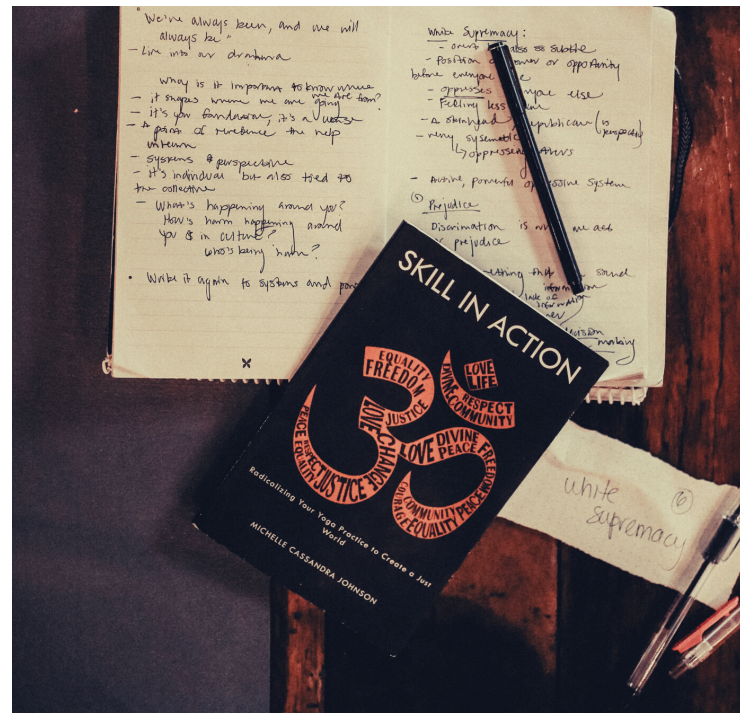


SKILL IN ACTION

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Radicalizing Your Yoga Practice to Create a Just World

MICHELLE CASSANDRA JOHNSON

REVISED AND EXPANDED

WELCOME

Thank you for joining us for Skill in Action!

We appreciate your carving out time for intentional practice, community and skill-building. Our hope is that through your participation in this Skill in Action workshop, retreat, or immersion you find some stillness, clarify how you might respond with courageousness and steadfastness during this time and build relationships with others who share the same questions you do about how to create a just world.

This workshop, immersion, or retreat is an offering based on Michelle Johnson's years of work as a dismantling racism trainer, yoga teacher, activist and change maker. It will include embodied practice, discussions about the intersection of justice and yoga and time for reflection and integration of new concepts and information.



ASSUMPTIONS

Adapted from Dismantling Racism Works

- We live in a toxic culture that affects us all. We are not encouraged to see it, so we must learn to see our culture and how it teaches us to transform the absurd into normal.
- Intention is not the same as impact. We need to understand that we can have good intentions and still have a hurtful or damaging impact.
- Analyzing and cultivating awareness is a lifelong process. We all have questions. I hope to address some of your questions throughout the weekend, and my hope/assumption is that once you complete this retreat, you will have more questions at a deeper level.
- I'm offering this immersion as a way of understanding how social justice intersects with yoga to radicalize the practice of yoga, individually and collectively. I understand that by sharing an analysis focused on social justice, racism, and yoga, I risk reproducing racism by asking people already deeply traumatized to revisit and reflect on that trauma.
- We have different lived experiences and identities that affect how we navigate our lives.
- We are interconnected and interdependent.
- We have to develop awareness of ourselves, of our communities, and of the world—both as individuals and in community; we have to work together to love ourselves into who we are.
- We have to believe in the possibilities of creating the world we want to see by walking our talk and learning from our mistakes.
- None of this is easy and we have to do it anyway.

AGREEMENTS

- Speak your truth
- Listen to understand
- Expect and Accept Non-Closure
- Balance mutual care (self and collective)
- Be conscious of points of privilege and oppression that live in the room, and the power dynamics between us
- Confidentiality
- Brave Space not Safe Space



SHARED LANGUAGE

CULTURE:

Norms, standards, beliefs, values, and narratives created by a particular nation, people, or social group.

DOMINANT CULTURE:

A system that inherently believes some people are superior and others inferior. This system of dominance and inferiority is based on various identities e.g. race, gender, gender identity and expression, age, physical or mental capabilities, and sexual orientation.

Dominant culture creates norms thus deeming who is “normal.” When one is seen as normal based on their identities this gives them closer proximity to power. Therefore, dominant culture functions as a gatekeeper by deciding who has access to power and furthermore access to move with ease as they navigate their life.

SOCIAL LOCATION:

A practice used to reflect on the groups you belong to because of your place or position in history and society. It is a tool used to clearly see your proximity to power based on identities you embody. All of us have a social location that is defined by race, gender, gender expression, social class, age, ability level, sexual orientation, geographic location and context.

RACE:

A socially constructed system of classifying humans based on phenotypic characteristics (e.g. skin color, hair texture, bone structure). There is no such thing as race from a scientific or biological point of view. And yet, race is REAL and remains a powerful political, social, and economic force. Race is essentially a political construct, in other words it was constructed for political purposes. The term 'white' was constructed to unite certain European groups living in the U.S. who were fighting each other and at the same time were a numerical minority in comparison to the numbers of African slaves and Native peoples. In order to justify the idea of a white race, every institution in this country was used to prove that race exists and to promote the idea that the white race is at the top and all other races are below, with the black race on the bottom. All institutions were used to promote the idea of white supremacy.

PREJUDICE:

Learned prejudgment about members of social groups to which we don't belong. Prejudice is based on limited knowledge or experience with the group. Simplistic judgments and assumptions are made and projected onto everyone from that group.

DISCRIMINATION:

Action based on prejudice. Discrimination is always happening. There is no prejudice without discrimination because how we see the world drives our actions. Spiritual bypass is an example of discrimination.

SOCIAL/INSTITUTIONAL POWER:

The power wielded by entities like governments, churches, and corporations to control people and direct their behavior through access to resources, the ability to influence others, access to decision-makers to get what you want done, the ability to define reality for yourself and others.

RACISM:

Racism = race prejudice + social and institutional power

Racism = a system of advantage based on race

Racism = a system of oppression based on race

Racism = a white supremacy system

Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the major institutions of society. By this definition, only white people can be racist in our society, because only white people as a group have that power.

WHITE SUPREMACY:

A historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of establishing, maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege.

SYSTEM:

An interlocking set of parts that together make a whole, an established way of doing something, such that things get done that way regularly and are assumed to be the 'normal' way things get done, runs by itself; does not require planning or initiative by a person or group.

OPPRESSION:

The prejudice and discrimination of one social group against another, backed by institutional power. Oppression occurs when one group is able to enforce its prejudice and discrimination throughout society because it controls the institutions. Oppression occurs at the group or macro level, and goes well beyond individuals. Sexism, racism, classism, ableism and heterosexism are forms of oppression.

PRIVILEGE:

A systemically conferred dominance and the institutional process by which the beliefs and values of the dominant group are "made normal" and universal. Rights, advantages and protections enjoyed by some at the expense of and beyond the rights, advantages, and protections of others.

SPIRITUAL BYPASS:

A term first coined by psychologist John Welwood in 1984, is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs.

Where I am From

We begin with an exploration of where you are from because the people, places, memories and experiences you had growing up inform who you are. If one doesn't understand their roots and how culture has conditioned them it can be difficult to figure out where one wants to go. If we as a culture don't reckon with our history then we will repeat patterns of oppression and create more harm than good. For this Where I'm From activity, I invite you to find a quiet place to sit and breathe. I invite you to bring in experiences based on: where you grew up, who was in your home, who was in your community, the landscape, the structure of your family, memories, family secrets, messages you received about difference, messages you received about what it meant to be you, messages about race and whiteness and messages about identity.

Once you have had a moment to sit and call in memories please take some time to write your own Where I am From poem. I have provided a template below for your use. You can opt to use it or freewrite.

I am from (geography, region, city, town)

From (What type of land? A city or the country, rural or urban, red clay, concrete, dark soil, dirt road or busy streets)

From (landscape-big mountains, rolling hills, rivers, the ocean, grassy fields, open space or congested space)

I am from (family-share about the structure of your family-two parent home, single parent, share about how power worked in your family)

From (share a memory from an experience you had with family)

I am from (share something about a family meal think dynamics that come up over a holiday meal)

I am from (Share a family secret)

From (message you received about what it meant to be you based on identity)

From (a message you received about people who were different than you)

I am from (share about a message you received about race in your home)

From (share a message you received about race in school or a place of faith)

I am from (Share about your racial identity)

From (Share about another identity)

I am from (Add anything else you want to include)

Where I am From
By Michelle C. Johnson

I am from the rolling hills and city streets encapsulated in a state capital that was the capital of the Confederate states in America during a very uncivilized war.

I am from Whitewood road, a swing set and big yard that doubled as a baseball field.

I am from a radio flyer wagon and a sweet pup named Princess. She would let me put her in the wagon and roll her around the yard for hours.

From Whitewood and then Blithewood Road a reminder Indigenous people once walked the land my house sat atop.

I am from a single parent home, and a mom named Clara. She is the strongest person I know.

From messages like “we are going to the poor house” and “I’m going to rob Peter to pay Paul.”

I am from a scholarship that afforded me the opportunity to attend a school where I was the only black girl in my class.

From you talk walk, you dress white, do you think you’re white?

I am from “Mom, can I go on the ski trip with Alison?” and “No, you’re not like the other kids, you’re different.”

From different=bad.

I am from dinner tables full of warm meals to nourish us.

From Thanksgiving at my grandmother’s house and conversation around the dinner table about people we didn’t understand.

I’m from a Baptist church where the minister talked about the history of oppression we experienced as black people while replicating oppression through language and action because being gay makes you a sinner.

I’m from sitting in the church pew questioning why we as a people who have been so oppressed would oppress others.

I am from, it’s too painful to talk about race.

From longing to talk about my experience of being the only black girl in my class. I am from noticing connection and disconnection and observing humanity not treat everyone humanely.

I am from everyone isn’t the same.

From being awake to some of the ways we are treated differently from a young age.

From feeling suffering in my bones, cells and tissues wondering when others would notice the deep misalignment of values and action in our culture.

I am from finding the breath when I came into a world designed to take my breath away.

I am from each inhale and exhale.

I am from each inhale and exhale. I am from liberation yours, mine and ours.

The Connection Between Spiritual Practice and Yoga

Michelle C. Johnson

Yoga means to “yolk.” It means bringing together things that seem to be in opposition, like our mind and body, or our heart and spirit. There are so many opposing forces and dynamic tensions present during the times in which we live. There is justice and injustice; wholeness and fragmentation; healing and trauma; wellness and disease, coupled with who deserves to be well and who deserves to suffer, and resistance and acceptance.

The practice of yoga teaches us to act skillfully and radically as we respond to harm, opposition, and injustice.

Yoga encourages a space for deep exploration, curiosity, and reflection. The practice asks one to look inside and view their experience as a witness. A practice of witnessing allows one to understand that most places where yoga is practiced are a microcosm of the larger culture—whatever is happening outside of the yoga space is happening inside of the space. The business of yoga isn't void of power and privilege; the manifestation of how power moves in dominant culture is reflected by a lack of building community when teaching a class, the sequence that is taught, the decor of the studio, and the demographic of people practicing. The practice of merging the internal and external reality would allow people to live their yoga. Discernment follows witnessing, which can create a space for one to reflect on their impact on the collective good. Or, their perpetuation of power and privilege to harm the collective good.

Yoga is a practice that is for everyone, and one of its inherent purposes is to bring us into alignment, wholeness, and a healed state. Justice is the act of acknowledging and repairing the harm that comes from living in a toxic culture that values some over others.

Toxicity causes dis-ease and trauma to us individually and collectively. The teachings of the 8-limbed path of yoga focus on principles that can be responsive to the injustices that are happening in the world—they call practitioners into action, by suggesting that the only way to be on the path to enlightenment, and the only way to practice yoga, is to be compassionate and not cause harm to others.

The only way not to cause harm is to understand one’s power and privilege and to understand that suffering is perpetuated by a lack of recognizing the imbalance of power in our culture.

The *yamas* and *niyamas*, along with every other limb of the 8-limbed path of yoga, lay out a blueprint for how we can create a just world. Non-violence, uplifting non-dominant narratives, being aware of how many resources we use, understanding our relationship to scarcity and abundance, and managing our energy are all practices that could support us in creating conditions for liberation, making space to breathe for everyone. Devotion, and remembering we are interconnected with every sentient being, allows us to create conditions for wholeness for all.

Humanity, dignity and freedom are the heart of justice work. Interconnectedness, mindfulness, and the space to breathe freely are the heart of yoga. Justice and yoga feel one and the same to me.



THANK YOU

Thank you for taking the time to prioritize your spiritual practice and creating a just world. It has been an honor and joy to spend the weekend with you; I hope things continue to percolate in your spirit in response to what we co-created as a group.

Please stay in contact with us as we would love to serve as a resource for you.

The best ways to stay in contact are via the Skill in Action website and newsletter.

Please [sign up for the Skill in Action newsletter](#) to receive information about monthly offerings.

Website: <https://www.skill-in-action.com/>

Email: info@michellecjohnson.com

Be well on your journey.

Much Love,

Your Skill in Action Facilitators

*“On this path no effort is wasted,
no gain ever reversed; even a little of this
practice will shelter you from sorrow.”*

The Bhagavad Gita