

Discovering Your Light Through the Shadow, by Todd Norian

I am grateful for this opportunity to share some personal insights I've gained through my own life experience, my study of Kashmir Shaiva Tantra (KST), and my 36 years of deep yoga practice. The insights that follow have to do with understanding the full spectrum of who we are – both light and shadow. I will admit that for many years early in my study of yoga, I was a light chaser. There's nothing wrong with being a light chaser. After all, enlightenment and transcendence are the carrots that lure us forward on the path. In all honesty, though, recognizing your light is only part of the equation. The title of Debbie Ford's book, *"The Dark Side of the Light Chasers,"* sums this up beautifully. And I always laugh when I hear Deepak Chopra's wise words stating, *"If you think you don't have a shadow, then you must not be standing in the light!"*

Everyone has a shadow, that part of yourself you don't like to acknowledge or reveal in public. It consists of negative aspects of your character or habits that echo your worst traits. When you fail to identify and address your shadow, it gets swept under the proverbial carpet of the subconscious mind and wreaks havoc on a subtle level. In the KST philosophy, there is indeed a place for the shadow, which is given many different names but is essentially any limitation that blocks your light from shining. KST teaches that everything in the universe has a right to exist but that the issue is one of placement and perspective. For instance, dirt inside the house is called dirt, but outside the house it is soil; it is simply necessary to sweep the dirt outside where it belongs.

The shadow is, to frame it differently, a blind spot where your judgment is askew. It is ultimately a limitation on your unbounded, unlimited divine nature. In KST, the scholars refer to the shadow as dust on the surface of consciousness, or Mala in Sanskrit. There are three kinds of Malas – Anava Mala, a feeling of lack or scarcity; Mayiya Mala, a feeling of difference and separateness from others; and Karma Mala, over identification with being the "doer" and feeling that you lack the resources to engage in action.

Anava Mala is similar to a feeling of unworthiness or shame. It is useful here to compare shame with guilt for a deeper understanding. Guilt is characterized by an action and can be expressed as, "I did something wrong." Shame is instead verbalized as, "I am wrong." Guilt is easier to overcome because you can apologize and make things right again; when faced with feelings of guilt, you strive to do better next time. But shame is demoralizing and destructive because it belies a deeper belief that you will never get it right due to the fact that you are inherently flawed. People with unresolved shame take one of three approaches to life: fight, flight, or freeze. They either fight by reacting defensively and try to force their way through; flee by disappearing, shrinking, or becoming silent; or freeze, which equates to becoming immobilized and holding these feelings in. According to leading author and educator Brene Brown, shame is at the root of many other negative behaviors and actions, like perfectionism, victimhood, addiction, depression, and even suicide. She also says that what grows shame is silence, secrecy, and judgment; what heals it is empathy and love.

For me, unworthiness is something I've been working with since a very young age. There is one childhood experience in particular that had a major impact on me. It occurred when I was in the second grade and was one of the fastest runners in the school. That is, I had been until a new kid moved to town. One recess period, he beat me in a running race, and my girlfriend at the time dropped me and went with him instead. I felt so defeated. The meaning I attributed to that experience was that of unworthiness. I became convinced that I was not good enough and was a failure, morphing this experience into a source of shame. From that moment on, I moved through life with this shadow of unworthiness holding me back at every turn.

The true work, then, comes in being able to claim your shame and name your shame. If you don't claim your shame, it will claim you. If you don't seek to know your shame and understand how it works, shame claims you by controlling your behaviors and emotions in negative ways. Yoga is the practice of peeling

away the layers of shame that veil the true capacity of your heart to shine. Only when you fully embrace your shadow, comprised of your imperfections, will your light be authentic through and through.

KST asserts that we live in a universe of power. Attitude is power. What you believe, the attitudes you hold, and how you respond to the events of your life render your life either empowered or disempowered. Life is essentially meaningless, which is not to say that life has no meaning. Life is meaningless in that it's up to you to assign meaning to your life. Human beings are meaning-making machines. What we do all day long is make meaning about every experience we have. We are on a journey of fulfillment. What you tell yourself about what is happening is what you receive. If you've lost track of the meaning, you are likewise making meaning about losing your meaning. The negative meaning you are making is keeping you stuck.

Your attitude follows you around; so does your shadow. As Jon Kabat-Zinn stated, "Wherever you go, there you are". Wherever you go, the meaning you make will follow you. The nature of the universe is that it can only agree with you; it aligns with your beliefs. If you carry negative beliefs, the universe will provide the evidence, people, and circumstances to give you a negative experience. Conversely, if you step into your true power and align with the bigger energy, the universe will support you to be empowered and live in joy. Your beliefs indeed have the power to warp time/space reality.

When you misalign with grace, you start to live in the story that life is happening "to you" rather than "for you". This subtle shift of words from "to" to "for" is huge. "Life is happening to me" is the sense that you are the victim of life. It keeps happening to you. You have no control, responsibility or power to change it. "Life is happening for me" is the empowered belief that the universe is always supporting you, even if the experience doesn't always feel good. The yogic attitude I teach within the Ashaya Yoga® method, is that everything in life is for your awakening. When you orient to meaning in this way, nothing can bring you down since life is constantly happening on your behalf.

At the same time, we have to be very discerning because the very instrument of mind we use to create a meaningful life is the same one we use to create a life of misery. The mind that can turn your life into a deep ocean of gratitude is the same one that can take you into the depths of a depression and leave you isolated, abandoned, stuck, and frozen. In this place, every thought you have is negative because all thoughts are now being filtered by your shadow. In the Western medical model, this is called mental illness. In Tantra, it is called ignorance, and this is not a judgmental term. It is instead simply the way the universe reveals itself. We are all suffering from a certain degree of mental illness (ignorance). Tantra teaches us that we can only know 25% of anything; 75% is always concealed. We sometimes expect perfection and want to know 100% of everything, but this isn't the way the universe works.

In KST there's a positive value attributed to ignorance and concealment. Concealment is the way grace reveals itself. If you play all seven notes of a scale at the same time, you produce noise, but if you play certain notes at the same time, while other notes are concealed, you create music. Ignorance is indeed the prerequisite for knowing anything. Even in the state of ignorance, you are a divine being. You are still the deepest, most profound crystallization and most ecstatic expression of the universe's desire to know itself. Your limitations are in fact the ways in which the unbounded Absolute reveals itself in you as you. Therefore, even your limits and shortcomings are divine. They are what give you your particular character, personal expression, and singular vantage point such that you show up in the world in a way that is wholly unique to you.

Given this, it is vital to become more aware of how our shadow conceals us and keeps us stuck. The imprints of these shadow aspects are so subtle and our patterns are so ingrained that we hardly see them. These imprints or grooves are called Samskaras. Samskaras can be positive, neutral, or negative. One of the deeper purposes of the practice of yoga is to establish new Samskaras, new grooves or habits that are life enhancing. Within KST, there are specific mantras and practices that are used to burn Samskaric seeds. Once seeds are burned, they can no longer sprout. These mantras are like tiny

missiles that penetrate the heart shell and crack it open. And why are these walls there in the first place? To keep us safe. They are protective mechanisms erected by the subconscious mind to help us function in life. If you have a wall around your heart, get to know it. Build a relationship with it because your wall has power. Only when you embrace your wall - which is a manifestation of your shadow - can you extract insight from it. If you push it away and attempt to forcefully rid yourself of it, it will bite you in the butt later. Your fulfillment in life resides on the other side of the heart wall.

Ultimately, the purpose of limitation of any kind is to help you awaken to your unlimited nature. The same is true with forgetfulness. If you never forget who you are, you never have the joy of remembering again. Limitation is one facet of the dance of creation. The one infinite, unbounded universe chose to limit itself by becoming you for the sake of its own delight. You could also say this about the big bang; the one infinite energy exploded into a multiplicity of finite forms in order to experience its own existence in myriad ways. Pretty deep, I know, but isn't it wonderful? It means that your limitations have a purpose. You are not wrong, nor are you flawed. Your limitations are what impart your unique character and personality. When I first heard this teaching, I felt such an incredible sense of relief. I was able to accept my shortcomings and my shadows. I released the burden of judgment and the weight of unworthiness. Everything started to make sense. This doesn't mean, however, that practice and purification is no longer needed. It is simply recognizing that you are perfect as you are and will become more perfect tomorrow.

In yoga, it is possible to work your body on the physical level and never address your shadow aspects. I know a lot of miserably flexible yogis. But there's no real fulfillment unless you embrace the full spectrum of your being – both light and shadow. Ashaya Yoga®, which has its foundation in KST, is a pathway for complete transformation of body, mind, and heart. It is a method of going so profoundly deep into the layers of your being that you touch the source of all creation and tap into the wellspring of vitality that is hidden within. There, you touch the deepest source of your being and leverage the amrita (divine nectar) of unbounded joy and happiness.

by Todd Norian, Founder of Ashaya Yoga®