

# Zen, Contemplative Practice, and the Emergence of Black Queer Joy

Steven Thurston Oliver

Salem State University

*This narrative essay offers an exploration of the ways in which contemplative practice can be part of a strategy for nurturing health, well-being, meaning and joy in our everyday lives as Black contemplatives. Drawing on my experience as a Black queer scholar and college professor, attention is given to the notion of contemplative practice as a way of cultivating our internal emotional, intellectual and spiritual resources from which those of us who teach must draw upon to make our disciplines come alive for ourselves and the students we work with.*

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When we are deluded, there is a world to escape.

When we are aware, there is nothing to escape.

– Bodhidharma

In writing this essay, I want to offer a few aspects of my life journey and the movement towards a focus on contemplative practice and the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education. To center my energies here in my early fifties, what some have described as “the afternoon of life” (Jung, 2014, p. 72), is in many ways an effort to bring together all of my experiences and apply them in a way that will have meaning and value for others. As a Black queer man I want to experience Black queer joy. Finding joy in who I am and in whatever my experience is in this moment. I endeavor to be free so that others can be free. I suspect that all of us who are Black and understand ourselves to be contemplatives are in one way or another attempting to do similar things. To heal so that others can heal. To be liberated to fullness of life so that others can experience liberation. Not just surviving, but being present and fully alive while we are still here.

### **Contemplative Practice and the Necessity of Time**

Contemplative practice allows us to be with things as they are, without a constant wish for things to be otherwise. We are able to settle into the present moment with deep appreciation for all that we are, and all that we have, here and now. As a Black queer man who is a scholar and college professor, I have been drawn to contemplative practice as a way of cultivating and investigating my internal motivations, deepest thoughts, truest wishes, actual beliefs and stances on a range of issues. I am able to sit with all the complexity of life steeped in a sense of gratitude and curiosity. This intentional internal investigation is essential for those of us who teach, to make our disciplines come alive for ourselves, and the students we work with. Contemplative pedagogy is anchored by and flows out of contemplative practice in a reciprocal process whereby one informs and feeds the other. There are no shortcuts if we hope to embody qualities of centeredness, groundedness, and calmness that others can feel when they are in our presence. These qualities cannot be manufactured and it takes time and commitment to nurture and cultivate. We cannot “fake the funk” as they say, nor should we want to.

### **Black Queer Joy and the Sweetness of Life**

Reflecting on my own experience, an essential and inescapable aspect of “dealing with things as they are,” has been fully embracing the intersectionality of my identities. I am a Black man and I am gay, queer, same-gender-loving, and two-spirit. I offer this terminology understanding that all the language we have is imperfect and insufficient to fully express all that we are. Initially, Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality was focused on the cumulative and compounding impacts of holding multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Over the years the concept of intersectionality has been used (to the consternation of many) to describe the colliding of many varied identities within an individual body, whether those identities are marginalized or not. Both qualities, my Blackness and my queerness are marginalized identities that inform how I view the world, yet having survived for over five decades in a society that is as racist as it is homophobic, I’ve come to regard them as a form of giftedness among all the various forms of giftedness that exist. In

my work with BIPOC college students I will often ask them to reflect on what they love about being a person of color. Yes, there are challenges, but there is also beauty and more joy than our hearts contain if only we are able to see it. I define Black queer joy as the ability to experience and savor the sweetness of life, embracing the fullness of my identities while facing and dealing with the aspects that are challenging with my eyes wide open. Black queer joy informs how I show up in the world and what I potentially make possible for others by being authentically who I am in all places and at all times. Black queer joy is a lived reality that I have cultivated and deepened through contemplative practice and it has been a long journey towards self-love and acceptance. Whatever identities you may hold, contemplative practice can be part of a strategy for cultivating health, well-being, meaning and joy in our everyday lives as Black contemplatives. Contemplative practice has been a catalyst of my own journey of becoming, as a Black queer man who is also an educator, a husband, a recovering diabetic, Zen practitioner, and human being living in community with other human beings.

### **Zen Practice and Being with Things as They Are**

My primary practice is sitting meditation (Zazen) rooted in the Soto Zen tradition. As part of that tradition I have a teacher whom I meet with regularly and I am part of a sangha in the Greater Boston region. I find the act of simply being with oneself and meeting whatever arises to be an experience as profound as it can be challenging at times. If you sit quietly with yourself focused on your breath and observing your own thoughts you may find that everything shows up, i.e., love, fear, anger, lust, regret, and memories joyous and painful. In my experience a profound benefit has been coming to the realization that I am not my thoughts or even my emotions. These are arisings that come and go, and there is something solid, steady, and eternal that undergirds all of it. In Zazen I come to understand the nature of reality and the habits of my own mind. There is a deepening of awareness that brings a richness to life even in the midst of challenging circumstances and we are able to “just sit” in the middle of the whole catastrophe. I am able to be with whatever arises and see something interesting in it that connects me to

experiences of other living beings. It allows me somehow to connect with and tap into my own experience of joy that comes with knowing that I am exactly where I am supposed to be, doing exactly the thing I am supposed to be doing. For me, it is this feeling of wholeness, congruence, and authenticity that is the essence and possibility of Black queer joy.

### **Christianity and Islam: Seeking Meaning and Running from the Truth**

I've come to this place after a lifetime of many twists and turns trying on different ideologies and faith traditions to find something that worked for me and that I could be a part of. I've come to the conclusion that I am simply wired this way to be in search of deeper meaning and an attempt to make sense of what it means to be alive. Despite having grown up in the mainline denominational context of the Episcopal church, as a teenager I gravitated towards evangelical Christianity and became a member of the Brooklyn Tabernacle. Brooklyn Tabernacle was and still is a charismatic Christian church that in some ways was a forerunner to the mega churches that have sprung up around the country. It was Christianity set to music that sounded like top 40 radio hits anchoring worship and praise experiences that were fueled as much by emotionalism as they were by the holy spirit. Interestingly, it was in this dynamic environment that my reality as a queer and same-gender-loving person came sharply into focus. Church as it turned out was one of the rare places I found where men were allowed to be vulnerable and affectionate with each other. During Tuesday night prayer meetings, the pastor would often say, "Brothers with brothers and sisters with sisters, everyone, find someone to pray with." Those prayers could go on for what seemed like hours. On one occasion my friend Omar came to pray with me and he hugged me with such tenderness and affection that my heart melted leaving no question of how I was wired in terms of orientation and longing for intimacy. To know someone and to be known by them.

Still for many years I resisted this reality. The leadership of the Brooklyn Tabernacle, like many Christian pastors, regularly quoted Leviticus 18:22 and Romans 1:26-27 as evidence that being gay was an

abomination to God and not compatible with a Christian identity. Along with the doctrine of the church that clearly stated that homosexuality was a sin that must be overcome through prayer and fasting, this was the mid-eighties and there was also the terrifying reality of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that was ravaging the LGBTQ communities just as I was coming of age. The church was a place of safety and a place of great harm in the ways I was forced to negate and resist core elements of my psyche, emotional disposition, and creativity that were innately connected to and informed by my queerness. While I loved the people, the music, and the affirming socio-cultural context, I left the church knowing that I could never fit all aspects of myself into what I experienced as a very limiting and constricting container. I didn't want to leave and I simply could not stay. If only I had known then that Black queer joy was possible, I would have avoided years of pain. This experience informs my efforts to support BIPOC college students by making sure that student affairs professionals are aware of the ways in which the church plays a vital role in the lives of many BIPOC students as their primary frame of reference, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing meaning and purpose to their lives (Berger, 1973; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Lee, 2002; Means, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

My process of coming out was not linear, but rather it contained repeated episodes of coming out of the closet only to retreat seeking shelter in closets often of my own making. I would have periods of embracing my sexuality followed by periods of trying to find ways to make that reality other than what it was. In one such period I was drawn to the study of Islam. In Islam I found a religion that had foundations similar to that of Christianity but without any of the cultural baggage I had amassed from my years in the church. I appreciated that embedded in Islam there was a love and appreciation of scholarship and an encouragement to develop the intellect. My attraction to being Muslim was rooted, in part, in my attempt to make myself not gay through another mechanism. Rather than relying on the laying on of hands to rid myself of the "demons of homosexuality" that I experienced in the church, the directive was to simply study the Quran and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet). This was brilliant. I could study away my gayness by "replacing

falsehood with truth” as I’d heard so many scholars say. The notion being that once you encounter the truth you will no longer want to engage with that which is haram (forbidden). One teacher told me that with regard to resisting my queerness I simply had to “throw the bull by its horns” and not allow it to overrun my heart and mind. What is amazing to consider in hindsight, is that I have never encountered more queer people than I did in the church or in the mosque where sadly many are attempting the same kind of self-imposed conversion and mutilation. There was a violence to this constant pulling layers of myself apart and not allowing those layers to be in conversation with each other. The result was a kind of imbalance that caused me to show up in the world as fractured, inauthentic, and fearful of facing the truth in ways that negatively impacted all of my relationships and every area of my life.

### **Diabetic Fire and Reconciliation of a Black Queer Identity**

What ultimately broke this cycle for me was landing in the hospital for a week with blood sugar levels so high that there is no reason I should still be alive. Fear had caused me to avoid regular physicals and while I knew I wasn’t feeling well, I attributed my lack of energy to entering middle age and the need to lose weight. I had learned how to compensate for my lack of energy and during this time my general stubborn stoicism allowed me to plod forward and fulfill a dream of obtaining a doctorate in education. Here I was, highly educated and seemingly successful, and life slammed me down so hard, forcing me to reconcile and integrate all the disparate aspects of myself. I fought so hard and so long that even as I felt myself slipping into what turned out to be a diabetic coma, I still resisted and attempted to fight off all the medical staff who were trying to save me. The lasting benefit of that traumatic experience was that it forced me to face, and be with, the reality of my humanness which included the fact of being gay, and furthermore, that as a human being I am in need of community. I need touch and connection with other human beings. There would be no escaping, nor should there be a reason to escape the fact that for me the need for intimacy would be most fully realized by being in a relationship with another man. Now some 10 years later, I have a husband, a home and life that I love, and it is surreal to realize that I almost didn’t allow myself to have any of it.

My parents did a wonderful job of instilling in me and my older brothers a strong identity connected to our Blackness. We were raised to love our skin, our hair, our features and my father in particular was relentless in making sure we were aware of all the great things that Black people have accomplished in the world. For me, there was always a sense of wanting to find beauty in what was given to me. I can appreciate the beauty of people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and never have the notion that they are somehow better or more beautiful than me and the people I come from. Blackness is a way of seeing, knowing, and being in the world. I now understand that Queerness is also a way of seeing, knowing, and being in the world and living at the intersection of Blackness and Queerness brings more insights still that should be expressed and celebrated.

### **Zen and Showing Up for Myself and Others**

With Zen practice, I found a way of being that did not require this kind of fracturing that I had experienced previously. I could bring all of myself and the full range of my experiences and use it all as a point of inquiry. In some strange way all the things that had ever happened to me, good, bad, and ugly, became something to be with, to work with, to learn from, and offer to others so that they could learn from it, too. The regular practice of meditation has resulted in clarity and inner strength that ensures that while there are challenging things happening in the society, particularly around issues of systemic racism, I can see it clearly for what it is and not be buffeted about by it. This gathering of myself unto myself has resulted in a congruence that has allowed me to be a better friend, husband, brother, and teacher with the ability to hold space with and for students.

I offer up these stories hoping that they might be useful to others who may be struggling to find and experience joy unique and specific to all the identities they hold and all they have experienced in life. I shed light on my journey and the particular things that have been meaningful to me being fully aware that there are many ways and practices that people engage in to accomplish similar things in their lives. I also want to be clear that while I ultimately moved away from the church and Islam, I did

find beauty in those spaces and those experiences are still part of me. I know of many amazing people in both faith traditions who are endeavoring to make them more welcoming and inclusive of LGBTQ people and I have witnessed with great interest an evolution that continues to take place. There are so many ways to be and paths that are available to explore that I often wish that there was more time to engage with it all. One does not need to be Black and queer to experience joy. One does not need to practice Zen to have clarity and wholeness. However, I would argue that joy, clarity, and wholeness are necessary for our experience of being human and I am interested in leaning into and learning more about the ways human beings have realized this over thousands of years of existence.

### **Commonalities of Contemplative Practices from Varied Traditions**

Contemplative practices can come from many different cultural traditions. We find that almost every culture has some form or ritual that can be described as contemplative in nature. I confess that since the form of contemplative practice I engage with most regularly is rooted in Zen Buddhism, I have at times struggled to understand all the through lines that hold all the variations of practice together as an essential notion that can be considered and talked about in concrete ways. Through reading and having conversations with other practitioners it seems that what all forms of contemplative practice have in common is a quality that stills the mind and cultivates a greater awareness of the way things are and the interconnectedness of all things. Whether that happens through meditation, centering prayer, a walk in the woods, yoga or contemplative writing, in many ways what we are attempting is the same.

While contemplative practice can take many forms, I would argue that it must be taken up with seriousness, intentionality, regularity, and a time commitment that allows one to discern the benefits derived from the practice. If your contemplative practice is yoga, then allow yourself the opportunity through regular and consistent practice to uncover the ways in which yoga can enrich your experience. In my experience, contemplative practice hasn't been something I can pick up for 10 minutes



here and there or whenever the mood strikes. It has been something I return to again and again. My encouragement to others is to commit to a form of contemplative practice and see all that you can see knowing that your needs may shift over time. Different periods of your life may lead you to different practices yet they will all require depth, consistency, and time.

### **Finding Balance and Committing to Practice**

Twenty years ago I attended a talk by Imam Zaid Shakir at Zaytuna Institute (now Zaytuna College) in Hayward California. Sitting on the floor in a tightly packed room, Imam Zaid laid out a framework calling for focus, depth, and sustained concentration that has stayed with me although any notion of being Muslim did not. He simply said that if one wishes to be a scholar, it will undoubtedly mean that there will be times when you can't also be the life of the party. The effort, time and commitment required to learn something deeply such that one can write and think about it, and impart knowledge to others, will require at times a kind of retreat. A pulling away from the crowd and salacious intrigue. One who desires to be a scholar must cultivate the ability to be quiet. To be still. To be alone with one's thoughts. To pose questions internally, explore possibilities, and to hear the answers reverberating through one's consciousness and ways of knowing. I have always known this to be true and understood that this was how I needed to engage with life, and I have been attempting to live this way, albeit imperfectly, in the more than twenty years that have passed since I sat with Imam Zaid. I would be remiss if I did not balance the advice of Imam Zaid with an anecdote I've always loved about James Baldwin, who would often retreat, needing space and time alone to write, only after he had experienced a full evening of drinking and partying with friends. When asked why he stayed up so late partying when he knew he was up against deadlines, he would often say that if he didn't party he wouldn't be able to write the book. Writing for Baldwin was a form of contemplative practice to which he was committed, fiercely protecting the time and space needed to derive the benefit for himself and others. Whatever practices we engage with as Black contemplatives, we need to approach them in similar ways.

### **Lessons of COVID-19 and Contemplative Pedagogy via Zoom**

The quest toward authenticity and living a life of meaning has meant finding ways to bring the full range of my experience to bear in the work I do as a college professor. As I mentioned earlier, contemplative pedagogy flows out of contemplative practice and we are living at a moment when higher education is undergoing a seismic transformation. The pandemic and the pivot to virtual learning has brought about rapid changes that it was previously thought would take 10 – 15 years to come into fruition. Sadly, many in positions of authority are imagining a future with what seems to me to be a diminished role for faculty. In the coming years, many institutions will have fewer faculty and the ones that remain will have a different function, more as mentors and encouragers of students rather than deliverers of content knowledge. This change is rooted in the belief that there are many ways for content to be delivered, either with adjuncts or virtually, making the notion of tenure track faculty redundant and unnecessarily costly. What many in higher education are missing is the value of human engagement in teaching and learning, whether that be in person or on Zoom.

My pedagogy is heavily informed by Paulo Freire who argued against the notion that students are empty vessels or blank slates waiting to be filled by knowledge offered up by the professor. Rather, knowledge is co-constructed in a dialogue between teacher and students (Freire, 1970). It is the mingling and clashes of ideas that are often the catalyst for growth and transformation. Contemplative practice allows me to come to my role of professor with the strategies and insights necessary to facilitate dynamic learning spaces for students. Similarly, assignments are designed in a way that invites students to be contemplative and introspective, exploring and expressing what they discover without fear of being penalized. By the time I encounter students in the midst of their college careers they have become masters at telling professors what they think we want to hear. The invitation for them to be in touch with their own thoughts, experiences, and beliefs is startling to many and a welcomed change from what they've grown accustomed to.

While being on Zoom is not the same as being in person, there is still a human interaction that is occurring. Over the past year of teaching

totally online I have reminded students that we impact each other by how we show up in the virtual space. Our participation and our countenance matters and although we are not physically together, we can still see each other and feel each other's presence. Rather than bemoan all the things that virtual learning is not, I have been inclined to lean into it with curiosity wanting to understand all that it makes possible for students and expanding access to educational opportunities.

### **Sustaining Ourselves as Black Contemplatives**

I have a friend who is a mentor and professional coach. Lloyd is a Black same-gender-loving man in his seventies who has held many faculty and administrative positions in higher education over the years. I value our connection and I have found that having a community of like-minded people is critically important to sustaining ourselves as Black contemplatives. Lloyd and I can engage deeply and regularly about what it means to be Black and gay in this moment in time. Not only what is challenging about our shared realities, but more importantly, what is beautiful about it. *What does it allow us to see, to experience, and to know? What is this Black Queer Joy and how do we sustain it? How do we live it such that others can witness our lives and endeavor to have their own joy called by another name yet equally and powerfully as sweet?* Lloyd recently said to me that for too long Black people in this country haven't been taught how to live, we have only been taught how to survive. I was struck by the truth of this statement and forced to consider all the ways this has manifested in my own life. *What would it mean for me to truly live rather than just survive? What do I want out of whatever time I have remaining to live? How can I ensure that I am internally motivated rather than externally motivated, influenced and jealous of the paths others take and how other lives have unfolded? How do I feast on my own life and the richness of my experiences, once again finding beauty in what was given to me? That this, just this, is more than enough?* Contemplative practice cultivates within me the capacity to engage deeply with questions which I will continue to explore for a lifetime. I am thankful to have found a community of people grappling in their own ways, with

their own questions, and with their own forms of contemplative practice. May we all find peace, may we all find true meaning, and may we all experience each other's joy.

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