Justin Michael Williams is a 2020 New Thought Walden Award honoree. For more about this year’s honorees, see Page 30.

A PRACTICE TO EMPOWER

Justin Michael Williams is on a mission to teach meditation outside the mainstream. But his endgame is less about blissing out and more about believing in yourself. His process targets the trauma of everyday life for those who are part of any marginalized group—and he makes a great role model. He’s Black, gay, and from a neighborhood where the bullet holes on the outside of his house were no big deal—yet at 32, he’s already a successful recording artist, passionate social activist, and dynamic motivational speaker. His new book, Stay Woke: A Meditation Guide for the Rest of Us (Sounds True, 2020), explores a nontraditional type of meditation for nontraditional people. The companion song he released along with the book, “I Am Enough,” is its apt anthem. Here, he explains to Unity Magazine editor Katy Koontz how his radically different Freedom Meditation might just change your life—and the world along with it.
LISTENING IN WITH...

KATY KOONTZ: In Stay Woke, you share a process you call Freedom Meditation. You say that if someone grew up in struggle, in any kind of a marginalized group, they need a different type of meditation—one that doesn’t pretend that the struggle doesn’t exist. Can you elaborate?

JUSTIN MICHAEL WILLIAMS: I’m not trying to bad-talk any other style, but in my experience, even if other practices acknowledge struggle, they say, “Let’s send love and light and rise above.” They spiritually bypass struggle and pretend it doesn’t exist. They teach that our thoughts create our reality, so let’s not look at this negative stuff. For me, sending love and light and compassion and kindness and all that is absolutely essential, but in my opinion, it’s not enough.

One thing all of these meditation styles have in common is that they’re all about awareness. If we’re really being aware of everything that is happening in our world right now, then we have to recognize that our awareness is calling us to take action, not to just sit on our meditation cushions and stare at our navels.

We want to welcome the light and the shadows. If we don’t, the shadows keep growing and end up controlling us from behind the scenes, without us even recognizing it. You can send all the love and light and prayers you want, but Black people are still being killed by police. Poor people are still starving. Kids are still in cages at the border. These traumas still exist. My intention with Freedom Meditation is to name the struggles and then apply the practice to this different context.

Then we’ll be able to see how we need to take action to make some of these things better.

KK: Sounds like it would be a good choice for everybody.

JMW: Exactly. As I say in the introduction, this book is for my Black brothers and sisters, for those who are LGBTQIA+, for women who’ve had enough, for starving artists and workaholic creatives, for conscious entrepreneurs—and more. I wrote this book for everyone who is on the side of justice and equality for all, for those who know that the liberation of one of our groups is essential to the liberation of all of us. If we can come together around using the practice to help us take action then we’re going to change the world.

KK: Why did you choose the phrase “stay woke” for the title?

JMW: I had just put out a music video called the “Stay Woke Medley,” and everybody was using woke as a hashtag. One of my mentors suggested Woke for the title, and then it just hit me—it’s Stay Woke. But at one point, I started to worry that the phrase was being overused. I read an article that said the term woke was dead. Then I found out woke actually came from the civil rights era in the 1960s. It’s about staying awake to the oppression and injustices that are happening, because if we don’t, then they live inside of us, and we end up oppressing ourselves.

When I found that out, I realized that this is a word that we cannot lose. The word stay was important in the title because it’s not a destination, it’s a process. It’s not like you can just read the book and then you’re woke. You’re never done. Staying woke is a constant practice. It’s a choice to keep ourselves in the energy and the agency to do better for our lives and for the world. So the phrase “stay woke” as a title is meant to reflect both mindfulness and awakened social justice, which is where the phrase comes from, so it was just perfect.

KK: Your approach to mantras is very different—and fascinating. Can you outline it?

JMW: Freedom Meditation gives people the freedom to create a practice that works with their life. The book is like a recipe. I say, “Okay, these are the ingredients, these are substitutes, and these are options.” I’m trying to guide readers with the right questions and the right experiential moments so they can figure out how to create a recipe to suit their taste, their life, and their needs, and that includes the creation of the mantra.

To do that, I ask people to first imagine their higher self to get them in touch with the possibility that there’s a future that is greater than their present circumstances. This is huge for anybody who’s grown up with trauma or who’s in a marginalized group. It’s a game changer.

Essentially, I am saying, “Here’s you now, and here’s this higher self. In between those two selves is a gap.” The naming of that gap is the mantra. Creating that is exciting because it...
helps them become more of who they really are. Their mantra becomes their unique energy signature. My first mantra, for example, was “complete authenticity.”

**KK:** The process sounds like powerful inner work.

**JMW:** It is, and it’s not just for the people doing it. For those of us in marginalized groups, our ancestors didn’t have the opportunity to look at things like mental health, manifestation, and life purpose. They had to sacrifice all that to create the freedom we have today. So when we step into our purpose and our passion, we’re laying the foundation for what the next generation can have. In that way, the work we’re doing is for all of humanity, now, in the past, and in the future. I’ve seen this beautiful quote that says, “We repeat what we don’t repair.” That’s the reason that we do this healing work.

**KK:** Another way Freedom Meditation is different is that you’re not telling people they have to attain a blank mind. How freeing!

**JMW:** Right, I’m not asking people to focus on their mantra and block everything else out. I’m asking them to focus on their mantra and then welcome everything else in at the same time. Here’s a good exercise for understanding how that works: Pick one point that’s right in front of you and look at it without moving your eyes. This is what the typical monastic focus on a mantra is like. Now, keep focusing on that point, but also expand your peripheral awareness. Without moving your eyes, notice that you can perceive light and color from the right and from the left and from above and below that point. See how much you can actually notice and take in. That’s similar to what I’m asking people to do with their minds when they’re focusing on their mantra, but instead of becoming aware of colors and shapes in their periphery, what I want them to let in are different thoughts, emotions, feelings, dreams, and visions. We can learn to let them come forward to heal without taking our focus away from what we’ve chosen as our ultimate energy signature.

**KK:** This sounds much more integrative than traditional meditation.

**JMW:** It is. So many of us push things down just to function, especially if we’ve grown up marginalized or with trauma. Sometimes you have to do that to survive. So I’m not saying that we should never push anything down, but if we don’t ever give it an outlet, it ends up seeping out into our lives in places where it doesn’t belong. We might develop health problems or get into toxic relationships, for example. One way or another, this stuff is going to come up so that it can get our attention and we have a chance to heal—but the healing may not be just sitting and meditating on it. It may require that we take some action.

**KK:** Another difference is that you don’t require people to stay absolutely still. I have always had problems with that myself.

**JMW:** Lorin Roche, my teacher, taught me that when I started meditating. He’d say, “Is it more distracting for you to scratch your nose and then go back to meditating or for you to sit for six minutes trying not to scratch your nose?” Every animal has a system of dealing with discomfort to create equilibrium and balance. That system is smarter than us, so why would we try to undo that primal instinct? If our body isn’t comfortable, our brains can’t relax and the discomfort is going to keep nagging at us. Ignoring that discomfort shouldn’t be the goal. I want the practice to make people more connected to their bodies, not less connected to them.

**KK:** You write in the book that if you can worry, you can meditate. You just have to flip that switch from worry to empowerment.

**JMW:** When I talk, I ask the crowd, “How many of you think meditation is about getting your mind to stop thinking?” Most people raise their hands. Then I ask, “How many of you have ever gotten your mind to stop thinking?” No hands go up. This idea that we have to get our minds to stop thinking is such a silly concept to me. It’s the propaganda of meditation.
What people really need is to get their thoughts to work for them instead of against them and to be able to choose what they’re focusing on.

**KK:** To that end, you suggest bringing high-quality questions into meditation. What does that mean?

**JMW:** Meditation gets me in touch with the part of myself that knows that all the answers I need are within me. But if I’m asking the wrong questions, the answers don’t matter. Low-quality questions usually begin with “why,” like, “Why is this so hard?” or “Why is this happening to me?” or even “Why is there so much injustice in the world?” Even if you got the answer, you wouldn’t be able to go anywhere with it. High-quality questions, on the other hand, give us the opportunity to take action. They often begin with “how,” like, “How can I make this world less unjust?” or “How can I step more fully into my passion and purpose?” Those questions have a completely different energy—but they also hold us accountable because now we know what we have to do. They invite us into a space of possibility, growth, learning, and ideas.

**KK:** I love this one line from the book: “You don’t get what you want in life. You get what you are.” When I first read it, I felt a bit frustrated, but when I let it sink in, it actually felt freeing.

**JMW:** That’s my favorite line in the book. It’s essentially about alignment. Many people feel that they’re doing all this work, but they’re not getting very far. If you are not being the person that you see in your vision, if you’re not in relationship with your higher self, then you’re not in alignment. I’m not saying you have to be perfect, but you’re out of integrity if you’re saying, “My vision is this, but I’m just going to go do this other stuff instead right now.” Then no wonder your vision is not manifesting.

The first thing people typically do once they get clear on their vision is that they ask, “What do I do?” A better first question is, “Who do I be?” because the right action actually comes from the right state of being. If you’re asking, “What do I do?” then it’s all coming from your head, and once your ego gets involved, things get jacked up.

**KK:** You write about both toxic thoughts and toxic beliefs. Can you explain the difference?

**JMW:** Toxic thoughts are about you. Some people try to avoid them, but the real work comes from leaning into them to see where they’re coming from so you can heal them. That’s where you really grow. Toxic beliefs are about the world and how it works. You have to look at where they come from, too, and then you ask if they are actually true and if they are serving you.

For example, I grew up in a home with domestic violence. Most of the men in my life showed anger in a way that was aggressive and harmful. So as a kid, I created this belief that anger is bad and I told myself, I will not be somebody who gets angry. But that belief started to run my life because I wasn’t standing up for myself. The truth is, anger itself is not bad. Anger misused and expressed improperly is bad, but often anger is what incites social justice movements. It can create passion for us. It wasn’t until I was able to access my anger in a healthy way that I was able to even feel that emotion. Then I was able to make changes in my life and in the world.

**KK:** What does the future of the conscious movement look like to you?

**JMW:** When I started this work almost 13 years ago, I was the only Black person or gay man I saw in my communities doing yoga or meditating. I’m also one of the first people like me to ever write a book like this. I would not be anywhere near where I am today without the love and support of so many people. In the past five or six years, we’ve started to see more people of all different ethnicities and backgrounds engaging in these practices. They look different and they have different things to say. My hope and prayer is that the leaders of today—who are a fairly homogenous group—will welcome these new people with open arms, just like they did me, because these people will be the leaders of tomorrow. We just have to keep extending welcome to these people who are coming, because believe me, they’re coming.

*Justin Michael Williams is gifting his message directly to the kids who need it most. With his “Stay Woke, Give Back” tour, he’ll be speaking in cities across the country that have been the most impacted by racism, gun violence, poverty, and social injustice. The tour will include free mass meditation events in schools and community centers and will provide students with free copies of his book, Stay Woke. For more on Williams, visit justinmichaelwilliams.com. For more about the “Stay Woke, Give Back” tour, visit staywokediveback.org.*