​Evolving Dharma: Meditation, Buddhism, and the Next Generation of Enlightenment

Evolving Dharma is a “next generation” book on meditation, Buddhism, and the path of awakening, published by North Atlantic Books in October, 2013.

The latest book by bestselling author Dr. Jay Michaelson, Evolving Dharma tells the story of how meditation has evolved beyond Buddhism, beyond religion, even beyond spirituality — and how one’s own meditation practice can evolve throughout one’s life. It is, in the words of Deepak Chopra, a “must-read.”

Fearless, unorthodox, and irreverent, Michaelson shows how meditation has moved from ashrams and self-help groups to classrooms, prisons, and corporate boardrooms. He introduces the reader to maverick brainhackers, postmodern Buddhist monks, and cutting-edge neuroscientists while also sharing his own stories of months-long silent retreats, powerful mystical experiences, and many pitfalls along the way.

Evolving Dharma comes at an exciting, even historic, moment in the spiritual life of the West. There are one million new meditators each year in the United States. This is a moment of remarkable opportunity — yet also of a hunger for a more cutting-edge, younger, and plugged-in “dharma book”, which comes from a newer generation and is informed by its values. How is a new generation, post-hippie, postmodern, and possibly even post-Buddhist, reshaping meditation in the West? How is the practice of happiness informed by cognitive neuroscience? How are newer, Occupy- and Web 2.0-influenced participant communities creating new forms of contemplative communities and perhaps avoiding the scandals that plagued the authority- and guru-based ones of a previous generation?

Evolving Dharma answers these questions. Featuring interviews with Richard Davidson, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Lama Surya Das, Stephen Batchelor, and other leading figures, it is the authoritative guide to the mindfulness revolution.

Praise for Evolving Dharma

“Jay Michaelson gets it. His voice is contemporary yet serious,informed yet engaging — and much needed today.” ~ Daniel Goleman, Author of Emotional Intelligence

“I highly recommend this book. Its scholarship on the past is solid, its review of the present is revealing, and its sense of possibility grounded in both kindness and vision.” ~ Daniel Ingram, author of Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha

“Taking the reader from the banks of the Ganges to the offices of Google, Evolving Dharma shows how meditation is transforming our world. A must-read!” ~ Deepak Chopra

“What a fantastic book! Smart, tender, incisive, and visionary. If you only read one dharma book this year, read Evolving Dharma.” ~ Kenneth Folk, teacher, Kenneth Folk Dharma and Buddhist Geeks

“Evolving Dharma tells a story that is changing the world: the mainstreaming of meditation and the democratization of wisdom. This is not only the best book on contemporary mindfulness; it is the first of its kind.” ~ Josh Baran, former Zen monk and author of The Tao of Now

“All of us need to Occupy the Dharma, to take meditation and mindfulness back from the spiritual 1% and enliven our lives. This book demonstrates and instructs us how to do exactly that. “Evolving Dharma” is essential reading if you’re an aspiring brainhacker, a BuJu, a seeker, or anyone who wants to see the light, lighten up and brighten up on the path from head to heart that is the de-lightful journey of awakening.” ~ Lama Surya Das, author of Awakening the Buddha Within

Reviews of Evolving Dharma

Read Publishers Weekly’s rave review of Evolving Dharma.

Read Terry Patten’s account of his conversation with Jay and his views on Evolving Dharma.

Q&A with Jay in Examiner

Jay speaks with Eric Davis about the book on this episode of Expanding Mind, a program of Progressive Radio Network:

About the Author

Dr. Jay Michaelson is a writer and activist who has practiced Theravadan Buddhist meditation for twelve years. He is the author of five books, most recently God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality (Beacon), a 2012 Lambda Literary Award finalist and Amazon.com bestseller, and Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism(Shambhala). His writing appears regularly in the Daily Beast, the Forward, Tricycle, and the Huffington Post.

Unusually for an author of a book on meditation, Jay is not a full-time meditation teacher but rather a longtime leading LGBT political activist. Recently the vice president of the Arcus Foundation, the leading funder of LGBT causes worldwide, Jay’s advocacy work has been featured in the New York Times, NPR and CNN and he has been listed as among the “most inspiring LGBT religious leaders” by the Huffington Post and among “our religious allies” by The Advocate.

Michaelson own contemplative journey includes twelve years in the dharma, including several long-term vipassana retreats in the United States and Nepal, as well as a serious commitment to nondenominational Judaism, including twenty years of studying at teaching Kabbalah. He is affiliated with the Practical Dharma movement and the Contemplative Development Mapping Project, and has participated in the Mind and Life Institute, Wisdom 2.0, Buddhist Geeks, and other emerging dharma communities. Having taught at institutions from Kripalu to Burning Man, and at over two dozen university campuses around the country, Jay brings to his presentation of the dharma a contemporary sensibility, a critical, yet warm, perspective – and hopefully, a sense of humor.

Jay is also an accomplished scholar of religion who holds a PhD in Jewish Thought from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a JD from Yale Law School, an MFA from Sarah Lawrence, and a BA from Columbia. He has held teaching positions at Yale University, City College, Harvard Divinity School, and Boston University Law School, and has been a scholar-in-residence at over 100 institutions around the country. He is presently an advisor to the Varieties of Meditative Experience project at Brown University.

Q&A with Author Jay Michaelson

What inspired you to write Evolving Dharma?

This is really the book I wanted to write right now. I wanted to tell the story of a phenomenon that is rapidly changing the Western world—the mass adoption of meditation—but I also wanted to tell it from a personal point of view, about my own winding road in practice and how it’s impacted my life.

It’s corny but I really do think that contemplative practice may change the world. I don’t know of a better way to help us become better animals than we might otherwise be.

What’s the most important take-home message for readers?

Meditation is not religion, not spirituality—it’s a technology of upgrading the mind that can enrich one’s life, including one’s religious life. We’re used to the idea of physical fitness. Time to get used to the idea of contemplative fitness, and practice at least as diligently.

How did you get started on the path of Buddhism?

In college and later in graduate school, I studied mystical texts and was entranced by the possibility of profound mystical experiences. Yet I never tried to have them for myself – not until later in life. I came to meditation for experiences of transcendence, only later to find out that they weren’t what really matters. I discuss all of this in the book.

Is there anything you had to leave out?

I excerpted pieces of my own retreat journals in the book, and had more in there originally. Honestly, though, it was too corny and too mistaken to leave in. Most beginning practitioners go down a lot of blind alleys, filled with mistaken notions about the purpose of practice, the signs it’s going well, and what to do next. At least I know I did. So I cut out a few of the more embarrassing bits. And left others in.

What are some of the biggest misconceptions about your topic?

For meditation “outsiders,” it’s that you need to be a hippie to meditate. For meditation “insiders,” it’s that you’re not supposed to make progress in practice. I understand why this idea was once useful, and it’s true that meditation is not really about getting anywhere or accomplishing anything. But, and this is an important but, it is possible to get better at not getting anywhere.

All the Asian contemplative traditions have notions of a path, of development, of a dharma that evolves over the course of one’s practice. Yet in many streams of Western Buddhism, this idea was not just lost but deliberately omitted in translation.

Did you have a specific audience in mind when writing?

The truth is, there are a lot of same-old, same-old Buddhist books out there, aimed at Boomers and festooned with inspirational cover art. There are also a lot of whiz-bang, hype-filled books on neurodharma seemingly aimed at the business-book crowd.

Rather than go for mass market on this one, I wanted to write the book I wanted to write, for my circle of serious-practitioner friends, intelligent skeptics, and pragmatic contemplatives—all of whom are either Gen-X or millennial, and none of whom have any patience for either of those sets of cliches.

What is the “next generation of enlightenment”?

The very notion of liberation, or enlightenment, is evolving. We understand what it looks like in neuroscientific terms, and we’re in a more mature position to appreciate it experientially. Liberation involves building up your pre-frontal cortex so that it can mediate between even the most intense impulses from other parts of your brain. This shifts how we understand meditation itself — what it’s doing, what it’s about.

Are you hoping to inform readers? Entertain them? Piss them off?

I’d love for a smart, cynical reader to say “hmm, I guess meditation isn’t just hippie indulgence after all,” and for that reader to consider doing something that makes the world a better place—starting with their mind.

I also hope that people who have been doing some meditation already read the personal, developmental chapters and decide to go for some more hardcore practice themselves.