

Tricycle Talks

“The Joy of Justice”

Episode #101 with Kamilah Majied

April 24, 2024



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Kamilah Majied: The joy that I'm talking about in this book is not “Oh, let's just all forget about it and be happy.” It is the opposite of that. It's like, “Let's face it 100 percent together, grounded in our interdependence, understanding the wisdom of impermanence, and embracing the joy of being alive and connected through suffering together and making a commitment to justice so that we can all have more joy, which will ripple to all of us.”

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen and you just heard Dr. Kamilah Majied. Kamilah is a mental health therapist, clinical educator, and consultant on advancing equity and inclusion through contemplative practice. In her new book, *Joyfully Just, Black Wisdom and Buddhist Insights for Liberated Living*, Kamilah draws from black cultural traditions and teachings of Nichiren Buddhism to lay out a path to liberation that is grounded in courage, curiosity and deep joy. In my conversation with Kamilah, we talk about how she views the relationship between joy and justice, why she believes joy is a mode of self-transcendence, how we can learn to suffer without being insufferable, and the importance of not taking ourselves too seriously. So here's my conversation with Kamilah Majied.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Dr. Kamilah Majied. Hi, Kamilah. It's great to be with you.

Kamilah Majied: Lovely to be with you as well. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

James Shaheen: And it's great to finally meet you.

Kamilah Majied: Yeah, I was just thinking that. I have long admired what you've been able to do with Tricycle under your leadership, and it's good to have an opportunity to sit down and talk.



James Shaheen: Thank you, and thank you for your contributions. They've been wonderful. So I'd like to start by mentioning your book, *Joyfully Just: Black Wisdom and Buddhist Insights for Liberated Living*, but before we get to the book, I'd like to ask you a bit about your own story, if you don't mind. Could you tell us how you first came to Buddhism?

Kamilah Majied: My mother introduced me to Buddhism in a couple of different ways. She was an avid reader and scholar and encouraged me to read from a very young age very widely, including about varied spiritual traditions. So of course she had me read *Siddhartha*, but she also had me read other Buddhist writings in addition to Islamic writings and writings from Hinduism, just from various religious traditions so I'd have a sense of the spiritual literature of the world. So that was the first way.

But then in 1982, she was introduced to Nichiren Buddhism by Soka Gakkai members who lived in our neighborhood, and she started practicing. And my mother was always kind of ebullient and full of energy, and yet her practice of Buddhism seemed to elevate or just enhance her life force in a way that was compelling to me. And I was like, I wonder what this Buddhism is about, because I saw her sitting in front of this altar that she created saying these words, *Nam myoho renge kyo*. And I was like, what is going on here? And she explained it. I understood it conceptually. She'd given me materials to read about it. But it was the extra pep in her step. She started taking on even more. She was raising the five of us and working full time, and she decided, “Well, I'm also going to go to law school.” And even taking on that additional work, she was full of energy. So me being 17 at the time and about to head off to Mount Holyoke to start my college career, I was like, “Maybe I'll do this and I'll have a little bit more energy too, since she just started law school and she's acting like more energetic as opposed to less, so maybe this will help give me a little boost too.” So that's how I started.

James Shaheen: Great. So some of our listeners may not be familiar with Nichiren Buddhism and more particularly Soka Gakkai. Could you tell us a bit about that?



Kamilah Majied: Absolutely, absolutely. The Soka Gakkai International is an international organization based on the practice of Nichiren Buddhism, which comes from the Mahayana lineage of Buddhism. Nichiren Daishonin was a Japanese priest who studied all the works of Shakyamuni and recognized that the *Lotus Sutra*, one of the last sutras that the Buddha really expounded, encapsulated a lot of his essential teachings and proposed and encouraged that chanting the title of the *Lotus Sutra*, which is *Nam myoho renge kyo*, would actually be a practice, an invocation that would allow everyone to tap into their fundamental enlightenment and realize the lived meaning of the Buddhist teachings. So that's what Nichiren Buddhism is fundamentally about, chanting *Nam myoho renge kyo*. And we also recite chapters of the *Lotus Sutra* in the morning and evening.

Soka Gakkai was founded because Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, who was an educator in Japan, was really looking for a way to elevate the life state of people in Japan and in the world. He was a philosopher and educator. So he started studying Nichiren Buddhism and founded the Soka Gakkai, which means “value creation society.” And then Josei Toda and Daisaku Ikeda kind of expanded the Soka Gakkai to become the Soka Gakkai International, which is an international organization of Buddhists with members in about 122 countries and territories, some 12 million members worldwide.

The SGI is really a fascinating organization and a depiction of the spread of Buddhism. One of the major ways that Buddhism has spread throughout the world is through the Soka Gakkai, and it's very much grounded in helping folks have good lives, helping regular people use the practice and apply it to daily living. So it's not so much of an esoteric practice that has no relevance to daily life. SGI members worldwide gather in their local communities to chant together. And that's something that also appealed to me in the practice, because even though I started practicing in East Orange, New Jersey, where we were living at the time with my mother, just literally a couple of weeks before I went off to Mount Holyoke, when I got to Mount Holyoke, there was a SGI community there that I practiced with during the academic year. And then in the summers I



went back home and practiced in East Orange. And then after college I moved to Harlem, which was amazing practicing in Harlem district for ten years, where I got to meet a lot of African American Buddhists, especially artists who are Buddhist, musicians and activists who are Buddhist. So I got to see it lived in a lot of places. And then later, going on to graduate school and traveling the world and going to Buddhist meetings in France and going to Buddhist meetings in South Africa and going to Buddhist meetings in Ghana, I got a sense of what it is to belong to the global sangha of people who are really committed to self-development because the fundamental purpose of Buddhism is to manifest our own enlightenment and support other people in doing the same thing. So it's moved from me being a 17-year-old saying, “I want a little more energy,” to an amazing worldview and mission.

James Shaheen: Just really quickly, you say that Nichiren Buddhist chant what we call the *daimoku*, and that's *Nam myoho rengo kyo*, just as you mentioned. Can you give me a quick translation of that chant?

Kamilah Majied: Absolutely, and I often say that trying to say what *Nam myoho rengo kyo* means is like trying to define love. It's like we need all day! It's very felt. I feel like I've understood the true meaning of it more through the practice of it, but the literal translation of the words, *nam* is generally translated as devotion or even fusion, so just to completely connect. *Myoho* is translated to mean mystic law, and not mystic in the sense of magic but mystic in the sense of things that cannot be understood with intellect alone, mystic in the sense of phenomena that transcend intellect or what we understand as a very kind of limited logic. And then *rengo* is the lotus flower. It's translated to mean the lotus flower, and the lotus flower is significant in Buddhism because it flowers and seeds at the same time, symbolizing this simultaneity of cause and effect. And also it's symbolic in Buddhism because it grows in the muddy swamp, symbolizing that we can manifest this beautiful life condition from the muddy struggles of life. So both those aspects of the lotus flower are very significant. And then *kyo* is translated to mean sound action or vibration. So together, the phrase speaks to fusing our lives with this mystic law



of cause and effect through sound, vibration, and action, so that we unite our lives with this universal principle in a way that helps us to manifest our enlightenment.

When we chant the daimoku, when we chant *Nam myoho renge kyo*, it's saying, “I *am* myoho renge kyo. My life is myoho renge kyo.” And in that way, we're tapping into the power of the universe, this compassionate, essential aspect of all life. We're manifesting within ourselves chanting, and as we chant, we're really chanting for the wisdom to make causes that will produce good effects for ourselves and others and chanting to turn the muddy swamp of our own challenges and of the distress in our world into a flower of wisdom.

James Shaheen: I do want to get to your book, but there's one question I had about Soka Gakkai. Its membership is probably more reflective of the American demographic than any other Buddhist school. It represents the country's diversity in a way that no other Buddhist school I know of does. Do you have any ideas or thoughts about that?

Kamilah Majied: I do. I think that it's because from the very beginning, the Soka Gakkai has been about inclusion, and it's been based on this principle that Nichiren Daishonin really emphasized from the Buddhist teachings that all humans are fundamentally enlightened. Every living person, every living entity has an enlightened aspect. And so when folks experience rejection in other spiritual communities based on some aspect of their being, their sexual orientation, their ethnicity, or what's called race, they often encounter the SGI as one of the first places where they're not hearing, “You have to change some aspect of yourself to practice Buddhism here.” And I do talk about this aspect in the book, that one of the things that is compelling to me about Buddhism, and I think to a lot of people, is that you can come as you are, and you manifest your enlightenment with your particular cultural heritage. It's proof of the validity of Buddhism. If it's only a valid teaching that people from one ethnic heritage can benefit from, then that's saying there's a limitation to Buddhism. But the true proof of Buddhism is that people in Togo, people in Japan, people in New Jersey, people in Ireland, people in



Missouri are all tapping into their enlightened nature and expressing it through their own cultural experience.

I'll tell you this one piece, and maybe it'll highlight it. One of the things that you'll find when you go to SGI meetings is that there's always a cultural presentation. The three founding presidents of the Soka Gakkai talked a lot about peace through culture and education. The SGI is a nongovernmental organization of the United Nations, really trying to work for peace through culture and education. And what that means is that every little Buddhist community meeting, like the one I'm going to on Saturday, has a very brief cultural presentation as part of the meeting, because we recognize that people expressing their own cultural heritage is how we demonstrate our own enlightenment.

So I think that's been a real draw for people from diverse cultures. I'm writing about how in West Africa, seeing people doing their cultural dances and making songs about manifesting their enlightenment in Wolof, in the native language, that's what Buddhism looks like. And I think when people walk in SGI meetings and they see all different kinds of people not doing the same thing in terms of culture or the way they dress or the way they speak but sharing a practice and a vision of improving themselves and improving the world, it's kind of exciting.

James Shaheen: Thank you. So now your book, *Joyfully Just*. Could you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it? And in particular, what does it mean to be joyfully just?

Kamilah Majied: It means that we're able to engage with ourselves and with the world in a way that is fair and equitable and that honors our fundamental enlightenment. That's a core principle of Buddhism: that we all possess this enlightened life condition and that we are just toward ourselves in honoring the Buddha within. And what that means is releasing some of the negative self-talk, releasing some oppressive ideas that we've internalized about ourselves, and it also means releasing oppressive ideas that we've internalized about other people, because of course, Buddhism articulates interdependence. So if we think, “Oh, these people are this,” or “These



people matter less,” then we're actually cutting off one of our own limbs and limiting one aspect of our own enlightenment. So being joyfully just means accessing the inner joy that is available to us when we treat ourselves as enlightened beings and strive to develop our own enlightenment as we strive to recognize and honor the enlightenment of everyone and everything around us.

James Shaheen: You say the goal of the book is to reclaim joy by using meditative practice to be just toward ourselves and the world around us. Can you say a bit more about how you see the relationship between joy and justice?

Kamilah Majied: One of the things I say in the book is that a lot of times when people think about working for justice, they only focus on the part that is challenging or difficult. Even our language—it's like a struggle. And it is a struggle. And it can be and has been a joyful struggle. In the book, I draw from Buddhist traditions, and I also draw from Black wisdom traditions. And a lot of people are like, “What are Black wisdom traditions?” You asked me earlier why I had to write the book, and it's because I realize that people look at African Americans, I think, and say, “African Americans are creative and strong and fun.” And I think they often don't realize that African Americans are deeply wise and have created wisdom traditions through music, through Black dialect, through what I call communicative kinesics that are emulated the world over because they resonate with exactly this point, articulating the human experience, especially the human experience of suffering, with joy.

If you think about it, the Blues originated from enslaved people singing in enslavement. That was a self-transcendent wisdom practice. It remained so as African Americans moved through Jim Crow and continue to move through civil rights battles. It's a deeply self-transcendent practice of hope, even as one grieves.

So in the book, I talk about joyful suffering because the four noble truths are about suffering. And that's the place where I articulate and see a connection that both Buddhism and the Black wisdom traditions help us to navigate suffering and injustice with joy and with equanimity. But



there's a way that people think, “OK, justice is over here and joy is over there because working for justice is hard.” But you have to do hard stuff to be joyful! That's just a fact of life.

One of the things that my mother wrote down in this volume of writings from Nichiren Daishonin that she gave me was her own reflection, and she said, “The greatest impediment to happiness is lack of courage.” So when we lack courage, we can't have all the joy because we try to stay within our comfort zone and not do the things that scare us, like working for justice. “I'll just stay over here in my own little corner and I won't advocate for justice for myself or anyone else, and I'll be ‘safe.’” There's no safety in that kind of hiding, so to speak.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you go as far as to refer to the joy of facing injustice, and you quote the Buddhist educator, you mentioned him earlier, Daisaku Ikeda, in saying that “enlightenment comes from seeing the truth, no matter how unpleasant it may be.” So how can facing injustice actually be joyful or even liberatory? I think you touched on that, but it's just something that seems counterintuitive.

Kamilah Majied: Yeah, it really is until you do it. I'll tell you a little bit about my research. My doctoral research focused on looking at racism and homophobia as they impact Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian people. One of the outcomes of that study domestically, and also when I expanded the research internationally, was that people who were involved in advocating to end racism, people who were involved in advocating to end homophobia, were more joyful because they were reaching in and grabbing this life force, this energy to transform reality as opposed to succumbing to it.

It's kind of a joyless life when you say, “That's the world, life's a blank, and then you die,” right? As opposed to “I'm alive, and with all the power and life force I have, I'm going to do things to make things better.” So it's the joy of manifesting your own potential. It's like doing something about it, even if it's a small change. That's all we can do is make these small changes. Some of us are able to make some larger scale changes, but with this commitment to “I will be just toward



myself, and I will create justice around me,” just from the resolve—one of the *paramis*, one of the core tenets of Buddhism is resolve. So to make this resolve, this commitment, the bodhisattva vow is an expression of that resolve. It is itself joyful, it's freeing, it's liberating, it's, “Nope, I'm not confined by this. I will do more.” Even if the “more” is challenging an ableist policy at my organization. It's so much more empowering to try. And so in terms of the research that my data showed and lots of data show that folks who are involved in resisting oppression that they experienced, whether it's ageism or sexism, tend to be more psychologically well, less depressed, less anxious, because they recognize they have an internal locus of control, which is what Buddhism helps us develop: “Yeah, no, I'm not powerless. I can create change. I can change my own mind in terms of how I interpret this, and I can create change in the world to make us better.” So that's how it becomes joyful because we live in the world of possibilities when we're working for justice.

James Shaheen: You know, you just answered a question because there was one statement that you made in the book early on that I thought at first was stunning, but you've shed some light on it. You write, “All suffering, including the suffering of oppression, has a relationship to joy.” And I think to be hit with that statement is a challenge, but I think you've done a very good job explaining how that might be so, unless you want to add anything else to that.

Kamilah Majied: It's real. Herbie Hancock and Buster Williams and Wayne Shorter do this dialogue with Daisaku Ikeda, the recently deceased president of the Soka Gakkai. It's titled “Reaching Beyond,” and it's about jazz, joy, and Buddhism. They're talking about African Americans and the creation of this genre of music and how what I refer to as the wisdom transmission of jazz really managed to transcend language and create beauty and art out of suffering. So much of Black music is about that. Hip hop is about that too. A lot of hip hop music, a lot of the kind of “fight the power”-oriented hip hop is about that too, accessing that internal power to resist. So if you look at different genres of Black music, you'll see exactly this thing, the relationship between suffering and joy. Yes, I'm suffering, but it's the muddy swamp,



and in the muddy swamp, from the muddy swamp, I can grow a flower. And that's what Black people have done through the creation of these wisdom transmissions of different genres of music. And also Black people have done it in other ways as well, through protest itself. Some of the protests have been so joyful. They're mourning ceremonies often, but they're also a joyful resolve. They're just intertwined. They're not separate.

James Shaheen: When you first started writing for us, I thought, “Wow, she knows and knew all these great jazz musicians,” Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and so forth. So you also explore how we can learn to suffer without being insufferable. I rather liked that. So what does this look like, and how can learning to suffer well help us heal addictive or harmful behaviors?

Kamilah Majied: It's funny, in the book, I quote this book that I read when I was a little girl called *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, and in this book, one of the characters in a family had a substance abuse problem, and so he was siphoning off money from the family pot until the matriarch of the family found a way to block his access to that money. And so he turns to her and says, “I can't get the money for the substances anymore. What am I going to do?” And she turns to him and she says, “Suffer, just suffer, like the rest of us. That's what we got to do.” And I think that we suffer more than we have to when we believe that we should not suffer. That is the first truth. There is suffering. There is a path to end suffering, but it's not an avoidant, escapist path. It's like Suffering is unavoidable. And if we turn toward that, OK, the reality is this muddy swamp. I will suffer, and the path to end suffering is to practice, to release attachment to nonsuffering and to create value out of the suffering, to grow, to be creative, access your inner strength, your enlightenment in the suffering, because you can't access it by trying to escape it.

James Shaheen: I don't know if you know of Ross Gay's work, but we had him on the podcast and he spoke about how joy often emerges from the depths of suffering, particularly in how we learn to care for each other. So I'm curious if that resonates with your understanding of joy.



Kamilah Majied: Absolutely. I have a whole section on joyful grieving. I talk about loss and grief, and not just loss as far as death, but the losses that accompany aging, the physical losses, if you're losing your hair or your teeth or developing arthritis, if we can be light about it. If we can think of ourselves like these great mountains that are decaying and no less beautiful for the decay and be with ourselves in these transitions and see the joy of them. Fall is my favorite season, especially being from the East Coast, because watching these leaves change color as they die, it's like that's the universe just saying death is beautiful too. Decline is beautiful too. Look how glorious and joyful decline could be if we were to change our lens on it. And the other side of that, a lot of times trying to avoid it, we do harmful things to ourselves, trying to not be in acceptance of it.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You write a lot about the power of levity and playfulness, and I'm hearing it in your voice, and I'm hearing the joy in your voice. So what can we learn from lightening up? Because things aren't always so light.

Kamilah Majied: Right. Now, when I say lightening up, I don't mean not focusing on the challenges. I mean turning squarely toward them and deciding again that the freedom and the joy is in facing it. And it's not pleasure. There's relative happiness where you have some ice cream, and then there's absolute happiness where you feel a profound sense of the meaning of your own life and the ways that your life is and can be contributive. The joy that I'm talking about in *Joyfully Just* is not the relative joy. It's the joy that you often have to weep through sorrow to get to, right?

I'll just give you this example of adrienne maree brown offered this song on Instagram a couple of days ago, where it's a singing protest offering that she made to the survivors and to the dead in Rafa and Gaza. And it is so beautiful and in some ways joyful, even as it is a grief song. So what I'm saying is that the joy we access is from deciding we can face this. We are together in our human condition. It's the joy of recognizing interdependence because that's the aspect of being awake where we know, yeah, suffering is the thing that connects me to all of humanity. So in



deep suffering, when we face deep suffering and turn toward one another's suffering, we also experience the profound joy of our interdependence and our connection.

James Baldwin has this quote about you think your pain and your sorrow are unique and singular in the world, and then you read, and then in reading, you realize that every pain you've ever suffered has been articulated or experienced by other human beings in some way. So it's in this deep interdependent connection to suffering where we are working to alleviate one another's suffering that we really actualize the joy of interdependence because otherwise interdependence is just an abstract Buddhist concept. Yeah, we're all connected, but it's actually a very joyful concept that lands us in the reality that we are fundamentally a part of one another. We are deeply, like Dr. King said, tied together in a garment of destiny. And with that joy, understanding that we're a part of this fabric, joy emerges, even as we suffer. There are parts of the fabric that are fraying that we can reach for and that we can hold. And there's joy in that, like if you've been to a funeral where you were weeping but also you were laughing because the person dropped so much love in your life.

So the joy that I'm talking about in this book is not, “Oh, let's just all forget about it and be happy.” It is the opposite of that. It's like, “Let's face it 100 percent together, grounded in our interdependence, understanding the wisdom of impermanence and embracing the joy of being alive and connected through suffering together and make a commitment to justice so that we can all have more joy, which will ripple to all of us.”

James Shaheen: Yeah, you also described joy as a mode of self-transcendence, and you mentioned interdependence. So how can joy help us transcend the bounds of a separate self and experience this sense of interdependence?

Kamilah Majied: By connecting with the suffering of others. That's the shortest answer to that. I really want to emphasize that part that when I'm talking about joy, it's not any kind of spiritual bypassing. It's the opposite of that, because that doesn't lead to joy. It's like, “Oh, OK. Who's



suffering? Who can I reach for?” If you think about some of the people who we think had this most noble way of living, there was also a great deal of joy. MLK was joyful. Mother Teresa was joyful. They weren't downtrodden because they were heartened by their internal awareness that, yeah, within me, there's the capacity to heal and create justice and connect with the joy of other people. And that is the greatest joy of my life. That's the greatest joy I'll ever know.

So self-transcendence, one of the things Ikeda Sensei often said was, and Rosa Parks echoed this sentiment and they had a great dialogue together about this, which I'm talking a little bit now about it in an article that I'm writing with you all, but they talked about how when we're so bogged down in our own personal struggle, then we can't wriggle out of that. So Rosa Parks used to say, “If I find myself too focused on my own problems, I go out and I do something to support someone else.” And it seems counterintuitive to us a lot of times, because it's like, “I've got my own problems. I can't go and support the unhoused people in my community or go and participate in an anti-racism protest. I've got too much to do. I can't do that.” But the actual truth is that going to do that puts our personal problem in some perspective and in connection and in relation with all the other human challenges in the world, and we return to our personal challenge with a vigor and an awareness of our connectedness in this human web of interbeing, as Thich Nhat Hanh described it.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I mean, service changes everything. It really frees you in so many ways to be of service to others. And in the book, you quote the novelist Toni Morrison, and here's what she says: “I am suggesting that we pay as much attention to our nurturing sensibilities as to our ambition. You are moving in the direction of freedom, and the function of freedom is to free somebody else.” So this feels like another iteration of the bodhisattva vow. Could you say more about how this quote has guided you in your own work of liberation?

Kamilah Majied: Absolutely. Well, Dr. Morrison is one of my favorite authors, and again, just like a deep wisdom transmission for all of humanity in so much of her work. And here she's recognizing, like you just said, service is freeing. It gives us that self-transcendence because it



frees us from the limited worldview where we are only seeing ourselves and the box of problems that we're in or our own little corner of the muddy swamp, right? When we do service, what Dr. Morrison is saying is that when we reach for others who are suffering, we disentangle ourselves as well from the paralysis of fear, from the paralysis of shame, from the paralysis of hopelessness. Hope is a practice. Ikeda Sensei often talked about hope as a decision. Hope is a discipline. It's not like anything that's going to be bequeathed on us. If you don't have it, go get some. Practice to arouse hope. It's not going to come as a bestowal. It's a thing that we have to create, especially in the most hopeless times. And again, African American people, African heritage people throughout the diaspora are excellent models of this. If you can just study the wisdom of people who not only were enslaved themselves but who saw their grandparents enslaved and their grandchildren enslaved, from whence hope? For what reason? Right? Hope was a decision that they made. And I think that's the piece that we can learn from really studying the history and the wisdom transmissions of Black people and of Buddhism.

James Shaheen: Throughout the book, you draw from the teachings of the 13th century priest Nichiren Daishonin. Including his teaching, “The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra”: “Spur yourself to muster the power of faith. Regard your survival as wondrous. Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before any other.” So can you walk us through this quote and what it has come to mean for you? What is the strategy of the *Lotus Sutra* and how can it support us in cultivating greater joy?

Kamilah Majied: Yes, I can. I actually recite that every morning and evening after I do my practice, because the strategy of the *Lotus Sutra* is to manifest your enlightenment. A lot of people who are cerebral and try to think our way through problems or create a strategy if you're having a problem with your boss, or you're trying to create a vision for your work, or you're even trying to create change in the world, or just something going on with your family, that we try to strategize and pick it apart using just the faculties of mind, so to speak, as opposed to the faculties of heart, mind, body, and spirit that are accessed when we tap into our fundamental enlightenment.



So the *Lotus Sutra* postulates that all humans have the capacity for enlightenment and that by practicing, by chanting *Nam myoho renge kyo*, by studying the teachings of the Buddha, which is a very big part of practice, certainly for us as SGI members and I think for many Buddhists that you do whatever the contemplative practices, the invocation and the meditation, and you also serve others and strive to help others cultivate their enlightenment, and you study the Buddha's writings. That is the strategy of the *Lotus Sutra*. So instead of trying to just “I got to figure this out,” to move into your practice, chant to manifest your enlightenment, right? What is my most enlightened response to this challenge, this problem, this conflict? And that is what it is to employ the strategy of the *Lotus Sutra* before any other. And I think that's the part where you said, “Regard your survival as wondrous.” It's really true. Like just the fact that you woke up today considering what's happening to so many people around the world. Why is it that you or I get to be alive and to notice the sunshine? Considering that whatever degree of survival you have, if we're on a respirator or jogging up a mountain, our survival is wondrous. It means to deeply, deeply value being alive and to proceed with gratitude for that in a way that is empowered. Because if you regard your survival as wondrous, you don't just want to do the least you can; you want to do the most you can because it's a wonder that I am alive. And that is obviously a very joyful way to live, right? Because if you're in the midst of a turmoil or a problem, you're probably not necessarily thinking, “My survival is wondrous.” But if you contemplate that phrase, then you can recognize, “Yeah, I am in the middle of a storm and even more in this circumstance, my survival is wondrous.” To employ the strategy of the *Lotus Sutra* before any other means to continue to deepen your wisdom so that in this storm, you can maximize the benefit of growth, right? Because the storms are opportunities for growth.

James Shaheen: Regarding it as wondrous also it brings me to much neglected gratitude that I otherwise could have. But you also refer to the *Lotus Sutra* strategy as an emergent strategy. Can you say something about that? You're drawing here from the work of adrienne maree brown, I think.



Kamilah Majied: Yeah. She talks about emergent strategy as really being able to respond to the needs of the moment. What does the singular moment need right now? So you're standing in the grocery store and you're seeing someone be disrespectful to the person in front of you saying something ageist or racist or sexist, and you're feeling that internal tug of, “Oh my God, I'm so conflict-averse. I just want to get out of here,” or whatever you're feeling. But then there's some part of you that's maybe like, “This isn't right.” So emergent strategy is in that moment, you don't have to wait until you get home to your altar, you can, in that moment, for me, in that moment, say *Nam myoho renge kyo*, or just think it aloud, just think it. And what is my most enlightened response to this situation? Moving ourselves out of the inertia and taking an action to resource the situation around us. I've seen parents yelling at their children, and I've done this and just dropped into a little bit of wisdom about how to do it. Because, for example, if I see a parent yelling at a child, my first impulse is to almost scold the parent, but dropping into just a little bit of wisdom, I say, “Oh, you must be having a really challenging day. It must be really challenging to be shopping with all of your children. Is there anything I can do to help?” And then it just dropped the parent right into a place of, “I'm not alone.” So we're always in positions to improve the quality of the experience of ourselves and everyone around us. When we're using this strategy of the *Lotus Sutra* moment to moment, what makes it emergent is that in each moment, life is this dynamic experience, and each new moment creates an opportunity for us to consider what is the next step, what is the emergent strategy, the strategy that will allow my most enlightened life force to emerge, the strategy that will allow everyone else's enlightened life force to emerge?

James Shaheen: Yeah, I wonder, is it like allowing yourself to intuitively meet the situation in front of you?

Kamilah Majied: And enhancing that intuition with practice, because sometimes our intuition says “Run, hide, don't deal.” So we have to be in a friendly coaching relationship with our intuition because bias is also intuition, right?



James Shaheen: And judgment, like why is she talking to her child that way?

Kamilah Majied: Exactly.

James Shaheen: So you also discuss the importance of fierce compassion, or a type of compassion that challenges our complacency and facilitates growth. Can you say more about the power of fierce compassion? How can it reinforce what you call discomfort resilience?

Kamilah Majied: Absolutely. When I talk about fierce compassion, I'm talking about the compassion to spur ourselves to growth. I give the example in the book of how it can certainly be a compassionate thing to get ourselves a good massage. However, it can also be very compassionate to get a colonoscopy or a breast exam, highly uncomfortable and very compassionate acts toward ourselves. So what I'm trying to do is to help folks recognize the distinction between compassion and comfort. Compassion is not always comfortable when we're trying to act on it and when we're trying to offer it. So for example, if someone is doing something harmful, for example, language, one of the ways we do the most harm to one another is through language. Toni Morrison talks a lot about how violence is enacted through language. I think I even quote her in the book as saying so.

So if we're trying to attend to our language in a way that does justice to ourselves and everyone else, we may offer someone a compassionate correction. A lot of times you'll hear people referring to African heritage people who were enslaved as slaves. They'll say, “Oh, your ancestors were slaves,” as opposed to recognizing that they did not morph into another type of human being or nonhuman when they were kidnapped and trafficked. They were enslaved. There was a verb in there where they were trafficked, and their fundamental humanity stayed intact, so much so that they were able to endure and create musical genres and contribute to every field of endeavor. So you might offer the general correction to someone as saying, “They weren't slaves, they were enslaved, and it's important to say that for these reasons.” That's an act of fierce compassion because you're trying to help someone grow past a kind of limited view. Now, the



person hearing that correction might not feel very warm and fuzzy when they feel it. They might feel like, “Oh, you know what I meant,” or just off put or uncomfortable. And so that's what I mean when I'm talking about discomfort resilience. That discomfort is good. It's like welcoming discomfort. It means this is a place where I can grow. And this person had enough compassion, fierce compassion for me to help me see this in a broader, more inclusive way, a more just way, a more accurate way.

There's a talk where Reverend angel Kyodo Williams and Bhikkhu Bodhi are talking about the eightfold path and how *samma*, the word “right,” doesn't necessarily mean right and wrong in the kind of Western sense of right and wrong, but *samma* or a right way or right view or of the eightfold path means whole or inclusive or just. So when we're trying to support one another in growing our capacity to be just toward ourselves and one another, it's going to get uncomfortable sometimes, but we have to have the fierce compassion for one another to do so, as opposed to the “I know what they meant and they're going to be uncomfortable, so let me just not do it.” That's not as compassionate, right? We may think that kind of letting people do things or say things that are harmful is compassionate, but it's really negligent in a way. So when we offer fierce compassion, we're saying, “Hey, guess what? You could see this more broadly, more justly. And I believe in your capacity to do so.” However, in order to receive that kind of compassion, we have to have what's called discomfort resilience. We can't run away every time we're comfortable. We can't be so fragile that we can't bear a correction because then how will we ever grow?

James Shaheen: Right. It's working against our tendency to become obsessed with our own comfort. Nothing grows in that place. So you also describe how fierce compassion can help us face social oppression and injustice, including helping us to see through the delusions of white supremacy culture. So first, can you say more about how you understand white supremacy as a delusion or as a cognitive distortion?



Kamilah Majied: Absolutely. There are aspects of white supremacy culture. Tema Okun articulates these characteristics of white supremacy really well, and what is meant by the notion of white supremacy is the idea that Eurocentric ways of seeing and doing and knowing epistemologies and actions are the right way and the best way and that other ways of being doing and knowing are less than. That gets manifested in a lot of different subtle and not so subtle ways. White supremacy is not something that only white people enact. She describes it as the water we're all swimming in, the way we expect to see things and the way we expect to experience things. So these are delusions or cognitive distortions in that they diminish the value in humanity of other beings around us, of other human beings and other life around us. They place humans, and particularly white humans, at the top of the value and relegate others to lower value. And you see this in the most surprising but not so surprising places, like when you're watching a movie and there's this white family who is vacationing in some beautiful Asian country, and the whole country is destroyed in a tornado or something, but the white family survives, so we all cheer, right? The very subtle message of that is that the people who were most important made it through, and even all of the suffering in the movie is focused on their experience.

So that's an example of where you can see white supremacy impacting media and popular culture, but you can see it in other places too, like education. I've been a teacher for over twenty years, and how much does anybody know about the great Asian authors? How much did we learn about that in high school or even in college? Or philosophers or the great Black mental health and psychoanalytic leaders? So there's this white supremacy, this overvaluing of knowledge, experience, and wisdom from Eurocentric colonialist perspective and undervaluing. So we've all gotten contaminated by that. And now we've got to unlearn it and expand and reclaim the reality of all of humanity's contribution and value. So that's the cognitive distortion. And it's interesting because it's been born out in research. Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt, who's a researcher at Stanford, did this wonderful book called *Biased* where she talks about the findings of her eye-tracking device studies, where she put eye-tracking devices on teachers and said,



“Look for the troublemakers.” Everyone's eyes went to the Black students. And of course we know Black students are suspended at higher rates from kindergarten onward, including the Black teachers looked at the Black students. So we all have absorbed this idea of devaluing certain lives based on these notions of white supremacy. So we have these cognitive distortions that lead us to be biased in these ways. But with deep practice, and with the pause, with creating some space between the biased thought and the word or action we might take, by creating a pause there, we can really shift.

James Shaheen: I thought this was very interesting. One of the delusions that you refer to, you call our right to comfort, and you say that clinging to expectations of comfort can cause us to suffer unnecessarily. How can we learn to let go of our expectation of comfort? Before I mentioned our obsession with our own comfort. There's an expectation of comfort or that we have a right to be comfortable.

Kamilah Majied: Yeah, it's really true. She talks about it as a characteristic of white supremacy because we can see that in the world where people say, “I don't want to talk about racism or critical race theory. It just makes me uncomfortable.” It's like, well, six-year-olds experience racism, and they have to get talked to by their parents about how to navigate interactions with white adults and police. So it's like saying, “Yeah, If you're Black, you have to deal with those discomforts. But if I'm white, then I have a right to comfort and not being made uncomfortable.” So that's how it relates as an aspect of white supremacy, the places where folks with any kind of privilege say, “Oh, why do I have to think about that? I'm not trans. Why do I have to think about trans inclusion and how I named the bathroom? It's such a pain using new language. It makes me uncomfortable saying they, them.” There's this way that we resist the discomfort of being more just. It's more comfortable for me not to have to be just toward you. Then we're defining comfort very narrowly. The more we step out of what we believe to be our comfort zone, the bigger that zone grows until the whole world is our comfort zone. But it's not comfort in the sense of “I feel good all the time.” We're going to be very distressed if we expect to feel good all the time.



It's like having a cold. You can have a cold and be joyful. That's like suffering without being insufferable. You don't have to be grumpy with your whole family and angry that you have a cold or that you broke your leg or that your teeth fell out. You don't have to be angry about it, right? We don't have to invest the emotional energy of anger. That only comes from our feeling like “I shouldn't have to suffer through this.” Just like the matriarch is saying to the person in their family, “Suffer,” but you can do it without being insufferable. We can let go of this idea that we're supposed to be comfortable all the time.

Pain is information. Pain is a doorway. Jon Kabat-Zinn has a wonderful book about mindfulness and pain that he recently shared with me, and there's a lot of joyful information in it if we can walk through the pain door with some equanimity and some awareness that no, people suffer, I'm one of the people on the planet, I'm supposed to be uncomfortable sometimes, and approaching that with some equanimity will allow me to access the growth that is available to me from this discomfort. But resisting discomfort just increases it.

James Shaheen: Well, it's a lot of work, and it doesn't work, and it makes you miserable. So another delusion you explore is adultism, or the systemic devaluation of children and young adults. So what can we learn from tapping into the curiosity we had as children, for instance? What can we learn by regaining some of that, I wouldn't say innocence, but open-mindedness?

Kamilah Majied: For a lot of us, getting that back, reclaiming that involves recognizing where it got cut off and where we got told to stop being silly, stop being childish, right? Like, why is that an insult? What's wrong with the ways of being as a child?

James Shaheen: I'm still told that.

Kamilah Majied: Well let me be your ally in that, James, because what's wrong with the ways of a child? What exactly are we saying to people when we say stop being childish? Like, what about being a child are we diminishing? Some kind of jaded, limited way of being. Young



people’s epistemologies are wise. They have a curiosity. They have a sense of youthful insouciance that we can learn a lot from. So the notion that people who've lived longer know more is a delusion. We know what we know, but we've also inherited a lot of biases and we're jaded and we don't have beginner's mind anymore. That's what we get to really divest. We get to get rid of all that jadedness when we reclaim our beginner's mind and our youthful selves.

James Shaheen: That's what I was looking for, beginner's mind, reclaiming the part of ourselves that is OK without knowing. I think that's how you describe it, being OK with not knowing, because it's another form of discomfort often not to know, but to get comfortable with that makes a difference.

Kamilah Majied: Yeah, it makes us behave with less superiority. We recognize ourselves as part of the community of beings forever coming to know, forever unlearning what we thought was reality because we're growing. You're not growing if you know everything.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Well, we're running out of time. So Kamilah, thanks so much for joining us. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we close?

Kamilah Majied: I guess I'd like to invite people to preorder the book and to participate with me in some of the practices that I'll be leading around the book as the year unfolds, because it really is meant to be a living document and something that enables people to engage with different realities of the world with joy. I talk about joyful grieving and joyful aging, joyful engagement with media, joyful protest. So I really invite people to at least get the book and continue to stay connected with me and honestly with you and with *Tricycle* because I feel like the work that *Tricycle* is doing to really have Buddhism be a lived, inspiring practice for people not divorced from daily reality is really important. And as we experience Black History Year, because every day is Black History Day for me, and I think especially in the United States and every part of the world where Black people have made a contribution, I encourage people to turn toward Black

Tricycle Talks

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Episode #101 with Kamilah Majied

April 24, 2024



music, Black protest as wisdom traditions and recognize the ways that these are resources for our enlightenment.

James Shaheen: OK, Kamilah, thank you so much. And for our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Joyfully Just*, available now. So thanks again, Kamilah. It's been a real pleasure.

Kamilah Majied: Thank you, James. I look forward to talking again soon. Bye bye now.

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