

Joyfully Just

Black Wisdom
and Buddhist Insights
for Liberated Living

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 **sounds true**
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Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| | |
| Chapter One: Contemplative Practice, Joy, Justice, and Inner Transformation | 15 |
| Contemplative Practices | 15 |
| Practicing to End Oppression | 17 |
| Storytelling and Mindful Speech | 20 |
| Useful Terms and Concepts | 21 |
| Connecting with Cultural Wisdom and Traditions | 28 |
| | |
| Chapter Two: Resilient Compassion | 45 |
| Life Is a Spiritual, Psychological, and Emotional Gym: Let's Get Our Inner Workout On! | 47 |
| Self-Awareness and Affirmations for Fierce Compassion | 50 |
| Frustration Tolerance: Resistance and Courage | 56 |
| Strong Spirit, Strong Faith, Strong Prayer | 59 |
| Discomfort Resilience | 65 |
| Releasing the Cognitive Distortions of White Supremacy Culture | 66 |
| | |
| Chapter Three: Power and Playfulness: Mo' Joy and Mojo | 87 |
| Adulthood: The Gateway Oppression | 88 |
| Ending Racism Begins at Home: Cultivating Anti-Racist, Non-Oppressive Family Relationships | 104 |
| Mindful Sex: What Does It Mean to Be Joyfully Just, Sexually? | 106 |
| Healing Our Connection with Elements of the Natural World | 112 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Taking Our Joy on the Road: Pleasure, Power, and Place in Nature | 118 |
| Suffering Without Being Insufferable | 122 |
| Chapter Four: Joyfully Just, Conscious | |
| Cultural Engagement | 127 |
| Cultural Humility | 128 |
| Ending Cultural Appropriation with Reparative Relationality | 133 |
| Do You Know What Time It Is? | 140 |
| Conscious Engagement with Media | 143 |
| Chapter Five: Joyful Suffering | 159 |
| Our Timeless Dance with the Four Sufferings: Birth, Aging, Sickness, Death | 161 |
| Understanding Grief and Loss | 164 |
| Characteristics of Loss | 174 |
| How to Grieve Well—and the Importance of Doing So | 189 |
| Engaging Impermanence and Death in Good Humor | 201 |
| Conclusion: Closing and Opening to Our Next Steps | 215 |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | 221 |
| NOTES | 223 |
| ABOUT THE AUTHOR | 237 |

Introduction

Welcome! I am so excited to have you with me on the journey of being joyfully just. The goal of this book is simple—to reclaim joy by using meditative practices to be just toward ourselves and the world around us. And yet as the great Jazz artist Thelonius Monk said, “Simple ain’t easy.”¹

This book illustrates how we can be joyful in our efforts for personal, familial, social, organizational, communal, and environmental justice. There is a sublime exhilaration that comes from the capacity to really know, to discern—to appreciate reality with all its beauty juxtaposed with rampant injustice. The joy of facing injustice comes when we can finally allow ourselves to *know* what we can already viscerally *feel*. In *Joyfully Just*, I offer meditative practices that allow insight to arise. As we begin to see and face—clearly and deeply, and perhaps for the first time—all that we could not see and face before, we become more free and thus more joyful. In Buddhism, emancipation from delusion is itself enlightenment. As the renowned Buddhist educator, poet, and philosopher Daisaku Ikeda states, “The joy of life is to be found not by evading life’s sufferings but by grappling with them to the finish. Escapism cannot produce true happiness. Happiness based on delusion does not last. Enlightenment comes from seeing the truth, no matter how unpleasant it may be.”²

There is joyousness in turning toward injustice with a commitment to transforming it. It’s like the elated charge of resolve you get when you hear rousing African American freedom songs like “Ain’t Gonna Let

Nobody Turn Me Around.” That’s what it feels like to be joyful in our resolve for justice. There is delight to be found in meditative practices themselves, whether we are engaging in music meditations or singing; whether practicing yoga, stillness, or dancing in the ocean; whether gardening or deep breathing. Countless practices can bring us to a deeply thoughtful, contemplative state of being. I define meditative, mindful, or contemplative practices as the activities we engage in to bring ourselves to the present moment in a way that reflects an embodied and integrated experience of our own minds, hearts, and bodies. True mindful or contemplative practice strengthens our compassion for all other beings as we deepen awareness of how our lives are interdependent with all life. *Justice is embodied wisdom and compassion toward ourselves and all that surrounds us.*

As surprising as it may sound in a book about addressing injustice, I invite you to *relax* and be at ease, to let it be enjoyable! Allow a playful curiosity to guide you to and through learning about embodying a just, joyful existence.

Well minds nurture justice
and just minds nurture wellness.

Because we often hear of *striving* for human and civil rights as a “struggle,” it is easy for us to forget that there is joy in the journey toward justice. Sometimes there may not seem to be an evident connection between justice and joy. The joy I speak of in this book is not superficial pleasure. *Joyfully Just* is about the joy that arises when we use our meditative practices to pause and look at the suffering that injustice has caused in our own lives and in the lives of others. In that pause we can experience the joy of clarity, which is a precursor to the joy of healing. We come to know and delight in the wisdom that can arise when we see the injustices we perpetrate against ourselves and others. Whether spoken, embodied, or reflected in nature, wisdom is simply truth that

enriches our insight. We experience still more joy in taking action based on wisdom as our interior lives and relationships begin to expand. This helps us become more psychologically and relationally well. Well minds nurture justice and just minds nurture wellness.

Many, if not most, iconic social justice leaders exuded indefatigable joy spawned from their deep contemplative practice. People often forget what an expansive sense of humor Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had. I believe his humor was part of (and arose from) his embodied enactment of his faith and Christian contemplative practice. When Dr. King said “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” he was not simply encouraging us to stay hopeful because things would get better.³ Rather, he was encouraging us to lean in and *bend* the arc with the might of our minds, bodies, and spirits. This book draws from the wisdom of many Black liberation leaders and thinkers, including those who make their liberatory contributions through prayer, protest, language, and music.

The goal of *Joyfully Just* is to support people from all spiritual traditions and cultural backgrounds in using meditative practices to reclaim joy. Our spirits, bodies, and minds need to be buoyant to navigate the unceasing waves of prejudice, devaluation, and degradation that we encounter internally, interpersonally, and communally. This book is about actualizing that buoyancy, that levity, as we enact justice using diverse meditative practices. In particular, the *Joyfully Just* journey focuses on practices, teachings, and insights from Buddhism and Black wisdom traditions.

The Black wisdom traditions I explore in this book include those shared through language and dialect; musical practices such as Gospel, Blues, Jazz, R & B, and Hip-Hop; dance practices; and communicative kinesic (movement and gesture) practices. These practices are often misunderstood—especially when they are appropriated. Often they are underestimated as simply entertainment. In this book, you will come to see how much insight and guidance for wise, courageous living we receive from Black cultural traditions. I explore Buddhism and Black wisdom together in this book because although the spiritual and religious

traditions of Black people are diverse, as are Buddhist lineages, many secular Black wisdom traditions and overarching Buddhist principles share common insights. For example, Black musical traditions illustrate the unity of suffering and joy and the possibility for self-transcendence and enlightenment in any circumstance. The creative, lively resilience of Black life shows us, in so many ways, what enlightenment looks like in daily living. Black wisdom traditions are the script, score, and choreography of Black love and resistance. As such, they have universal relevance to all who feel love and resist oppression. They can be and are enriching to everyone.

How do you avoid cultural appropriation with regard to Black wisdom practices? It's simple, but not easy. When you engage in Black dialect, music, or other Black cultural traditions, reiteratively reflect on how you demonstrate or could begin to demonstrate love for and solidarity with Black people. Likewise, we can avoid appropriating Buddhism by reiteratively reflecting on whether Westernized notions of mindfulness and other Buddhist principles honor and center the peoples from whom Buddhism originates and the principles that Buddhism expounds.

Buddhism, mindfulness, and meditation practices are often conflated with solemnity, with pretentiousness about being “deep.” Meditation instructors may exhibit a lack of enthusiasm or *joie de vivre* while leading practices. For example, recordings of guided meditations on apps and YouTube are often spoken in hushed, monotone voices. But Buddhism and mindfulness are inherently infused with joy. *Mudita* is a Sanskrit and Pali word used in Buddhism to describe sympathetic joy, joy in our connected interbeing and in one another's thriving. This is the type of joy that far surpasses fleeting pleasure, and it can only be experienced as we develop insight and engage justly with everyone and everything around us.

We often think about justice as something to be sought externally and, of course, we know that we must take action in the world to ensure justice. To support that effort, I invite you to *play* with ways of being just toward *yourself*. From there, you can learn to extend that play to engage justly with family, friends, frenemies, colleagues, and nature itself. I use the word *play* intentionally because another goal of this book is to highlight and help you access the playful aspects of meditation in the context

of enacting justice. I invite you to experience the freedom that comes with tearing off the restrictive garments of privilege and internalized oppression. I invite you to allow your heart and soul to be regularly cleared of oppressing thoughts and experiences and thereby feel more liberated in the world.

An essential part of this process is welcoming our hearts, our emotionality and feelings. There is a concise African American expression that describes being “in your feelings.” Usually this refers to when the emotions we are having are so strong, it is like *we are in them*, rather than the feelings being *in us*. We all know what that’s like. When you feel something so intensely, it’s like being in a soup bowl of chunky, slimy rage or sorrow where you cannot get out. Often acts of injustice make us feel sunk in despair or rage or shame—sunk in our feelings!

This is where meditative practices help us, especially if we can engage them with playful curiosity. Cultivating a *playful* inner observer, we can learn to watch our own mind and heart and be delighted with the ways they move from one thought and feeling to another. As the poet Kahlil Gibran writes,

And could you keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of
your life your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy;

And you would accept the seasons of your heart, even as you
have always accepted the seasons that pass over your fields.

And you would watch with serenity through the winters of
your grief.⁴

We can surface an intention to regularly manifest delight with ourselves. We can manifest intentional levity to levitate us *out* of suffocating emotions and toward insightful being and acting. However, we must notice and feel our feelings first, applying our practice to the exploration of the feelings rather than trying to use the meditative practice to ignore feelings or escape. We can cultivate a playful observer mind to poke fun at (and poke holes *in*) the grip that painful thoughts and feelings have on us so that we can wriggle ourselves free.

Practices and Exercises

The combination of Buddhist wisdom and cultural wisdom in *Joyfully Just* is intentional. It is important that we do justice to ourselves by honoring the wisdom traditions of our various lineages. This is a good thing to do even if we also practice Buddhism. The rich universality of Buddhist teachings only finds its truest expression when Buddhists of every ethnic, cultural, and spiritual background are able to express their Buddha nature, their enlightenment, in ways that are informed by their cultural traditions and lineages. As Indigenous Buddhists, Jewish Buddhists, African Buddhists, and other Dharma practitioners emerge and embody Buddhahood in their own unique way, we see the true power and relevance of the Dharma, which itself affirms the diversity of its own expression. Daisaku Ikeda references a writing of Nichiren Daishonin, a thirteenth-century Japanese priest and the founder of Nichiren Buddhism:

Buddhism expounds the principle of cherry, plum, peach, and damson, each having their own unique characteristics, and the related principle of “illuminating and manifesting one’s true nature.”

Cherry blossoms are cherry blossoms, and peach blossoms are peach blossoms. A cherry blossom can never become a peach blossom. Nor is there any need for it to try to do so. It would be perfectly miserable if it did. Similarly, you are none other than yourself. You can never be someone else, however much you might wish it. What matters is that you become the kind of person who can cherish, praise, and feel content with your own precious, irreplaceable life.⁵

This guidance from Ikeda encourages each of us to let the unique expression of Buddhahood that only we can manifest with our singular intersections of experience contribute to the endlessly diverse personifications of enlightened living. As such, we become gorgeous and singular flowers in an ever-expanding landscape of human flourishing.

Black wisdom traditions include practices that bring forth insight and joy. You may have heard the expression “Black joy” and wondered,

What is that, exactly? Black joy is self-transcendence. Black joy is a type of pleasure activism. It is embodied resistance to the life of unremitting sorrow assigned to Black people by racism. It is the insistence on and expression of internal freedom despite external restrictions. Black joy is resilient creativity that creatively grows more resilience. We can all learn and benefit from Black joy. In fact, through Black language and dialect, Black music, Black art, Black literature, Black protest, and countless other aspects of Black life, we already learn and benefit from Black people's leadership and labors for justice and joy.

To support you in reclaiming your authentic joy, I will share examples from my own experience and my work with students and clients as an educator and mental health therapist. There will be short reflective summaries and practices that invite you to explore how your efforts to experience justice in your interior life and interpersonal relationships can bring forth joy.

We'll do exercises that help you develop insight from your reflections and connect the examples given to your own experience. Meditative practice prompts will include movement practices to embody justice and joy viscerally, as well as writing practices, affirmations, and meditations where you are encouraged to play with art. You will also find nature-engaging practices to move you toward a just relationship with the natural world.

As you read this book and try the practices, I invite you to give yourself the gift of an inspiring setting whenever possible. Give your joy journey some support by putting on some music and reading with soothing surroundings and scents to accompany you. However, you can also use this book in difficult times and spaces. If you have to be at the hospital for yourself or you're waiting for a loved one to get medical treatment, if you are sitting in a waiting room at the DMV, or you're on hold forever with the IRS, this book can also help you drop into joy in those moments, too—so keep it handy!

As we let the joy of insight settle within us, we can arouse more joy through engaging with suffering and using our minds and bodies to heal it. What we can experience through an intentionally joyful approach

toward justice is not the glib relative happiness that escapist activities might bring. Rather, it is the deeper joy that evolves from having the spiritual rigor to turn toward inhumanity with courageous, undefeatable curiosity—like the curiosity we had when we were children. *Joyfully Just* guides you in turning toward injustice with courageous compassion and the commitment to know, to see it all, so that we can recognize the aspects of our own delusion and defilement that are reflected in the historical and present world. Great joy comes from knowing that we are bigger than we thought; that we have the capacity to face all the world's pain, take it seriously, *and* laugh at our foibles, learning from them as we try again and again to be just toward ourselves and create justice around us.

Your Joyfully Just Squad

As you read this book and engage in the practices, you will be building a deeper relationship with your greater self. If possible, I also encourage you to invite one or two people to read this book with you and to do the practices together. Community is one of our biggest resources! Reading and practicing with an accountability partner, team, or squad can be a wonderful source of support and connection. Even if you don't read the whole book with anyone else, share the joy you experience from any of the ideas or exercises, because when we share joy, it multiplies infinitely.

Creating Your Joybox and Joy Journal

As you engage with these exercises and encounter ideas throughout the book, you will develop strategies and resources to inspire your journey to joyful and just ways of living. These inspirations, ideas, and insights will fill your Joybox—your ever-growing *Joyfully Just* toolbox. It's important to have a way to collect these strategies and refer to them in the future, so I recommend dedicating a journal or notebook to record your responses to the exercises. Or you can dictate your thoughts into a voice-recorder app and create an audio journal. Whatever form it takes, allow your journal to be a place to chronicle and reference your expanding, joyous

inner capacities. You can call it your Joy Journal! I will invite you to note things in your Joy Journal and add things to your Joybox throughout the book. Get ready! Your first invitation to use your Joy Journal is just a few pages away.

Oppression and Joy: Developing Your Own Emergent Strategies

All suffering, including the suffering of oppression, has a relationship to joy. *Joyfully Just* is about using contemplative practice to turn every situation into an opportunity to enact justice and thereby experience joy. If you resonate with the concept of emergent strategy as described by activist and writer adrienne maree brown, you may find the joyfully just practices described in this book to be emergent strategies.

All joyfully just action is an emergent strategy because it is a positive response to what is arising in a given moment.

brown describes emergent strategy as responding to and generating change with compassionate intentions based on the interdependence of all things. She talks about learning how to be “fractal,” meaning making small changes that have the ripple effect of wider impact. What it means to become joyfully just is to make small changes by being more just toward ourselves and one another out of our heightened awareness of our connection to all life. brown also talks about emergent strategy as nonlinear and iterative, which means we have to go back sometimes and do the practice we did before, again—and again—to reassert justice.⁶ We need this reiteration in our habits of self-development as much as we do in our sociopolitical and environmental movements for justice. Cultivating resilience—and what is described in *Joyfully Just* as “discomfort resilience”—is also an emergent strategy that turns every difficulty into a source of

possibility for generating more positive responses to injustice and the challenges of living.

All joyfully just action is an emergent strategy because it is a positive response to what is arising in a given moment. This is why contemplative practice is important, because it allows us to be present in the moment and from that heightened awareness, assess what is emerging for us as the appropriate, most just strategy.

One of my favorite Buddhist writings is entitled “The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra.” In it, Nichiren Daishonin states, “Spur yourself to muster the power of faith. Regard your survival as wondrous. Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before any other.”⁷ The faith he is referring to is faith in the limitless power of our own enlightened life force. The strategy of the Lotus Sutra Nichiren refers to is the practice of chanting the mantra *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* as a means to cultivate enlightened wisdom and the courage to act on that enlightened wisdom. Employing the strategy of the Lotus Sutra is a Buddhist principle of emergent strategy. It is an enlightened strategy, a joyfully just strategy, a present-moment strategy. It is a re-emergent strategy based on the re-evaluation that we experience through contemplative practice.

How do you create a cache of emergent strategies to help you respond positively to ever-changing challenges and opportunities? This book will offer you practical steps to doing so. As you practice various types of meditation throughout the book, I encourage you to release emotions rather than repressing them or trying to bypass them. As you practice with me throughout this book, building your own Joybox full of your songs, affirmations, and embodied practices that help you transcend the matrices of oppression that have ensnared you, you will also reflect on your personal stories. A crucial role that story creation can play is to create new narratives: reflections that align with and move you toward the values you want to live by so that you are not stuck in your old, unexamined stories. For example, you may have a particular memory or experience that is defining for you. If you play the recording of that memory, that story, in a way that triggers only shame and inertia, you might lose the opportunity to grow from that experience. However, it’s

possible to experience power and joy from that story if you tell it from the standpoint of compassion and resilience.

I will guide you through exploring what books, art, physical activities, and other things bring *you* back to joy and toward a sense of interior and exterior justice. No cookie-cutter approach could work for everyone. So, in addition to offering examples of what inspires me, I offer guidelines to help you embed your own good practices into your life. In becoming joyfully just, we welcome grief. I show you how to use your sad songs and other grief-releasing practices to weep your way through injustice to the joy of honoring all that has been lost and all that remains.

Songs, Songs, Songs!

One of the ways that we can see the global influence of Black wisdom is in the transmutation of suffering into music. Many genres of Black music express a present-moment state of awareness and experience while simultaneously aiming the heart, mind, body, and soul toward an intention. Black music practices from throughout the African Diaspora—including drumming and vocalizing as well as formal genres founded by Black Americans such as Blues, Jazz, R & B, Hip-Hop, and Gospel music—are so universally embraced because they are transmissions from the souls of Black people that illuminate universal truths and experiences. Drawing from these embodied wisdom traditions and recognizing Black artists as spiritual teachers who model creative resilience, I invite you to develop the score to your happy place, filled with your fight songs, your grief-releasing tear-jerker songs, your love songs, and your joy songs! This soundtrack will help you build your own safety net to catch yourself when you feel the weight of injustice pulling you down. Music is a reminder that joy is with us always, in every moment and in every experience. These songs and playlists will be part of your Joybox. It is important to create collections of encouragement because when we are feeling down, we won't necessarily remember the things that encourage us, so compiling them and having them on hand helps. This is why you want to have a dedicated Joy Journal to track your insights as we sail along.

Introducing . . . Me! My Own Joyfully Just Journey

Let me tell you a bit about who I am. My favorite moniker is Lailah Majied's daughter. When I walk through Buddhist centers in New Jersey, the local elders rarely remember my name and always say, "Oh, you're Lailah's daughter, right?" I love that! I am also the granddaughter of Catherine and James Haynes who migrated from Savannah, Georgia, to New York City with my Grandaunt Essie Haynes in the 1940s as part of the great migration of Black people seeking more liberated living. My family's love of learning and art inspired me at an early age to enjoy brilliant artists and teachers who would become my lifelong familiars. These eternal mentors and guides include Louis Armstrong, James Baldwin, Stevie Wonder, Lou Rawls, Kahlil Gibran, Wayne Shorter, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Herbie Hancock, Alice Walker, Daisaku Ikeda, Octavia Butler, Maya Angelou, bell hooks, Billie Holiday, and many others. To bolster and deepen wisdom and joy in our lives, my mother introduced us to Islam first and then to Buddhism. I have been practicing in the Mahayana Nichiren Buddhism tradition with the Soka Gakkai International for over four decades.

I was drawn to Buddhism because it illuminates the inherent connection between enlightenment, justice, and joy. My Buddhist practice launched my curiosity about the causes of unhappiness, particularly the unhappiness created by social oppression. This led me to pursue a master's degree and then a PhD in clinical social work. As a practicing clinical social work therapist and consultant for over twenty years, I have had the opportunity to support individuals, families, organizations, and communities in using Buddhist and other meditative practices in healing from racism, sexism, homophobia, and other types of oppression as we reclaim joy.

Drawing from over forty years of contemplative practice and social justice activism, I love engaging people in experiencing wonder, humor, and insight as we release oppressive patterns and deepen relationships with one another and with the natural world.

Now I invite you to introduce yourself to yourself in your Joy Journal. When we describe ourselves, it is an opportunity to see who we are and who we want to be—that's why it feels so awkward sometimes!

This book offers many of my personal insights into how contemplative practices can aid us in joyfully just living. It is my great plan that this book helps you cultivate meditative practices to enhance joy and justice in your life. May *Joyfully Just* guide you toward freedom from the limitations imposed by oppression and privilege, and also toward the wonder-filled world of compassionate, inclusive thinking and acting.

In Joy!