

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health Podcast

MICHELLE CASSANDRA JOHNSON

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality & Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami, and this is *Essential Conversations*. Our guest today, Michelle Cassandra Johnson, is a licensed clinical social worker, who describes herself as a social justice warrior, author, dismantling racism trainer, empath, yoga teacher and practitioner, and an intuitive healer. She's the author of *Radicalizing Your Yoga Practice to Create a Just World*. Her newest book *Finding Refuge: Heart Work for Healing Collective Grief* is reviewed in the July-August issue of *Spirituality & Health Magazine*. Michelle Johnson, welcome to *Essential Conversations*.

Michelle Cassandra Johnson: Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

Rabbi Rami: I'm very happy to talk to you. You raise issues about which I know close to nothing. I learned a lot from the book and I'm hoping to get some more clarification from you. One of the things I loved about the way you structured the book is that you defined your terms right upfront. So many times you pick up a book, the author is using all these terms, and you're left guessing. Do they mean what I'm thinking? Do they mean something else? What are they talking about? You don't do that, and I really appreciate that. That said, I want to go a little bit deeper into what you mean. Let me give you an example and then an actual question.

You talk about the term white supremacy. If I got it down right, this is how you define it as a quote, "The (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to people of colors, and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions." Now we're clear what white supremacy is.

Then in the next section you define the term racism and you make four points, which I really found helpful. Racism is racial prejudice, plus social and institutional power. Two, racism is advantage based on race. Three, racism is oppression based on race. Four, racism is a white supremacy system.

Now, it's the last one. After you define white supremacy is, the idea that white people and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions are superior to everybody else's, that's how you understand white supremacy. Then you say racism is a white supremacy system. I'm wondering if only white people can be racist?

Michelle: This is a really good place to start. The definition that you shared is a definition I learned from trainers over 20 years ago, dismantling racism trainers, and they became trainers I ended up working with for over two decades. The definition is from critical race theory. It is definitely a definition that I believe and work with.

Critical race theory is all in the news right now and has been a body of work that's been around for quite a long time. The definition definitely implicates white-bodied

folks. Sometimes what people get caught up in is the reverse racism, or what is it when Black, Indigenous, and people of color are doing things to other Black, Indigenous, and people of color that seem like racism?

Because of how white supremacy created racism and designed a racial hierarchy, the definition does mean that BIPOC folks, Black, Indigenous, people of color cannot be racist, and it does implicate all white-bodied folks in this white supremacy system. That said, BIPOC folks are implicated in this system too because we can collude with it and we can go along to get along, but more of what people witnessed when there's interracial fighting or things that look like racism, that's internalized racial oppression, which is different than racism.

Rabbi Rami: That makes sense. What do you call it when-- I mean, before there were white people? When there's-- I don't know. I want to use the word racism, but based on this, I can't. Going back, way back in human history before there were Europeans, before there was white supremacy of any kind because there were no white people. When everybody was basically in the Middle East, I'm thinking, in particular, brown or Black in Africa, what do you call the oppression that they imposed upon one another? They enslaved each other. They had more sub-genocide against one another. What do you call that?

Michelle: I think tribalism is the closest thing, although I'm not sure that's the appropriate word. We were all in different tribes, so it's the word that's coming to mind based on what you described about the behavior, and then white was created, to your point, which you named.

Rabbi Rami: I appreciate that because my next book is called *Judaism Without Tribalism*. [laughs] I use tribalism as opposed to tribe. I look at them as different, but I use tribalism as the big enemy in that book. If that's true, and I'm just thinking off the top of my head here, is that built into the human DNA? Actually, let me back up one second, is that built into the male human DNA? This kind of tribalism, ethnocentrism, ultimately racism, do you think it's just part of our makeup as a species?

Michelle: This is a good question too. I think the trauma connected with what you described when you were asking about what word would be used and I said tribalism, I think that had everything to do with a group being made inferior and had everything to do with limited resources, or the desire to fight over resources. Perhaps, that is in our DNA.

I also think we learn a lot about bias, about ourselves, about what the culture tells us about who we are, and what the culture tells us about others. I think it's based on trauma that we've experienced that's unprocessed, and maybe that's what needs to be processed overtime. Ancestrally to be passed down for us not to pass this on to future generations. It's so old. It's so baked-in, embedded. I struggle with this because I think some of it is learned and some of it is really based on trauma and the embodiment of that, and acting out that trauma on others.

Rabbi Rami: You mentioned critical race theory a moment ago. I know, like you said, it's in the papers all over the place, everyone's ranting and raving about critical race theory, even though most of us haven't got a clue about what that really is. I'm

not even going to put you on the spot to have you define it for us, but I don't have a problem with-- To the extent that I identify as white. I mostly identify as Jewish and Jews aren't white. There are white Jews, but Jews aren't any specific color. We come in all colors.

To the extent that I do, not only identify as white, take advantage of white privilege, all of that, I have no problem with being called a racist in that sense. That somewhere in my upbringing I was trained to utilize whatever white privilege I could get away with to my advantage. Growing up in the place I grew up, I was considered a Jew, and couldn't join the country club because we were Jewish. There was that kind of antisemitism, but I know that that in my family-- My dad didn't know there were Jews of color until I took him to Israel once in the 90s, maybe even in the early 2000s, and he met Jews from Iran. It just blew his mind. He completely identified, not only himself as Jewish and white, but he identified Judaism and Jews with whiteness.

When you are wrestling with people, like in the yoga world, just to take it out of the social justice area, but when you're wrestling with people in the yoga world around the issue of whiteness and white supremacy and racism, does it play out differently in that eastern yoga context than it might in some other?

Michelle: Well, I've only really practiced yoga in the west, and there's a whole conversation we could have about what happened to the practice of yoga when it came to the west and how it came to the west. I think it is a different conversation than perhaps I might have in a space where yoga originated, in India and Africa. I'm sure there would be a different conversation, although there may be similar threads because of the caste system and because of tribalism, and even who could practice yoga.

I think what I find is that people, in particular, white-bodied folks have been conditioned not to see themselves as white and so not to see themselves as part of this larger system, and not to understand how they're benefiting from it even as I think this white supremacy culture is affecting us all and toxic and harming us all. I think that's where I encounter this discomfort or resistance to look at how one is implicated in this system. The reason I invite people to look at it is to figure out what we want to do about it. If we can't look at it and see where we're placed and how culture is positioning us, then it's going to be really difficult to disrupt these systems.

Rabbi Rami: Absolutely. I'm going to shift gears a little bit because a lot of the book has to do with, and your prior book too, radicalizing your yoga practice to create a just world. You deal with yoga and I want to talk to you about Bhagavad Gita in a moment. I know a lot of people of color who are Buddhists often say they feel uncomfortable in the mainstream, overwhelmingly white Americans Sangha, the Buddhist community. What about in yoga? As a person of color, what was your experience in the yoga world?

Michelle: In my yoga training and many of the yoga classes and spaces I've moved through, and I went through training in 2009, people were not talking about social justice in yoga as much as they are now. I think the culture of the industry is shifting in what we're centering because I think we're shifting culturally as well in what we're centering and what we're struggling with and reckoning with.

I didn't feel authored by my teacher trainer or by the people in the cohort and I was very clear that we were talking about a practice that's focused on liberation, and there weren't many people of color in this space or many people who had disabilities or many LGBTQIA+ folks in this space from what I understood about our cohort. That made me curious because I was a dismantling racism trainer.

Once I entered into yoga teacher training, I'd been training in dismantling racism for a decade at that point, or almost a decade. I had this awareness that "Oh, I'm entering into this spiritual practice, and yet the way we're practicing it is exclusive, and so what does this mean?" People weren't overtly being racist very much. Of course there were microaggressions that I experienced in spaces and assumptions made about me because there weren't many Black, Indigenous and people of color teachers in my area, and again, I think that shifted some.

To speak to Ottoman and what you named, there also is this other side of colorblindness and bypassing, spiritual bypassing, where people believe they can transcend the relative truth and live into the absolute truth and we can aspire to the absolute truth, but we have to change the conditions that are in place. If we connect with the relative truth in what is actually playing out and happening, then we have to do something different. There's work that's required for us to get to the absolute truth. That happens in spiritual communities all of the time, in yoga spaces, in saṅghas, and many communities where people want to bypass our humanness, the different ways we are treated based on the identities we embody.

Michelle: That's really well put because I was going to ask you about that, this notion of spiritual bypass where, "Oh, not only do I not see color, I don't see gender. In fact, I don't even see the world of Maya. I don't even see your manifest form. I only see you as Ottoman and Ottoman has no gender, no color."

I'm really stretching my traditions here, but in Christianity, Dietrich Bonhoeffer might've called that some form of cheap grace. It's like, "Oh, this makes it easy. You're really Ottoman and I'm really Ottoman and now we can just sing Kumbaya and not have to deal with anything in," as you put it, "the relative world."

This is a question that was going to come out more as a statement. It seems a lot of people go to mindfulness meditation, in general, different spiritual communities, and yoga for escape. What I mean by escape is what you're talking about when you say spiritual bypass. It's just, "I want to get beyond all this stuff and the way I'm going to get beyond it is to pretend that I can get beyond it and not deal with the relative world."

When you teach, how do you keep people-- I don't know if the word is grounded, but let's just use that and you can correct me. How do you keep them grounded in the relative even as they're opening up to the absolute?

Rabbi Rami: I love this question because you mentioned the Bhagavad Gita, and there is a section in the Gita where Krishna, the guide, is talking to Arjuna, the warrior, whose Dharma is to fight this war and Krishna basically says, "You're in a body and you have a responsibility in this body. You're in this experience and in this realm, and this is what you're meant to do and your spirit as well, and you need to work and devote everything to the larger self and to God in the Gita."

I love it because it's this, "Okay, I'm in a body, but I'm bigger than my body," and I think I teach that all the time because it's like we're in physical bodies and yet we're not our bodies, but we need to recognize what our bodies are doing to other bodies as we remember our divinity. This is how I teach it, that we can hold both of these at the same time and live into what we are most meant to do to respond to the things that are in place that prevents us from actually being one and prevents us from being free. And we need to remember we're spirit because if I think I'm just my body, I'm trapped in a lot of ways, this is my experience of the body. I'm limited and when I remember I'm spirit it's so expansive for me and it gives me some more options and agency, even as I relate to the body and think about how I want to show up.

Michelle: I love the connection between what you're talking about in the Bhagavad Gita because Arjuna says, "I don't want to do this. I don't want to enter into war. These are my cousins. I don't want to kill anybody. I don't want to deal with this. I'm just going to leave it all behind." And Krishna says in a sense that he has to do his dharma, and in Buddhism, dharma means one thing but in the context of the Gita, dharma means duty. He comes from a specific caste, he's warrior-caste. He's got an obligation as a warrior and that means he's got to go to war.

It sounds like the way you're thinking about this is somewhat similar, that there's a dharma attached to my whiteness, attached to my Jewishness, attached to my maleness and these are all constructs that I have to work through. I don't mean work through to get out of them, I mean work with maybe, that this is what I'm presented with. Maybe I can work through them to the absolute and free myself, at least to the extent of knowing they're constructs and not taking them as something more concrete than that.

But Krishna's advice to, not advice really, command to Arjuna is, "Do your dharma." and that allows for what you're saying, that people have got to deal with the Dharma of being whatever they happen to be and yet yoga can take them to something larger. I don't want to say higher, but larger. I want to include and transcend to use Ken Wilber language, to embrace and transcend the relative in the larger reality of the absolute. Are we on the same page with that?

Rabbi Rami: Yes, absolutely.

Michelle: Not too long ago, we did an interview with Tracee Stanley. I don't know if you know her or not, but she's the author-

Rabbi Rami: Yes.

Michelle: You do know? Because you both published with Shambhala, and she's the author of *Radiant Rest*, a really wonderful book on nidra yoga. You mentioned nidra yoga as one of your personal spiritual practices. I was fascinated when she taught it to us or talked about it with us, and I'd love to hear your take on it. Tell us a bit about your personal practice of-- Tell us what nidra yoga is and how you practice and what you gain from working with that specific practice.

Rabbi Rami: Tracee is a good friend of mine and definitely one of my teachers. Yoga nidra is often described as deep breaths and really, I think it's about deep breaths to raise consciousness and to get to the truth of who we are and to

understand some scars, the patterns that we embody, and what we might want to shift and to receive information that is from the liminal space, from the spiritual space, instead of being limited by the body in the way I described.

Often my yoga nidra practice is between 20 and 40 minutes. Sometimes it's guided and eventually, people get to the place where they guide themselves but it may be easier if people starting out to be guided through this first deep relaxation and then rest but not sleep, so we're awake, we're aware. Then to receive whatever information might need to come in, or sometimes I like to talk about remembering.

I talk about this in *Finding Refuge*, remembering to remember. I think that is what yoga nidra feels like for me, this place I can go to remember because the world is so loud and distracting and the relative truth is really loud and being able to find this place and really find the piece of me that feels untouchable in the sense of there's part of me I always say this, that white supremacy doesn't get to take, there's part of me it will not steal.

I think I'd get to that place when I'm moving through yoga nidra more than any other practice. Sometimes meditation I'll get to that and certainly ancestral work I do, but yoga nidra is really the place I can drop into remembering and connecting with this part of me that is not just about the body. This part of me, and maybe it's not your essence but this part of me that is untouchable.

Rabbi Rami: The part that you might call Brahman?

Michelle: Right.

Rabbi Rami: I related to Yoga Nidra. I related to your love of the Bhagavad Gita. Then there's beekeeping.

[laughter]

My wife is into bees and we've tried hives but it just doesn't seem to work out. We get hive collapse happening around here. Tell us about what drew you to beekeeping and how does beekeeping help you find refuge and healing?

Michelle: It's so funny. I was in one of the hives earlier today because yesterday I discovered they were queenless and the hive can only survive for so long without a queen. So I went to get a queen this morning and put it in the hive today and was watching them respond to the queen. What I'll say about beekeeping is that it shows me, and some people say this about bees. I hadn't taken a class. I had sort of thought about bees but not really. I wasn't planning to get into beekeeping and all of a sudden I did and had two hives and now I have three hives here. I've learned so much from the bees and I feel like they definitely came to me, and I wrote about this in *Finding Refuge*, because my mother was sick at the time.

Bee mysticism would say that bees work between realms. They're in the spirit realm and they're here and they also can help people transition. My mother is alive now but she was close to transitioning. She was preparing for that, she was saying it. I really feel like they came into my life at that very stressful transitional time to support my mother and to support me. That's why I think they came in.

I've learned 150 things from the bees so far and there are thousands more things I need to learn from them. I think about bees and community a lot and watching them in the hive and just remember that everything is for the hive and that resonates so deeply because of so much of my work being about the collective, the collective good.

Rabbi Rami: Wow, that's very interesting. You wrote in the book, the hive in a sense has to choose the queen. You introduced the new queen into the hive but they don't just go, "All hail the queen." Right? It takes a couple of days to adjust. When you go into the hive, are you wearing a bee suit? I don't know what you call it.

Michelle: I wear a bee suit. A veil, sometimes is what people call it. I wear a bee suit and I want to get to the point where I don't have to. I'm in a full-body suit because when I first got them I did not know if I was allergic to them. I just didn't know. I've been stung about five times and the reaction has gotten a little more intense so I'm still wearing my suit because I go in by myself most of the time so I want to be okay and not in my yard with a bunch of bee stings because when one stings you, and their alarm pheromone is going on, more can come and sting you. I would like to get to the place where there's not as much distance between myself and the bees because many beekeepers talk about them feeling that distance with the suit. I'd like to have a deep enough relationship with them, a respectful enough relationship where I don't have to be so guarded.

Rabbi Rami: I don't know who I was watching on YouTube but there's somebody, maybe there's a number of people who are beekeepers who don't wear any protective clothing. When I saw it before reading your book, it looked to me like it was a kind of qigong or tai chi, that slow Chinese movement, and the bees were just okay with that. They didn't have fear pheromones coming out. They were fine. I'm wondering if you feel a connection between your yoga practice and being with the bees. Just the way you move with them. There is no bee pose that I know of.

Michelle: No.

Rabbi Rami: Just the way you move and interact with the bees if your yoga helps you with a certain state of body-mind.

Michelle: It does and I really need to deepen that practice more with the bees. Sometimes I move too quickly with them and I can feel it and their vibration will change, the sound will change. Then I'll listen to that and get out of the hive. I try to pay attention to what they're communicating and they communicate all of the time in so many different ways.

I can definitely deepen my practice with them and move slowly. I always say a prayer when I go out. I practice Metta when I go out for them, really, and create that loving relationship. There's certainly more I could do. This is true of many relationships. There's more that I could do to deepen that practice of mindfulness.

Rabbi Rami: I was speaking with someone yesterday. Her name is Dena Merriam. She's the founder of the Global Peace Initiative of Women. We were talking about interfaith work that we both used to do, sometimes together. It was a big part of our earlier careers and she said, "I am so done with interfaith. I'm much more interested

in inter-species communication." I thought, "Oh, that is perfect." There's a book, in fact, I just got another copy of it today, in Judaism called *Perek Shirah* which means Chapter of Song. The idea is that every species has its own mantra. It's usually from the Bible, somewhere they're all chanting psalms. You could look up what the bee's mantra is.

To us, we hear, "Bzz" but to them, they're actually saying some kind of mantra. Then you can work with a cantor who can the musical notation in the Hebrew Bible and you can learn how to chant the bee mantra and then go be among the bees, speaking their language. I don't know how literally I want to take that but I thought it was an interesting idea of doing interspecies-- I don't know if you could do a retreat that way. I have to figure out the details but it sounded like a fascinating thing. What you're talking about is interspecies communication. I have a dog with whom I am very close and we absolutely communicate. We read each other.

Your work with the bees, it seems to me it's part of the same work that you're doing. Even with social justice. There's a fabulous poster I saw. It says, "The world without humans." It shows an Earth that's just flourishing. Then next to it is a panel that says, "The world without bees," and it's just a barren hellscape. Bees are much more important to the planet than people are and we need social justice for the bees as well as other species.

I'm babbling and we are actually over time but you mentioned Metta practice. I'd like to close with that. You do that beautifully at the end of your book. If you can just give us a quick definition of what Metta is and then read the closing paragraph of the book and that's how we will bring this conversation to a close.

Michelle: Sure. Metta is loving-kindness meditation and there are many statements that you can say. There are different realms of Metta. Metta for yourself. Metta for friends, family, beloved. Metta for someone who may be neutral to you and Metta for someone you are perhaps in a conflict with or where there's a challenge in the relationship. Ultimately, Metta for all beings, loving-kindness for all beings. It's a practice I've worked with for quite a long time and it deepens our capacity to be compassionate. I think it reminds us of our interconnectedness as well. I end the epilogue with a prayer that includes some of what you might say in Metta. Often those statements are about freedom, about safety, about happiness, about decreasing suffering. Some of that comes through in this.

"May you be safe happy and free. May all beings everywhere be safe happy and free and may our thoughts words and actions contribute to that safety happiness and freedom for all. May your grief be honored and seen. May our grief be honored and seen. May we expose and regurgitate what needs to be processed now so we do not pass on trauma to future generations. May we move through the loving act of being with our tender hearts and our grief. May we move through the loving act of being in space together witnessing one another in our healing. **[unintelligible 00:29:17]** and so it is."

[music]

Rabbi Rami: Our guest today, Michelle Cassandra Johnson, is the author of *Finding Refuge: Heart Work for Healing Collective Grief*. A review of the book appears in the

July-August issue of *Spirituality & Health Magazine*. You can learn more about Michelle's work at michellejohnson.com. Michelle, thank you so much for talking with us on *Essential Conversations*.

Michelle: Thank you so much for having me. It was great to talk with you.

Rabbi Rami: You've been listening to the *Spirituality & Health* podcast. If you like this episode, please rate and review us in your favorite podcast app. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to share us on social media and tag us @spirithealthmag. You can also follow me on the *Spirituality & Health* website where I write a regular column called *Roadside Musings*. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well. The *Spirituality & Health* podcast is produced by Ezra Baker Trupiano and our executive producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami, thanks for listening.

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