If JAY SHETTY looks familiar, it’s because he’s one of the most-viewed people on the internet. He launched his YouTube channel just two years ago, and his “viral wisdom” videos have already garnered more than 4 billion views. How does a 31-year-old gain enough life experience to become a mentor with 25 million followers on social media? Shetty started out as a teacher’s pet and then spent most of high school getting into trouble. When he happened to hear a Buddhist monk speaking about selfless service, the message resonated. Inspired, he went to business school in London followed by spending three years as a monk in India. Then his teacher suggested he give up his monk’s robes to serve the world in another way. He’s now a motivational speaker and life coach, known for sharing spiritual lessons. Here, he tells Unity Magazine editor KATY KOONTZ how he maintains his connection with Spirit so that his connections with others leave them transformed.
KATY KOONTZ: Why did you decide to be a monk after graduating from business school?

JAY SHETTY: I really wanted to have time and energy to purify myself, overcome all my vices, and grow, and I thought, *When am I ever going to do that if I’m working for a big company?* I also wanted to serve humanity in the best way possible. I didn’t see anyone doing that more selflessly than Marcus, the monk who became my mentor.

There’s a beautiful piece of wisdom that says you can only take the world as far as you’ve visited internally. So I knew that if I didn’t work through my own issues, who was I to help anyone else? Living as a monk allowed me to do both—work on myself and help others.

KK: How did your parents react?

JS: My parents are incredible—very open-minded and supportive—but they were shocked. My mom was worried about my health, asking, “Who’s going to feed you? Who’s going to take care of you?”

My father’s attitude was more like, “Do what you gotta do.” My extended family was very critical of the decision. They were worried about what they would say to their friends and about how they’d portray it to the rest of our family, who are all doctors, lawyers, and dentists.

KK: What prompted Marcus to suggest you go back? And what was your reaction?

JS: Monk life gives you so much self-awareness that you can’t run away from who you are. I came to the realization that I was very independent, very rebellious, and I really wanted to build something creative so I could share what I’d learned. My teacher sensed that, too, although when he said it was time for me to leave so I could share what I’d learned, I was shocked.

I thought, *I’ve given up everything to be here—jobs, relationships, everything. I dedicated my life to this. I’m going to have to go back to normality now. How am I going to live? How am I going to make money?* Reality kicked in, and it was one of the lowest points in my life. It felt like I was getting divorced.

KK: It must’ve taken an incredible amount of trust to leave.

JS: Mentors and teachers can see beyond what we can see for ourselves, but it’s important to find those who aren’t doing it for their own growth. The best leaders make more leaders, not more followers. Another way to say that is that an average leader makes you believe in them, but a great leader makes you believe in yourself.

So for me, this was that moment where my teacher was allowing me to start believing in myself. He was starting to set me free, which is what good teachers do. They aren’t trying to control you and make you into something they want you to be. They’re trying to make you be the best version of yourself.

KK: Have you seen your teacher again?

JS: Yes, we talk all the time. He still means the world to me. He’s the first person I want to tell every piece of news that happens, and he’s brilliant at encouraging and humbling me at the same time.

KK: One element that really sets you apart as a coach is your emphasis on service and giving back. Did you have a sense of how important that was before you became a monk?

JS: Probably not. When I was young, I was very obedient and worked very hard, but at 14, I rebelled. I got involved in the wrong circle, experimenting with drugs and getting in tons of trouble. I was looking for thrills, for meaning in life. Then when I was 18, I heard a monk speaking about selfless service, compassion, and empathy. He said that the best thing we can do is use our skills in the service of others. I thought, *That feels really meaningful. That’s what life must really be about.* Now, I couldn’t see my life without that.

It’s beautiful to see how this has now been verified by science. Studies show that people with depression who serve others experience less depression. Other research proves we are happier when we give people our money, our time, or our energy, as opposed to when we use it on ourselves. The truth is that we are all wired to serve. That’s who we are at heart. We’re wired for generosity—but educated for greed.

KK: What effect does that dissonance have on us?

JS: It’s almost like taking a fish out of water. Greed might make us successful monetarily, but it disconnects us from our true identity, from what brings us meaning, fulfillment, and happiness.
When you’re using your passion to serve others instead, that gives you purpose. As my teacher would say, to go three steps forward, you have to go three steps deep.

**KK:** What other ancient wisdom has been verified by science?

**JS:** Gratitude is another great example. It’s part of every ancient spiritual text. The first thing we'd do as monks after we woke up is say a gratitude prayer: “Thank you so much, Earth, for allowing me to get up. Thank you for being here. Thank you for the oxygen I breathe. Thank you for the food I’m about to eat. Thank you for the water.”

There are so many studies on how gratitude boosts self-esteem, your immune system, and even the quality of your relationships. It’s incredible for perspective. For example, we often ask ourselves, *How do I become happy?* when the real question is, *How do I become grateful?* If you become grateful, then you’ll be happy. Happiness is a byproduct of practicing gratitude.

**KK:** I love your suggestion of making to-be lists rather than to-do lists.

**JS:** To-do lists are focused on the results, while to-be lists are focused on the process. If your to-do list says you need to get these three things done today, you might end up feeling stressed or disappointed if you don’t finish. But if you had a to-be list that said you need to be organized, then you would put the right number of things on the table to do. When you start with *being*, you end up doing more effectively, but when you start with *doing*, you sacrifice being. Everything is a byproduct of being.

**KK:** You refer to your morning practice as refining your why, your intention. What does your practice look like?

**JS:** I meditate for two hours every day. I do a mix of breathing exercises, Vipassana, and mantra meditation. The approach I then take with setting my intention is what I call identifying seeds and weeds. I ask myself if my actions are out of love, compassion, empathy, or kindness (those actions are seeds) or if they’re out of anger, pain, pressure, envy, competition, or jealousy (those are weeds).

With every action I take, I ask, *What is the intention behind this action? Is it a seed or a weed?* If it’s a weed, I try to pull it, and if it’s a seed, I try to plant more. Every day, I refine my intention, because although we all fall for our weeds looking like seeds sometimes, when we reflect daily, we get better at knowing what’s really happening. That’s how we learn to turn our passion into our purpose.

**KK:** Can you say more about that daily reflection?

**JS:** I think self-awareness—observing your natural organic reactions—is the best exercise. Ask yourself, *When am I alive? When am I happy? When am I enthusiastic? What brings me to life?* When you start learning about yourself, you start focusing on the right things. I have a rule about not complaining, not comparing, and not criticizing. I challenge people to try that for 24 hours so they can see how amazing it feels. Complaining, comparing, and criticizing is like junk food for your mind. It’s wasted energy.

**KK:** I love that you encourage people to test what they learn.

**JS:** That’s actually my favorite piece of advice. When you hear that gratitude makes you happy, for example, practice that for the whole week by picking a time each day to reflect on what you’re grateful for at that moment. Then you’ll know for yourself that it works. I think people should experiment more with wisdom when they hear it.

**KK:** Has there been anything that you were skeptical about that surprised you when you tested it and found out it was indeed true?

**JS:** When I became a monk, we were told that multitasking is a myth, that no one could effectively do many things at once. I would always think, *That’s not true. I’m so productive that I can do lots of things at once.* I would always think, *That’s not true. I’m so productive that I can do lots of things at once.* I read a study recently that said only two percent of the world’s population can actually multitask. When most people hear that, they think they’re in that two percent, but the truth is most of us are in the 98 percent who can’t.

As monks, we were taught single-tasking, doing one thing at a time. When you’re eating, just eat. When you’re on a phone call, just be on the phone call. When you’re watching TV, just watch TV. We’re so used to eating, watching TV, and being on our phone at the same time. I never thought doing one thing at a time would work, but it does because...
when you just eat, for example, you absorb all the flavors and you focus on the scent of the food. You are conscious of every time you chew and every bite you take. You digest food better, so you automatically feel energized.

The biggest challenge we have is that we’re never mentally and physically in the same place. We’re physically present, but mentally we’re usually either in the past or the future. Doing one thing at a time is the best way to bring our body and mind back in sync so we can become more fully present.

**KK:** Do you think that we all have the capacity to connect with intuition and guidance?

**JS:** Absolutely. I think it’s a skill that we can all learn, like speaking a language. It just requires self-awareness and constant observation. Your intuition’s always there, just like the sun is always there even when it’s covered by the clouds. Our intuition is sometimes just clouded over by our mind chatter. When you can push your mind to the side, then you can connect.

**KK:** You teach that we can turn our problems into our power. How does that work?

**JS:** Ancient wisdom teaches that the obstacle is the way. In this case, pain makes us recognize how powerful we are. The biggest pain points in my life—realizing I was four months away from being broke, having to rebuild my life after being a monk, being suspended from school—have been the rise of my biggest potential. I’ve learned so much more about myself in pain than I have in greatness. Pain is a beautiful thing. I’m not saying it’s easy, but it is one of the most genuine ways to learn your limits. Pain tests us, and we think we’re going to fail, but if we choose to change, it turns out to be the best thing that can happen to us. That doesn’t mean you wish pain on yourself or that you create artificial pain. Pain is going to come anyway, so just be aware of how to deal with it. Use it as an opportunity to learn about yourself and go deeper.

**KK:** Can you give me an example?

**JS:** Before I ever started making videos, I pitched my video series idea around mindfulness to 40 media companies in London. They all rejected me even before the interview stage because I had no background in media, hosting, communications, or video. It was painful, but I took it by telling myself, *There must be something better for me out there,* and I kept trying, and trying, and trying, and trying.

Looking back now, I’m so glad none of those companies gave me a job, because then I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing today. So in every rejection, in every delay, there’s a blessing. I think we often miss that because we want things to look or happen a certain way.

**KK:** So expectations can actually turn out to be a prison?

**JS:** They can block you from your greatest success because then you’re not open to surprise. It’s like being so focused on this one thing that you’re missing something amazing that’s happening right behind you.

**KK:** You have touched so many people’s lives. That must be very gratifying.

**JS:** It is, but there’s so much work to do. I’m just at the beginning of where I want to be. My goal isn’t the number of views and followers. My goal is transformation—no kid hungry, no kid thirsty, and no kid uneducated with options to serve. My vision’s much bigger than where I am currently, so there’s a long way to go.

Jay Shetty is an award-winning storyteller and viral video creator who was named on the 2017 *Forbes* magazine “30 Under 30” list. He speaks internationally, offers mentoring and coaching programs, and does corporate consulting. Visit *jayshetty.me*. 

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