to lying down to go to sleep, and at that moment, has an insight into impermanence, and becomes fully awakened.

There's something really profound in that parallel story of awakening to the Buddhas, that Ananda's story actually, in a way, is a no rather than a yes. If the Buddha pointing to the earth is saying, "Yes, I have done the work. I deserve this enlightenment, this awakening," Ananda lying down, in a way, is surrendering to not awakening. It's that deep, deep acceptance that I've worked for my entire life, the most profound goal that there is, I'm not going to achieve. In that profound acceptance, ironically, the goal is achieved. Ananda shows up, using psychic powers no less, at the meeting of the arahants, and they know that he is now one of them.

Only through surrender, being with the profundity of that loss, that what I've looked for my entire life I may not achieve, I may not have. That much surrender, that much acceptance, actually is the gateway. Let's not be afraid of the sacred in our own lives. Let's not be afraid of the deepest spiritual truths of our lives actually unfolding. Let's also allow for the possibility that our fondest dreams might not actually come true. That relinquishment is the gateway to liberation itself. When the shadow truly becomes our teacher, we see that the shadow is also light. We don't have to be afraid of not getting that thing that we're most dreaming of, because once the fear is released, the happiness that does not depend on conditions can unfold for you.

I'll end with a poem, a short poem ascribed to Ananda. It was a poem written actually after most of the other senior disciples of the Buddha had recently died, all within the space of a year. It's a



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poem after Ananda's full awakening, but still a poem of loss. Here's what this poem says in translation, "The old ones now have passed away. The new ones do not please me so much. Today alone I meditate like a bird gone to its nest." Ananda has learned his path to awakening, which is accepting the loss that unfolds, being fully present with the full range of the beautiful experiences of being human. Finally going to meditate like a bird going to its nest.

Thank you so much. I've offered these teachings because these are the teachings that have meant the most to me personally in my own dharma practice. I hope they were inspiring in some ways to you. If you want to learn more about my work, I'm online at jaymichaelson.net. The book on which these talks were based is called, *The Gate of Tears: Sadness in the Spiritual Path*. Thank you so much for your attention and participation. Thank you even more for your diligent practice to bring peace and awakening to all beings.