

touching darkness

an exploration of the shadow



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About This Guide

When I started on the spiritual path my main source of information was the internet and old library books.

This was back in the early 2010's when most of the spiritual information readily available (at least where I lived) was focused on the *New Age*. That is still the case today, to a certain extent.

This was also when Law of Attraction teachings were just coming into prominence. There was a heavy focus on maintaining a positive state of mind, raising your vibration and tending to your chakras.

So my introduction to spirituality was very '*love and light*'. That is to say that there weren't a lot of resources aimed at dealing with the heavy, dark, even shameful emotions we all experience in our lives.

There wasn't a lot of guidance on creating a spiritual practice that would serve you in all areas of life.

Over the years I have found this love and light brand of spirituality to be missing something crucial.

To cultivate a balanced spiritual practice it's important to have awareness of both the light and dark, in order to face them appropriately.

Knowing that I had the power to influence my reality with awareness of my thoughts, energy and vibration was uplifting. To find that I had power where I previously thought I didn't, was life-changing. However, I knew I had to dig deeper still.

When my thoughts weren't so positive; when things weren't going my way, when the world wasn't so easily ignored, I needed sharper tools. I knew that pushing this side of reality down wasn't going to be helpful in the long-run.

That has led me down a path to self discovery on all fronts - negative and positive. Shadow work has become a crucial part of my practice, and I would say spirituality without shadow work isn't really *spirituality*.

Of course, the words we use here can be defined in so many different ways, it's really up to interpretation.

But what rings true is that without awareness of the dark side of life, even at a surface level, we will not have the tools to deal with the obstacles and struggles that come up.

Without knowledge of the darkness we don't get a complete view of ourselves, and as an extension other people.

In this guide I want to explore shadow work from a different angle, and to see how we can balance working with our dark side as well our light side. It doesn't have to be one or the other.

How can we embrace our dark side and remain aware of the injustices going on in the world...without falling into a pit of despair? How can we remain positive and build a better life for ourselves...without pretending the *bad* things don't exist?

In the first part of this guide we're going to discuss what the shadow side is, how it forms and why shadow work is so important.

In the second part of this guide we're going to go over this apparent disconnect between *love and light* spirituality and shadow work. Why they aren't so different after all, and how can we unite these two approaches.

In the third part I'm going to outline how you can begin to do shadow work in everyday life, plus how to dig deeper.

In the final part of this guide I want to explore the spiritual shadow. This is an area that is uncomfortable to face because of the inherent contradiction it highlights - how do spiritual practices and ideas sometimes become distorted and unhelpful?

Approaching shadow work can sometimes seem heavy and it often is, so it's important that we proceed with care. If you aren't ready to explore the shadow, feel free to pick this guide back up at a later date.

Otherwise, you might want to approach shadow work with the guidance of a teacher you like or a partner you trust. Feel free to consume this guide at whatever pace suits you, when you are in the right state of mind.

There are parts of this guide that are going to provide a lot of clarity too. We're going to explore why shadow work isn't so dark after all. In that way, you might find this approach to be much more manageable than expected.

What Is The Shadow?

It makes sense to lay some groundwork before we get into the meat of the guide.

You might be asking yourself these questions: What is the shadow side? What is shadow work? Why is it important?

The concept of the human *shadow* was originally coined by the psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Jung called this the *unknown* side of the personality.

Jung stated that the shadow was the driving force of projection: where a flaw we deny within ourselves is projected outward onto someone else.

We can begin with a single principle: we all have a shadow side or shadow self. This is the unexplored part of ourselves that isn't being illuminated by our conscious minds.

It is all of the undesirable traits, qualities and beliefs that we repress. These are all of the aspects of ourselves that we consider *negative* or *unacceptable*, which we push down in favor of displaying the *positive* or *acceptable*.

This can encompass our more obvious negative emotions like rage, anger, greed, sadness and fear. Emotions which often reflect on our moral or social values. The shadow

can also contain more subtle negative ideas, habits and tendencies.

However the shadow is not all *bad*. It can also contain aspects of ourselves that we've disowned in order to fit in or please other people. Positive traits, qualities and skills which haven't been appreciated by others and we began to repress ourselves.

Think of all the different norms and rules that dictate how we must behave in order to be considered *normal*, *acceptable* or *functional* in society.

While many of these norms exist for good reason, others encourage us to hide aspects of our personality and talents in favor of more socially acceptable ones.

For example, artistic ability is often seen as frivolous or unproductive in society. Eventhough this is actually a positive trait, we might choose to push it down in favor of more *academic* or *productive* pursuits.

There is also a similar dynamic in our own homes and family units. Think of someone who is naturally sensitive, honest and open living in a family unit that encourages toughness, silence, and privacy.

This person gradually learns to push these positive attributes down into the unconscious; in order to be seen

as acceptable by their family. People like this often find themselves being labelled as the *black sheep* or outcast.

Rather than learning that there can be a balance between different traits like strength and sensitivity, we are presented with black and white thinking. There is no acceptable gray area in the ways we can express ourselves.

We can see how the shadow side surfaces during the teenage rebellion stage; which is where we battle this schism. The shadow can intensify into adulthood if we continue to push aspects of our personality out of sight, in order to maintain a particular image.

These aspects do not simply go away, but instead fester and shape our lives unconsciously. They can then manifest in more insidious ways such as addiction, anger, self-doubt and depression later on.

Shadow work is often linked to inner child work, in that the shadow forms throughout our childhood alongside the ego. It is all of the aspects of ourselves that we shunned by our parents, school system and society at large, which we then shun ourselves.

What Is Shadow work?

At its core, shadow work is the process of making the unconscious conscious.

Shadow work is any practice which brings awareness to these aspects of our consciousness which we ignore or repress. All of the parts of ourselves which we would rather pretend didn't exist.

When we are aware of these aspects of ourselves we can begin to integrate them. Shadow work allows us to examine and release our negative traits without shame, and uncover the positive traits we haven't fully embraced.

Any practices which bring awareness to our beliefs, thoughts, emotions are a form of shadow work. Meditation, mindfulness, journaling, traditional therapy could all be considered a form of shadow work.

However when we hear the term shadow work it is usually in reference to specific exercises and prompts that bring up our shadow in a controlled and safe way. It's more so about the intention.

Sometimes shadow work is defined as '*awareness of the negative aspects within ourselves*'. This is partially true, in that becoming aware of our unconscious patterns will make us aware of our negative traits. However the

shadow is really anything negative, positive and in-between which is *hidden*.

Shadow work also applies on a broader scale too. To be aware of the hidden aspects of our family units, social circles, communities, and our world at large. It's not being afraid to confront the dark underbelly of society.

Why Is Shadow Work Important?

Up to this point you might be wondering what the point of shadow work is and if it's really necessary.

Now that we've established that we all have a shadow side and that the shadow isn't necessarily all *bad*, what are the benefits of exploring this side of our psyche?

The shadow is already leading our lives

Whether we are conscious of it or not, the shadow side already has a level of control over our lives.

For those with larger unintegrated shadows - it is like living underneath a literal shadow. The shadow of old memories, wounds and relationships, which pull us back into old patterns.

Most of us already do some level of shadow work in day to day life as well. While shadow work is usually used to refer to specific exercises and prompts which put the shadow in full focus, most of us are aware of some of our unhelpful and unappreciated traits.

Shadow work is also done through practices like meditation, mindfulness, journaling and introspection as discussed before. We don't always have to look our shadow directly in the eye in order to work with it.

There are also major personality-shifting events in our lives that force us to confront our shadow in order to grow. Events such as: grief, heartbreak, the loss of a job or particular lifestyle, the birth of a child, a new relationship and so on.

To do shadow work consciously even if it is not our main focus (and I don't think it should be) puts us in the driving seat. It means we aren't simply defaulting to familiar ways of being because that is what's comfortable but can make more meaningful changes in our lives.

The shadow cannot be ignored

Expanding on the first point, our shadows cannot simply be ignored. Even if we don't use the same vocabulary or techniques, the concept of the shadow is something we are all aware of.

The awareness that there are aspects of ourselves which we hide or obscure from others.

The sense we are being influenced beyond our control, by events from the past. Wrestling with our *good* and *bad* sides - we've all encountered this polarity.

It's also true that when we push the shadow down or fail to acknowledge it, it doesn't just go away. Instead it festers, it grows and it gets expressed in other more subtle ways.

Shadow work is important because it allows us to see the gray area. We don't have to pick between one *side* or the other, all aspects of ourselves have something important to show us and express.

With shadow work we begin to see this underappreciated side of us as a friend, as something that accompanies us. It serves a particular purpose, and isn't this undesirable presence that needs to be removed or go away.

How Does The Shadow Form?

When we are born we don't have a shadow side as such, just as we don't have an ego.

We come into this world without a self concept, although you could say we are born into a certain amount of cultural and social '*baggage*'. What we do have is potential, to become so many different things.

As we grow older and develop self-awareness we start to form an ego.

The ego is the idea we build about who we are and how we should present ourselves. It is our protective mechanism that puts some distance between who we are at our core and the external world.

Just as the ego acts as a form of protection, the shadow does too. The shadow is part of our ego; where the ego is often used to refer to the image we showcase to the world, the shadow is the inverted aspect of ourselves that we hide from the world.

In a similar way that the ego isn't inherently bad neither is the shadow. While a lot of belief systems and disciplines promote the destruction of the ego, what is actually helpful, is an awareness of the ego or shadow and

knowledge of how to become comfortable with these aspects.

While we can't get rid of the ego or shadow side as humans who survive by compartmentalizing aspects of ourselves (on some level), it is possible to integrate the shadow. This is where we no longer push the shadow away, and can transform our relationship to it.

Shadow work allows us to reduce the *density* of our shadow and its power over our lives.

When does the shadow form?

The shadow forms in any environment which encourages us to push down aspects of ourselves in order to be accepted. This means that shadow aspects can arise from any area in our lives.

Childhood

The most obvious source of our shadows is childhood or *primary socialization*. These are our most formative years where we are building our sense of self (as an extension of this, ego), our values and habitual ways of being.

As we've discussed before, the messages we receive in childhood teach us which aspects of ourselves are *acceptable* and which are not. This starts with our parents,

then as we grow up we can also receive messages from our peers and other adult figures, which influence which sides of ourselves we are comfortable showing the world.

Exercise: Think of a need you had as a child that wasn't met. It could be the need for safety, security, peace, individuality, creative expression etc.

Recall how you responded to this with your physical actions. Did you express yourself in unhealthy ways? Did you withdraw from other people? Did you pursue different things? Did you treat yourself or others in unfair ways?

Referring to the shadow in a physical context like this is so important, because often the shadow remains a vague category that we place undesirable aspects into without having a tangible understanding of how they arose.

Identify how you repeat these responses in the present.

When you find yourself in a situation where a shadow/wound from childhood comes up again, you can observe your habitual response and use this as a way to face, shift and integrate your shadow in the present.

Adulthood

One of the biggest misconceptions about the shadow is that it always links back to childhood. Of course, many of our shadows arise in childhood because that is when we

are most influenced by others, however there can be many formative moments in our adulthood too.

- Our work environments
- Our adult social circles
- Shifting societal expectations
- Romantic relationships
- A breakup or heartbreak
- Trauma/grief experienced later in life

For example, you might have grown up in an environment that allowed you to be open, safe and trust the adult figures around you.

Entering your first adult relationship however, the environment created caused you to feel more self conscious, untrusting of your intuition and unsafe.

This contrast between what you were used to in childhood and how you are being treated in adulthood could cause you to push those positive aspects deeper inside as well.

Often people get stuck with shadow work because they try to figure out where a shadow aspect has come from, but only look at their childhood. Sometimes you have to widen your range and consider recent events and shifts in your life too.

We sometimes believe that as adults we are invincible to outside forces, but of course this isn't the case.

As we grow older we would hope to mature in a straight line, but it doesn't really work that way.

Despite how mature we might be or think of ourselves, no matter how much we have healed, we are all capable of being influenced.

When working with our shadows it's not always helpful or necessary to narrow things down to some specific time period in our life, or to dig deep in old memories. It's important not to try and make things fit just because.

Focus on your present behaviors, habits, beliefs and tendencies as these reflect old patterns.

Figuring out where these shadows originate from (if you ever do) is an ongoing process, and it's not necessary in order to heal or integrate them.

What influences the shadow?

Societal expectations

Perhaps the most obvious way that the shadow forms is through societal expectations. Expectations are pushed onto us from the moment we are born, by our parents as an extension of the type of community or society we live in.

There is an idea of how we are supposed to act and what we are able to achieve based on different, often arbitrary characteristics. There are expectations around what is valuable or acceptable in society.

These expectations are passed onto us by our parents or parental figures as we know, but also through the media and education system.

Even if our family values go against the commonly held expectations, we can still be influenced by them on some level.

The shadow can form in our conformity or rebellion towards certain societal expectations. Integrating the shadows that come from these expectations doesn't always mean rebelling in all aspects, but noticing what actually aligns with us and what doesn't.

It's important to strike a balance once you are aware of how you are aligning yourself based on societal expectations.

It's easy to either place all of the blame on society (which we all participate in) or think you are somehow outside of society.

Reflections: What does my society expect of me? How do I conform or align with this? What are my own values?

Social systems

An aspect of this that I don't often see being discussed is how social systems or structures play into the formation of the shadow.

We might talk about childhood, family systems, societal expectations, but rarely the tangible social structures that underline everything.

As we face our shadows it's important to keep in mind that we do this work in the context of societies where *broken* systems create *broken* people. Mental health systems, justice systems, monetary or class systems, education systems etc.

We often approach the shadow as a highly individual thing that evolves in a vacuum within our segregated family units or social circles. Of course this isn't how we function as humans. We are constantly influenced, not only by the media and social expectations, but the structures we live within.

How our education or lack thereof allows/ed us to move through the world, the financial and physical safety afforded to us, how available medical and mental health support has been for us.

Overall, the politics that exist in the background of our daily lives (whether we pay attention to them or not).

Without this context, it's easy to feel as if we have to constantly work on other people's shadows or that shadow work is this bottomless pit full of darkness. What we don't realize is that social shadow flows into personal shadow. We cannot and do not live in a complete vacuum.

One part of this is that we leave ourselves wide open to absorbing other people's shadows and the collective shadow - we have no boundaries. But another part to this is that we will inevitably absorb some of that dense energy that lingers in the collective.

We will have to consume some negative media, we will become aware of atrocities and corruption. There will be shadows that are mostly outside of our control, but that we have to take on in some way.

There are several different ways we can approach this. We can ignore this larger, somewhat ever-present shadow and pretend it doesn't exist. We can take on the burden and approach life as we are responsible for everyone. Or we can take a middle ground.

There are certain systems within society that we all have to operate under, whether they are just or unjust, healthy or unhealthy. And so, much of our shadow is fed by these

systems, many of which we cannot simply escape or separate ourselves from.

Even with solid boundaries, these systems still feed into how we view ourselves and which aspects of our personality we are safe to express.

Reflections: What social structures are you a part of? Identify what is within your control and what isn't. How can you find peace within this space?

We can do our individual shadow work and help others in their work when we can, knowing that not every aspect of the shadow side can be released, integrated or even necessarily healed. We can come to peace, without needing to *fix* everything.

This allows us to set realistic expectations as we do shadow work. It provides some much needed context and relief in areas of life where we feel there is just too much going on.

Religious or spiritual programming

It would be wrong to discuss the shadow without mentioning how religious and/or spiritual programming plays into it. We see extremes represented in these belief systems clearly; the battle between holiness and sin, awareness and unawareness.

This represents that battle between the shadow and light side we all have in us, but even more so, the difficulty or seemingly impossibility in uniting the two.

In certain segments of these belief systems we can observe a type of *purity* culture.

The idea that there are certain aspects of ourselves which are beyond repair, which aren't *holy* enough. We attempt to get rid of sin or the ego, we don't necessarily try to understand or take these things as part of ourselves.

This is one way spirituality or religion is practiced or presents itself, but there are many ways. Even where we do observe this purity culture, these belief systems do provide a structure to our lives that we can't get anywhere else.

They are another route people seek to this perceived wholeness, which we are exploring here.

We can view aspects of ourselves as sacred, while being mindful of how we judge ourselves when we fail to meet certain standards of holiness.

In this acceptance, our *bad* side doesn't simply fester and manifest in subtler ways down the line, it becomes a part of the whole.

For example, we can see this dynamic play out clearly in how sexuality is sometimes approached in religious or spiritual spaces. Sex being seen as a sacred thing, which is true on many levels.

However, when we judge ourselves for having sexual impulses, this often has the opposite effect, we don't erase our sexuality but instead express it in unhealthy ways.

We might practice what we perceive as unholiness acts, but do so in private instead. We might witness this behavior in others, in people who hold power in these spaces but ignore rather than confront it, in order to maintain a collective image of holiness.

With religious and spiritual programming there is this pendulum effect. In order to be seen as *holy* people or *peaceful* spiritual people, we meet our negative attributes with tension, pushing them under the surface.

When we inevitably stray or partake in unhealthy habits, when we act human in any way, there is a tendency to overcompensate and portray holiness or peacefulness even when that isn't the case.

Having awareness that this can happen allows us to confront this unhelpful black and white thinking. Religion and spirituality are often used as a way to extinguish the shadow; the idea that religion or spirituality can take us to a superhuman or holy level is alluring.

But we have to have an awareness that we move through these belief systems, which can come with a certain purity in their raw forms, as humans and as imperfect people.

Religious and spiritual programming flow into all aspects of life - political, cultural and social.

Therefore even those who don't practice or subscribe to a particular spiritual or religious belief system, can see the wider impact of these shadows in their lives.

Shadow Work & Toxic Positivity

When we only focus on the positive and refuse to address the negative, our spiritual practice becomes an escape from reality rather than an honest confrontation with it. Shadow work is an essential part of any spiritual practice.

We often hear slogans like *good vibes only* or *only focus on the positive*, and while these reminders are helpful in many contexts, they leave a lot to be desired when it's time to buckle up and confront the harsher stuff.

This is what is known as *spiritual bypassing*, which is where we use spirituality as an excuse to avoid facing responsibility, accountability or negativity. Our spirituality isn't complete if it doesn't adequately acknowledge all of reality, not just the parts we find pleasant.

By focusing only on the positive our spirituality cannot guide us when we may need it the most – in times of struggle. This isn't to say that we must focus on negativity all the time, of course not, but that we must bring balance to our awareness.

Much of the reason shadow work has become so popular over the last few years, is due to the prevalence of *'love and light'* spirituality. This is where people view spirituality as the practice of remaining positive all of the time, rather than being with yourself however that happens to look.

- Positive vibes only
- Positive attracts positive
- Your vibe attracts your tribe
- Your thoughts create your reality

While these ideas can work great in some situations or isolated contexts, they often leave out a large chunk of reality. The dark, evil, shameful and uncomfortable parts of humanity and the world around us.

Toxic positivity isn't the same as simply being a positive person or encouraging positivity. It comes where there is pressure to ignore reality, ignore your true feelings or remain positive all the time. The toxicity is where this creates judgement on either side, for not living up to a certain ideal.

When there is injustice, evil or abusive behavior, when people find themselves in situations that are largely out of their control, *'just think positive'* or *'shift your vibration'* can be like salt to a wound.

Where things take place outside of our control, outside of our individual bubbles; it's about striking that balance between what can be shifted with a shift in mindset, what requires deeper work, and what needs a bit of both.

Shadow work & the healing trap

Although shadow work can be seen as a counter-balance to this toxic positivity, there is a common trap with shadow work that isn't explored as often. That is when shadow work becomes an endless search for the *broken* inside ourselves.

When we do shadow work it's normal to experience an amplification of the shadow. We undercover one shadow aspect only to find there are a dozen more layers underneath it!

It can appear as if the shadow is all there is - an endless pit that we could go deeper into indefinitely.

This can cause us to become disheartened or begin to feel as if healing, living a truly fulfilled life is not possible. Awareness is an amplifier and so whether we focus on the positive or negative, that is what will expand.

I don't mean this in the sense of focusing on the negative will attract more negative, but in how bringing awareness to one wound will inevitably light up other wounds that are associated with it.

Shadow work can have us feeling as if:

- We have *too much* shadow
- We are inherently flawed

- Our shadow makes us a *bad* person

The important thing to realize about the process of shadow work, is that it doesn't require that we are constantly focused on the shadow. We can take breaks, we can focus on something else, and we don't have to engage intensely in each session.

Our shadow side will naturally come up in everyday situations that make us feel unheard, unseen, othered. While specific shadow work exercises can be helpful in short bursts, they shouldn't be our primary focus.

We don't have to go searching for our shadow all of the time in order to heal. At the start shadow work is simply how we become more aware of our shadow, where we used to ignore or repress it.

Once we are more aware of our shadow there isn't the same need to go searching for it. Ultimately the shadow isn't a *separate* part of us, it isn't even the *bad* side of us, it's simply another part of the whole.

While it's important to remain aware of toxic positivity, and situations that might require realism rather than a positive spin. Being afraid to confront our positive aspects is also a part of shadow work.

For many people, confronting their positive side is even more difficult than confronting their negative side! If you

have been labelled as a negative, depressing, self-sabotaging person, it's easy to own up to those things as, *'that's just who I am'*.

Whereas being comfortable with your positive aspects and affirming that you are a good person, that you can achieve what you set your mind to, that you have unique traits that need to be expressed more often, that can feel foreign.

Shadow work also involves becoming comfortable with our positive aspects, without brushing them off, looking for excuses or desperately trying to look for a downside. To face the self-sabotaging side of ourselves that is *comfortable* in mediocrity.

This can also be seen in groups and social circles, where positivity is not seen as valuable a social currency as negativity. Friendship groups where complaining, gossiping and wallowing are the predominant means of communication.

In this context, being positive in any context can appear as arrogant or alienating. Misery loves company is a saying that sometimes simplifies things, but also holds a lot of truth.

This links back to the concepts of the golden shadow mentioned before. Not everything that we repress, keep secret or even feel ashamed about is negative. Many positive traits get pushed down too.

Conscious positivity

In this realm of shadow work and toxic positivity, I would like to introduce another concept that I will call *conscious positivity*. This is where we approach positivity, not as a way to avoid the reality of our situation, but to broaden our perspective.

Many times what we see or label as toxic positivity, is an attempt to create balance in a world where there is often a negative bias or default.

Having positivity as an option in our lives is crucial. When things aren't going our way, being able to practice positivity, not to avoid the reality of things but because we deserve to feel positive regardless.

When we release the pressure to be positive at all times, or appear positive for the sake of others, we can explore what our actual relationship with positivity is.

Positivity is also important as a counterbalance to negativity as the default.

Often when we're working with our intuition, there is a tendency to believe the negative insights we receive but disregard the positive. We can detect when someone is lying to or deceiving us really well, but can't trust opportunities that come to us.

It's in these scenarios that it might be helpful to ask, '*Am I being real, or am I being self-sabotaging?*'

Conscious positivity can also be useful when we have had our power taken away, whether as children or adults. Affirming our good points, affirming the good side, is crucial even if we don't truly believe it wholly yet.

We don't *need* a reason to be positive, rather it's about being aware of how we are applying positivity. Is it helping or hindering us in certain situations?

How To Do Shadow Work

You don't have to go digging in dirt to find gold.

Approaching the shadow is not often as straightforward as we think. We cannot just locate something from our pasts that we'd like to heal, and have the shadow come up right at that moment so we can face and integrate it.

Journal exercises are great for becoming more aware of our shadow, contemplating the shadow, and allowing different mental associations to come up. But these are only one part of shadow work.

How we often approach shadow work is similar to how we often approach heartbreak or a difficult life situation. We dig deep, pick apart our pain, replay old memories and try to pinpoint a lesson or piece of gold amongst it all.

There is an idea that there is always a defined lesson to learn from pain and that we have to *go in search of it*.

Sometimes this is the equivalent of picking at an old scab in order to address the wound underneath it. When what we need long term is to come to peace with how the scar is going to look, feel and grow us further down the road.

While I believe this form of introspection can be helpful at times, I don't think it's the best way to approach shadow work.

In reality, the shadow is going to come up in everyday life whether we want it to or not. When we feel unsafe or unseen, when someone irritates us, pushes our boundaries or does something that might brush us the wrong way.

The shadow is always illuminating the past through the present. In this way, we don't always have to go digging for painful memories or spending a lot of time thinking about our shadows in order to find opportunities to confront them.

For many of us those shadows are so deep-set, so dark, so painful, that trying to identify a root cause or replay a memory in order to face it, would just cause more harm. We would start to overanalyze or spiral downwards.

Another problem with approaching shadow work like this is that we can start to intellectualize our shadow without actually integrating it.

We become so engrossed in the shadow, in thinking about the shadow and digging up old memories, that we simply become numb to it.

Use the journal exercises in this guide to help create associations, rather than being the focal point to your shadow work. This is so that when your shadow does arise in everyday life you already have the context for it, and can face it there.

Acknowledge your limits

One of the most healing things we can do is to acknowledge our limits. We all have limits, whether we are aware of them or not. One of the traps that comes with shadow work, healing and working with our energy is thinking we can do it all.

We are often discouraged from acknowledging we have limits or accepting that there is such a thing. This comes from a good place, but ends up creating more problems.

To confront our limiting beliefs, habits and thoughts, doesn't mean we are without limits themselves.

You create peace by identifying where your limits are:

- What have you outgrown?
- What goals have you had to shift?
- Where do you often over-exert yourself?
- What areas are you having difficulty with?
- What are your emotional and energetic limits?
- What limits do you have in relationships?

Often on this journey we want to do it all, coming from a place of lack, insecurity or disempowerment and wanting to flip the script. However this often comes with judgement and the pressure to rush.

Once you have written down some of your limits, try to look at them in a different light. Where are your limits there for good reason? What limits upon second glance...aren't really limits at all?

When we sit with our limits, just as we might sit with a situation that isn't optimal, we don't have to stay with these circumstances or draw the line there, we have an opportunity to grow and change things, with less pressure.

Another aspect to this is knowing your emotional, energetic and spiritual limits. Part of shadow work is learning how to feel your emotions more consciously, without trying to avoid or run away from them all of the time.

There is a certain level of pressure there too. Many of our emotions are heavy, many of our memories and wounds cut deep. It's not always possible to feel it all at once, or introspect for extended periods of time.

And so, knowing your limits isn't just a case of taking the pressure off, but of keeping yourself safe. To sit with our perceived negative emotions, doesn't mean we ignore our

limits or forget that we also need time to unwind, relax and focus on something lighter.

Acknowledge your inner child

The inner child and shadow self are so intimately connected because we form our shadow side in primary socialization. We push aspects of ourselves down in order to appease our parents, authority figures and peers.

It helps to take a look back at your early environments and identify which aspects of yourself you had to push down, what aspects were unappreciated, and what you did to accommodate this.

Common inner child wounds:

- Lack of safety or security
- Lack of affection
- Lack of healthy expression
- Shame

Emotions

Becoming aware of our emotions, specifically our habitual emotional responses is one of the keys to identifying the shadow. With the awareness that sometimes we need to sit with difficult emotions in order to let them go.

Working with emotions is difficult because they don't come with a description, they just are. We feel something but then ascribe a meaning or label to it afterwards to make sense of what is happening.

It's hard to identify the shadow once we've put a label on something, it's hard to see beyond that. We will have a disagreement with someone and our thoughts are along the lines of *'I don't like them', 'they are rude', 'they make me angry'*. We leave things at that.

It's necessary to put language to our emotions like this and it can be helpful, but it can also shut down exploration and make it difficult to see the layers underneath.

Exercise: Think of someone you are having a recurring issue with. What is the predominant emotion there? Do they make you feel angry, sad, annoyed, judged or something else?

Get a piece of paper and write this main emotion at the top. As if tracing the roots of a tree, create some branches down from this word similar to a mind map.

Can you get more specific with the language you are using? What subtle emotions branch from the first one? What branches out from them?

Example: Anger - betrayal - lack of control.

The more detail you can add the better, don't worry about being too specific or organized either. Just what comes to mind without restriction.

You'll often find that the deeper you go, the less these reactions have to do with the other person. Some aspects might be their responsibility, but certainly not all. This gives you a clearer idea of what you can control and what you can't.

In this example, someone might have betrayed your trust which is on them. However the lack of control you feel, the familiar pattern that forms a part of is on you to manage. This is how our shadows intertwine in relationships.

Observe your triggers

One of the quickest ways to identify your shadow side is to observe your triggers. These are moments where you react disproportionately to what someone says or does, based on past traumas.

For example, you may have had highly critical parents as a child, which caused you to associate any external input with criticism. Then when someone offers an innocent suggestion, instead of taking this as it is, you react defensively and see it as a harsh criticism.

You can see from this example how our triggers and consequently our shadow are directly related to the

unhealed inner child. It can be helpful to create a running list of these so you have something to reference.

Create space for your shadow

Once you have your shadow out in the light, the next step is to create a space where it can be integrated.

If we view the shadow side as a child who didn't receive the care they needed, then we start to treat this side of ourselves with the compassion it deserves.

Instead of pushing the shadow down further or ignoring it completely, we have to let it breathe.

There are three simple steps to doing this:

Observe: Notice where/when your shadow is showing up in everyday life.

Notice where you are triggered disproportionately, notice where you are projecting, and notice the aspects of yourself you hide from others out of fear or shame.

Validate: Avoid labeling these shadow aspects as *good* or *bad*, but instead acknowledge that they are there for a reason.

These shadow aspects are linked to parts of ourselves we haven't faced, or lessons we haven't overcome, so they are here to guide us.

Shift: Consciously choose to shift this shadow into light. When you feel yourself being triggered, take a deep breath and examine why this is.

When you are projecting, pull your energy back, and see what this idea is based on. When you feel yourself hiding, identify why you feel the need to do so.

Physical shadow

Something to be aware of when approaching shadow work is the tendency to mentalize every shadow. Which is to approach every shadow as if it can be integrated through mental exercise/introspection only.

Some shadows are mostly mental blockages that stem from recurring thought patterns, beliefs etc. However many shadows are physical in nature, in that they bring up very visceral responses in the body.

This is because our shadows are often formed due to physical circumstances. When our needs surrounding safety, peace, joy, expression and so on aren't met, there is often a physical action in response to them.

For example, consider someone who is naturally skilled at painting. Let's say they learn through their parents, peers, society that painting is not a *valuable* or *acceptable* pursuit.

Over the years they put down their paintbrushes in favor of more academic pursuits.

The blockage there is mental, of placing limits upon oneself due to the opinions of others. However to meet that resistance completely, to paint freely again, the solution is physical in nature...picking up a paint brush.

There will be times on your journey with shadow work where you reach an impasse.

You have done all of the visualizations, journal entries and introspections but something won't budge. What is required here is a physical action to solidify the internal work.

This can also apply in more abstract ways. Like the person whose need for peace or safety was not met at some point.

No matter how many times they go over this blockage in their mind, release the associated memories or resentments, what needs to happen to solidify things is the practice of physical safety and peace.

We often forget the body in shadow work because we focus on the spirit as separate from our body, when really the two are as one.

Our physical bodies are the main focal point of our consciousness for the majority of our lives, and so our shadow often resides on this level.

Another aspect to this physical shadow is how our bodies move throughout the world.

This goes back to the importance of seeing shadow work as part of the larger world we live in, both to be aware of where our shadows originate from but also to relieve some of the pressure in believing it is all down to us.

In spirituality one of the goals, if you wish to call it that, is to come to a neutral perspective. To see the world around us neutrally.

However our physical body as the vessel through which we express our spirit, isn't necessarily viewed as a neutral thing.

This is the disparity we face on the spiritual path as human beings. To see the world neutrally, when we often aren't seen that way ourselves.

Many shadows arise from this disparity. Shadows around our physical appearance: our perceived attractiveness,

weight, height, race, sex, how normative our bodies are considered etc.

With shadow work as an extension of our spiritual work, we continuously come back to the physical body. Therefore it cannot be seen as separate from our work overall.

The need for physical integration becomes apparent when we are deeper into shadow work, or when we are trying to integrate a heavier shadow. Where it appears there is no solution, or that tension lingers on some level.

As we've discussed before, each shadow originates from a core need that was not met. Our subsequent attempts to push this aspect of ourselves deeper inside ourselves creates a shadow.

When you have identified a shadow aspect in this way, think of which actions come alongside it. These are the actions we face the most resistance doing, and might need to practice in order to move through the larger shadow.

Some ways to integrate the shadow physically:

- Breathwork
- Free dancing and/or movement
- Drawing, doodling, painting etc.
- Chanting, singing, affirming

- Mindful rest
- Speaking up
- Resting (lack of action)

Areas Of Shadow

The shadow can manifest in many different areas of our lives. In this chapter we are going to go over the seven main areas which are governed by the seven main chakras.

You don't have to be knowledgeable about the chakras or know how they function to understand the different levels of consciousness explored here.

This is to help bring awareness to areas of your life you might overlook or be working through while doing shadow work, without even realizing it.

Physical

The area of your life that pertains to physical needs: safety, security, health etc.

This area of shadow is easier to notice in ourselves and spot in others, however it's a denser level of shadow to move through because it has to do with our physical body.

This isn't to say it is more difficult to work on this area, just that the blockages we have here tend to come through more viscerally.

Reflections: What am I lacking on a physical level? How do I overcompensate for this lack?

Sexual

We often view sexual energy as a separate thing in relation to everything else; where sexual energy is segregated to physical acts. However, how we manage and view our sexual energy has a big impact on all areas of our life.

Sexual energy is also a way which we express ourselves. When we feel restricted in this one area of our expression, it can affect other, seemingly unrelated aspects of our lives too.

Reflections: How do I view my sexual energy? What aspects of my sexuality am I ashamed or ignorant of?

Personal power

Most people have a blockage in this area because it works alongside everything else. To make changes in any area in our lives we have to summon the personal power to do so. This is the area that is involved when we *'give our power away'*.

To give our power away is to go against our own intuition in order to fit in, please someone else or stay safe. I think

it's important to note that sometimes our power is taken away from us against our will.

The inverse to this is an overexertion of power. It is defaulting to dishonesty, manipulation or abuse in order to compensate for our own lack of power. We partake in these types of behaviors on some level.

Reflections: Where do I feel I have the most power in my life? Which area do I have the least power? What is my relationship to power?

Love

How open or closed are you to love? When we have blockages in the lower areas we've already discussed, there is going to be a corresponding blockage in this area of our lives.

When our physical needs haven't been met, when we are ashamed of our sexual energy, when we have no personal power, approaching love is scary.

Reflections: Where do my ideas about love or what it is supposed to look like come from? What type of relationship do I envision for myself? What aspects of myself are confronted in relationships?

Expression

This can apply to expression in a broader sense, but in this case the focus is on verbal communication.

This is another key area that flows into everything else. We could be open in many other areas in our life, but if we cannot express this we are often left isolated.

In order to create safety/security in our lives we have to be able to express boundaries. To express our sexual energy healthily we'll often have to vocalize what we want.

To harness our personal power we have to speak up at times. Even in relation to our intuition and spiritual insight, putting words to our experiences opens us up to community.

Reflections: How free do I feel to express myself vocally? How comfortable am I when silence is required?

Intuition

There are a lot of misconceptions about intuition; what it is and how we can hear it.

Shadow surrounding the intuition can look like not hearing our intuition, not trusting ourselves enough to follow it and having a distorted relationship with our intuition.

Many of us grew up in environments that required us to consistently use our intuition as a way to keep ourselves safe. Our intuition may develop strongly due to this, but does so in a lopsided direction.

You may notice that you are intuitive but only tend to believe your intuition when it leans negatively. In this way, intuition becomes a way to detect danger. However intuition is much broader than that, intuition also leans positively.

This area would relate to the third eye chakra which governs how *clearly* we see things. It's great to have our awareness at this level and see things that are outside of our normal field of vision, but it's important not to get engrossed by this vision.

Spiritual vision can be incredibly clarifying. It allows us to open up parts of ourselves we would otherwise keep closed down, it can make the path ahead clearer.

However the shadow side to this spiritual insight is the inability to bring objectivity to these visions; to not bring your brain along with your heart.

Reflections: What is my relationship with my intuition like? How confident am I in following through on my intuitive insights?

Spiritual

The '*spiritual shadow*' which is actually an *inversion* of spirit, forms when we are encouraged or forced to distance ourselves from an aspect of our spirit. When this happens it can feel like we've lost an aspect of our spirit, that we are permanently disconnected in that way.

This is sometimes referred to as '*soul loss*'. However it's more so that we're unaware of our spirit, or aren't perceiving some aspect of it in a particular moment.

Many of us live in societies/communities that do not prioritize or even recognize the spirit, and so many of us will face blockages in this area. We may internalize the idea that spiritual practice is futile, and that the physical should be our sole focus.

We might be in an environment where it isn't safe or acceptable to explore this side of ourselves. And so, to heal this shadow aspect is a process of reconnecting with this spiritual side of ourselves in safer environments.

Reflections: What aspects of my spirit have I distanced myself from? What type of connection would I like to have with my spirit?

Projection

One of the key functions of the shadow is projection. This is when we unconsciously *'project'* onto others, characteristics which we haven't fully accepted in ourselves. This can apply both positively and negatively.

An example of negative shadow projection would be someone who hasn't owned the aspect of themselves that is angry or contains anger, viewing anyone who is standing up for themselves in any shape or form as angry.

An example of positive shadow projection would be someone who hasn't accepted the aspect of themselves which is capable of love or full of love, projecting a lack of love or care onto someone despite their best efforts.

Projection allows the shadow to remain outside of ourselves, a part of the world at large but never within us. It can be a way of protecting our own sense of *goodness* or to validate and therefore justify our lack of self worth.

To become aware that we project is to bring the shadow inward, which allows us to see ourselves in others, but also form deeper connections with others as individuals. It allows us to see other people more clearly.

"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and

destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Projection is such a difficult concept to explore because there is a tendency to judge ourselves as bad for it.

However it's important to remember that all humans project to some degree; it's part of connecting with people and intertwining with each other's energy.

Approach projection as a way to grow more knowledgeable about yourself and how to treat others more kindly, rather than another way to judge or burden yourself.

Exercise 1: The next time you are surrounded by other people, spend ten minutes simply observing every judgement that comes to mind.

Does someone's appearance annoy you? Does someone's personality grind your gears? Does someone's actions match what you would do? What other things come to mind?

As the process of projection is usually a very automatic one, some of these thoughts might surprise you. Getting in

the middle is a way to question the attitudes you are unconsciously reinforcing all of the time.

Next, notice what specific emotions come up. Emotions are a very clear way to see our own projections. Especially knee-jerk emotional responses that seem to *come from nowhere*.

How the shadow manifests

Projections often present as reactions and thoughts that seem to come out of nowhere or are out of character. This is where we are confronted with the gap between who we think we are (the idea we have of ourselves) and the deeper stuff under the surface.

These reactions aren't necessarily a result of our lived experience or well thought-out stances, but can come from the ideas we have been taught, the people we are around or the media we consume.

When we observe these mental or emotional outbursts with awareness, we are beginning a communication between the conscious and unconscious minds.

This is because these outbursts are the unconscious shadow making itself known, we now have an opportunity to question and contradict it.

Exercise 2: Write a list of the qualities and behaviors which you dislike in yourself. Is there a specific theme here? Are all of these traits mostly physical, mental or emotional?

Write a list of the qualities and traits you dislike in others. What are the similarities between these two lists? Upon reflection, what qualities would you reconsider or take off? Are you being fair to yourself and others?

Becoming aware of where we project is important, but keep in mind that not everything we see in others is necessarily a reflection of ourselves (at least not directly). There is an idea that everyone is our mirror, and in a broad sense that is true.

Internalization

I use the term *internalization* to describe the opposite of projection. This is somewhat similar to when we project shadow positively, in that we can see the good in others but not necessarily in ourselves.

However the opposite of this is *internalization*, which is where we see ourselves in everyone without objectivity. If we are surrounded by *unkind* people we take ourselves to be unkind, if we surround ourselves with *holy* people we take ourselves to be holy (even if our actions do not align).

There is an idea that every person is our mirror or that every person acts as our mirror, and on some level this is true. Every person we come across can teach us something about ourselves, and people often act as direct mirrors for us and vice versa.

If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself. What isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us.

- Hermann Hesse

This works well on a broad scale and it allows us to practice empathy for those who we otherwise would just write off as *bad* or *toxic*.

However it doesn't always work so well on an individual level. Some people are mirrors for us in that they reflect our insecurities and positive qualities back to us.

Other people are distorted reflections that might show us where we need to love ourselves more or set firmer boundaries.

But often people aren't really *reflections* of us at all, and it would become unhelpful and slow us down to try and see ourselves in someone who is doing harm.

The more we work on our shadows the more we come to know ourselves, our values, morals and unique energy

frequency. In doing so, the distinction between ourselves and others becomes clearer and we are able to create stronger boundaries in that way.

When you are at this level of shadow work and have integrated those aspects of yourself which were once considered undesirable, it's easier to see where you end and others begin.

When you are at this point you can observe traits in others without judging but also not taking on a specific energy as your own.

This is common in abusive or unhealthy relationships where the person being wronged takes on the shadow of the other person. Rather than set boundaries or affirm their intuition, avoid the issue entirely.

When we are aware that we are projecting we take self-responsibility, we understand where we are misinterpreting someone's behavior. When we internalize we blame ourselves rather than seeing things objectively.

When working on our tendency to project it's easy to go the other way and internalize everything as part of ourselves, but this is a lack of discernment.

Making judgments is not a negative thing in itself, it's simply applying our knowledge to choose between two options or to make distinctions.

When we are being judgemental in the negative or unhealthy sense, we are often assigning a moral value to someone based on our own standards.

However when we are being discerning we can see someone acting a certain way, not necessarily assign a value to them but know that is not something we wish to be around or encourage, and so we can make decisions from that informed place.

While this knowledge can help us understand other people's behavior and make it easier to understand why they do the things they do, our view of their internal world is not always accurate - we can't be sure what is projection or not.

Use this knowledge of projection and internalization as a way to become aware of where you are projecting your own stuff onto others and where you are taking on other people's stuff. Where you are externalizing and internalizing shadow.

In a broader sense, internalization is a major part of how our shadow originally forms.

We internalize the messages we hear about what is acceptable and unacceptable. We internalize the shadow of our parents, peers and the larger world around us. We

internalize the judgements we receive about our family units, friendship groups, and social identities.

Reflections: Write down some of the beliefs you have internalized about yourself. Write down some of the ways you've internalized other people's shadows.

Shadow In Relationships

Part of shadow work is coming to accept that relationships with other people are essential. We can strive to be independent, self-assured and unattached but that doesn't mean connection isn't valuable. There are many things only another person can teach and show us.

This goes both ways; we can see shadow in our tendency to pull away from everyone, and our tendency to pull away from ourselves. There is a balance somewhere in the middle.

Keeping all of this in mind, it's still important to pay attention to how we are connecting with others and for what reason. To strike that balance between being completely close off and wide open.

Reflection: How do I tend to connect with others?

Our own shadows are often (not always) more obvious in relationships, especially romantic ones. This is because we have to consider how someone else is impacted by our repressed emotions, unhealthy behaviors and unconscious beliefs.

Relationships act as a mirror in this way, where we see someone else's shadows and our own as a reflection of that and vice versa.

Relationships also require a greater level of intimacy and closeness, one which we might not even experience from ourselves internally. The more intimate we are, the more vulnerable we are, and the more our shadow is exposed and brushed up against.

One of the biggest obstacles in a relationship is figuring out where your shadow ends and theirs begins, and over time how these two shadows tend to intertwine with each other.

There is also what I would call a *relationship shadow*, which is a shadow we form in the container of relationships. Some of our shadows are only activated (visible) within a relationship, and consequently some shadow aspects can only be healed within a relationship.

This is why we might experience peace and harmony when in solitude, but the minute we try to connect with others chaos ensues. That old relationship shadow comes up again, just as fresh and raw as before.

Shadow can present itself in our initial romantic attraction to someone, where we feel a sense of familiarity. A sense of familiarity is not always a good sign if familiarity means revisiting old patterns, habits and ways of being.

Reflection: What am I attracted to in a person romantically?

There is no right or wrong answer to this, it's simply a case of becoming more aware of what you find attractive. From there you can decide if this is something that aligns with the vision you have moving forward for yourself or not.

Reflection: What aspect am I uncomfortable with in my relationships?

The first step to identifying the shadow in our relationships (romantic or otherwise) is to pinpoint a pattern that makes us feel constantly uncomfortable. What patterns come up in all/the majority of your relationships that you would like to change in some way?

Just the personal shadow creates a cynical pattern in how we connect with ourselves, shadow in relationships work the same way. We are unconsciously drawn to the same type of people and the same type of dynamics.

As we've discussed earlier there is projection and internalization of shadow. We have a lot of power to shift the dynamics of our relationships so that they are healthier for everyone involved, but it's important to keep other people's free will in mind.

There are many aspects in relationships that are simply out of our control. This isn't a sign that we are not doing the work, but a sign that people as individuals aren't always going to meet us where we are.

Reflection: What are my expectations in different types of relationships?

We often view attachments and expectations as a wholly negative thing in relationships. With the goal being to attain a state where we are attached to no one and expect nothing of anyone.

This sounds great in theory, but how realistic is this in day to day life?

It's true that we cannot expect anything of everyone, in the sense that everyone has free will. However it's also true that these things tend to come with the territory.

In monogamous relationships there is an expectation of monogamy, in friendships there might be an expectation of how much time you'll spend together or the activities you'll do.

It makes much more sense to be aware of what our expectations and limits are in a relationship, so we can work with them rather than against them. When our expectations aren't met we can be aware that this is what is happening, rather than simply projecting this outward onto others.

Working with shadow in relationships is tricky and just as with the personal shadow, there isn't a defined end-point.

We will always be meeting the shadow in ourselves and others.

No matter how much shadow work or healing we do; we cannot expect our relationships to unfold without disagreements, ego battles, and in some cases, pain. We cannot have relationships without any *humans* involved.

The goal isn't to heal yourself of your humanness or shadow in order to have *perfect* relationships. Instead the more conscious we are of how our shadow shows up, the clearer we can be with ourselves and others.

When our personal shadow does arise we can take responsibility. When shadow arises we can give ourselves and others the grace to take a step back, and sit with whatever it is that is asking for attention. Progress rather than perfection.

A natural extension of becoming aware of our shadows in relationships is setting the right boundaries. Where we need space from others in order to center ourselves again, or where someone else is crossing our limits, being able to speak on it.

A boundary is like a signpost which says 'this is what I'm comfortable with.' Once we set a boundary, it's up to the other person to either honor or ignore it and from there we have a choice of how to respond.

Reflections: How comfortable do I feel setting boundaries? What experiences do I have with setting boundaries, how did it go? How do I respond when someone crosses my boundaries?

There is no *right way* when it comes to creating boundaries, nor is there a set of magic phrases we can say to *get* other people to honor our boundaries.

This is a common misconception. Instead, it's about identifying where our limits lie, and allowing our own actions to line up with those, regardless of what other people do.

The Collective Shadow

We have touched on the collective shadow many times so far, but haven't really taken a closer look.

The collective shadow is an amalgamation of all of our individual shadows; how these intertwine and intermingle with each other. The collective shadow can refer to communities, countries and the world at large.

Just as the personal shadow consists of the aspects of ourselves which we hide from, the collective shadow consists of all of the aspects of our culture which we prefer to sweep under the rug.

The unsavory aspects of culture which we prefer not to discuss: the unhealthy ideals we hold, the way we deal with or manage the aspects of society that are considered taboo, controversial and/or unacceptable.

The collective shadow also consists of all of the prejudices and tangible structures that exist in the world: bigotry towards groups and systemic inequality.

To be more specific these can include things such as: racism, sexism, ableism, bigotry on the grounds of sexuality or gender, religious discrimination and so on. We can look at social systems which distribute power, wealth and resources unfairly.

The collective shadow is all of the commonly-held beliefs that otherize, reject or diminish specific groups of people.

Within the spiritual community or where the shadow tends to be discussed like this, there is usually a heavy or complete focus on individual shadow.

Everything is reduced to individual vibration, individual energy...and ultimately individual shadow.

Yet as humans, as a species we do not exist in a vacuum. Our individual shadows arise from this larger collective shadow, which we are born into and then perpetuate consciously or unconsciously, in big and small ways.

Shadow work didn't start with you and it won't end with you either. When we are unaware of our individual shadows or don't take a complete view of them, we are just as unaware of this larger collective shadow.

Many look away from the collective shadow due to fear that it will become a negative focus. When we look at the world today (and let's face it throughout history) there isn't an end to the corruption, the evil and the dismay.

It's easy to get sucked into all of the misery, to the point where living a healthy happy life is difficult.

We have to approach the collective shadow with just as much awareness as we would approach the personal shadow, because there is just as much of an issue ignoring it as getting consumed by it.

We can look at the ways we internalize the collective shadow, and further along, judge ourselves and others for it.

Questions to confront the collective shadow:

- In which ways do I avoid, ignore or dismiss the collective shadow?
- In which ways have I internalized the collective shadow?
- How do I judge myself for this?
- What are some prejudices I would like to work on?

Collective shadow work, much like personal shadow work, has to be approached with the same care; because there are the exact same pitfalls we have already discussed for the personal shadow, just on a larger scale.

There will always be some level of ignorance when it comes to the collective shadow, and to the lesser degree the personal shadow.

This is because we are limited in what we can confront all at once, we have biases and we are situated in different places.

As with the personal shadow there is a tendency to judge ourselves for not being aware of everything or facing everything at once. There is always something new to raise awareness on, unlearn or campaign against.

Personal shadow work has to be understood in the context of collective shadow work because the two feed into each other.

Our parents pass on their personal shadow which was passed down from their parents and so on. Our societies encourage us to form personal shadows, which then flow into each other.

While shadow work can become a trap in itself; where we are always looking for something new to heal, this in itself is not a new phenomenon.

Individualism, self-help and self-improvement are qualities that are valued in most communities. While these values are great in themselves, they can also lead into this self-improvement trap.

As the collective shadow also feeds into the personal shadow, it *is* going to feel as if there is always something new to heal or work on.

Reflections: What limits do I have in facing the collective shadow? What limits do I have around consuming certain

forms of news media? What is an area I feel comfortable focusing on?

Much of our shadow work is done within the context of a deeply broken society, deeply broken systems and deeply broken family units. To confront this, is to see that there is work to be done everywhere, but not necessarily taking on that entire burden.

This would look like identifying our relationship to the collective shadow and where we do want to help. In practical terms, aligning our actions with the causes that we feel capable of meeting, *and* setting aside time to rest and recuperate when the world feels a heavy place.

There is a shadow in thinking we have to take on every single issue in the world, that we have to be warriors all of the time, never stopping to take a break.

If you've been paying attention, you'll have noticed that the key to shadow work lies in striking a particular balance.

Lighwork

Part of shadow work is light work, because the light and dark aren't as segregated as we might think. Those who wish to be lightworkers, also have to partake in shadow work at some point.

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.

- Carl Jung

I want to expand upon this quote by Jung with how I conceptualize it in my own work. When we become conscious of the darkness, we no longer see it as a flat two-dimensional construct; it isn't the opposite of light but a part of it.

When we make the darkness conscious we can see how the light and dark play together, there is darkness in light and light in darkness - figuratively speaking.

Take biblical stories of people meeting angels as an example of how this might work. When a person meets an angel their first response is one of fear, which goes against our preconceived notions of what it would be like to meet an angel.

However it makes perfect sense when you realize that an angel is such a pure being, so high-vibrational if you will, that simply being in their presence is enough to bring up everything that isn't pure within ourselves.

All of our fear, doubt, anger, other negative emotions and prejudices come up when we are presented with a figure that is good but completely out of our comfort zone. Our immediate reaction is often to attack and deny rather than welcome.

This is an example of why shadow work is important, even if our goal is to become *enlightened*; to become embodied beings of light. As we move through the world we accumulate more and more shadow, meeting the light is a process of shedding this inauthentic shell, this armour.

On the flip side, when we do confront our shadows, we don't just see darkness.

Darkness (unconsciousness) may cover our shadow aspects, but the shadows themselves contain positive attributes too.

When we do shadow work there are going to be periods of time where we are just releasing stuff. Releasing old habits, mindsets and ways of being. We might experience heavy periods of isolation where we have no choice but to be alone to process it all.

However, after that comes integration - both of our shadow aspects and integration of ourselves back into the wider world.

One principle to keep in mind as you release old ways, is the importance of resourcing or affirming the opposite in yourself. When you release fear, don't forget to tap into and welcome your bravery.

When we release certain shadow aspects we create this space within ourselves, an empty space of sorts.

This space can be a great place to build something new, to welcome in more light, but it can also be a great space for the old stuff to flow right back into.

Reflections: What is something you want to release or let go of in your life? What is something you want to strengthen or build in your life?

And so, the step after shadow work is to figure out what you want to strengthen or welcome into your life.

The exercise you did earlier of identifying your limits will be helpful here.

Think about what you want to welcome within your limits, what can you add to your life without completely overwhelming yourself?

Facing fear

As with the analogy of meeting the angel, when we welcome something new into our lives there is often unexpected doubt and fear.

We might feel incredibly anxious or uncomfortable, this shows us where those old shadow aspects lie.

Fear is a very common response to welcoming in something new and good, because those things aren't necessarily *familiar* to us, they don't always feel *good* at first.

In the beginning you don't want to ignore this resistance or pretend it doesn't exist, but instead keep an eye on it. How does resistance feel for you? Is there a heaviness? A tension? An emptiness in your stomach?

You want to get familiar with how resistance feels to your system, and how it feels to move through it regardless. This is a way to *practice* moving into something new, and welcoming something good into your life.

This in itself is a form of shadow work, and another example of how shadow work doesn't always involve looking at the negative side of things. Sometimes the good stuff, the healthy stuff, is the stuff that brings up the most resistance in us.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.”

- Marianne Williamson, from *A Return to Love*

This goes back to the concept of the *Golden Shadow* from Jung. This is the idea that within each shadow is a positive aspect - each shadow we have come from a place of good intentions, a way to protect ourselves.

So alongside looking at our unhelpful, unhealthy, and what we might consider as negative traits, we must also consider that context alongside them. Figure out what you were protecting yourself from.

Claiming our positive traits can be so difficult because they often come encased in these walls of protection.

It might not feel safe to be out in the open, showcasing our good traits, because often those are the ones we internalize the most criticism of.

We carry the memory of having our positive traits downplayed, dismissed or attacked (how the shadow forms) in childhood and bring it along with us in adulthood, anticipating similar attacks.

The first step is to identify what your good traits are. Put aside the urge to judge yourself as vain or conceited while doing this for the moment, and just allow a list to form.

Reflection: What is a good trait you would like to claim?

In a similar way to moving through fear earlier, in order to integrate our golden shadow, we have to practice expressing those positive traits regardless of the responses we might get.

In this space, simply observe the doubts and fears that come up.

These thought patterns provide a clear overview as to why we might have been hiding these traits. The disapproving voices we have internalized, coming through again.

This is all information that can be used to confront those blocked spots. This is a practice of being in our power, which in itself brings up a lot of shadow. Notice where it feels uncomfortable to move in this way, but don't be afraid to question it.

Spiritual Shadow

Another aspect of shadow work that isn't often discussed is the idea of a *spiritual shadow*.

I think it's important to note here that there isn't really a distinct *spiritual shadow* as such. Spiritual shadow as we call it is an inversion of spirit, or what appears as spiritual progress but is actually the shadow steering us in a misleading direction.

When the shadow self takes over on the spiritual path, we begin to use our spiritual awareness or growth as just another way to put ourselves above other people; to look down on those we consider less 'awake'.

The spiritual shadow is so insidious because we might take it as a natural extension of spiritual progress. I believe we all face this type of shadow on our paths, and so rather than pushing it aside, it makes sense to come to it with just as much understanding as we would our *human* shadow.

Becoming aware of your spirit is neutral in itself. Spiritual awareness should make us more empathic, more kind, more tolerant, more understanding. However, as humans with an ego there isn't some 'perfect' spiritual path, it's natural to take some detours.

The spiritual information we consume comes through the filter of our ego: the image we'd like to create for ourselves, the image we have of our community, our physical circumstances, our upbringing and belief systems.

What the spiritual shadow represents is a subversion of spiritual concepts and practices - it looks like spiritual progress but is actually spiritual regression.

This applies on both a personal and community level. Where we see our spiritual practice as something that *has* to separate us from others altogether, and/or where we treat those who we consider our spiritual gurus as infallible.

There are two aspects to the spiritual shadow that I want to cover: spiritual ego and spiritual bypassing.

I believe these two aspects flow into one another, because when the spiritual ego is activated, the only logical conclusion is to begin spiritual bypassing.

It's common to encounter the spiritual ego at the beginning stages of our spiritual journey, but can appear at any stage. We suddenly come to this 'new' awareness, this *higher* awareness if you will, and want to tell everyone about it.

It's understandable to want to shake people awake when we feel we have access to important information that they do not. We suddenly see the illusion, lies and deceit in the world and want to make everyone else aware.

However this is not our place. We can teach people, we can help them, we can plant seeds, but awakening is something that each individual must choose for themselves. No amount of lecturing is going to force someone awake.

The spiritual ego is essentially what happens when we begin to see ourselves as distinctly different, unapproachable or lesser than because we see ourselves as spiritual aware. In an effort to protect our spiritual beliefs, separating ourselves from others.

Spiritual ego often comes about because we do not have a grounded spiritual practice. We don't know how to ground into the body, protect our energy or face negative experiences and emotions when they do come up.

We take on the spiritual label but throw our human label away (notice that both are labels).

There are two main aspects of the spiritual ego that I've identified which tie into each other: a sense of superiority, and a lack of empathy.

Sense of Superiority

The first aspect of the spiritual ego (that I've identified) is a sense of superiority; specifically the idea that being 'spiritual' means you are above other people.

The world is not divided into those who are *awake* and those who are *asleep*, consciousness is not as easy to categorize like that.

As people who consider ourselves spiritual there is a tendency to define ourselves in contrast to others. To an extent this is understandable, using labels is part of the human experience and finding groups that we resonate with is important.

However, most of the time we cannot tell someone's level of consciousness just by looking at them or even observing their behaviors. Not everyone is going to fit into the spiritual archetypes we have in mind, and many others can be highly aware without ever needing to go down a defined spiritual path.

Some of the most aware people I know don't consider themselves spiritual. But they are the strangers, the parents and the teachers who go about their day lifting people up and spreading awareness in their own ways.

We might believe we are better than others because we possess certain knowledge they do not. We might believe

we are better than those who don't meditate, do yoga or pray. We might believe we are better than those we don't perceive as conscious.

Even when spirituality takes on a tone of inferiority, where we feel we are more humble than others. That can still create a sense of superiority, we feel better or possess a higher vibration than others for needing less.

Lack of Empathy

The second key aspect of the spiritual ego is a lack of empathy; a *me vs them* mentality.

We might shame those who are struggling for their 'low vibration', see ourselves above the world's problems or feel disdain having to interact with 'unspiritual' people on a daily basis.

This lack of empathy often manifests as a lack of responsibility as well. When someone with a large spiritual ego wrongs someone, they can easily utilize spiritual concepts and terminology to avoid all responsibility.

Rather than admitting their mistakes, being self-aware or apologizing - everything can be labelled a projection or lack of awareness on the other person's part. Perceiving yourself at a higher level means you are above criticism, wrongdoing or accountability.

The spiritual ego can also manifest more broadly in the form of spiritual bypassing or escapism. This is where we consider the spiritual above the physical, or even that these two areas completely separate levels of being.

Facing the Spiritual Ego

Ego is a tricky thing, it often operates in insidious ways. In writing this I acknowledge there will always be an aspect of ego coming through - but that is ok. We all have an ego that we carry around with us day to day.

We can't escape the ego or get rid of the ego, but we can become more aware of the ego and not allow it to rule our lives. On another level, the ego operates as a way to keep us safe. It allows us to know where we begin and another person ends.

The spiritual ego was something I've had to confront along the spiritual path...and of course still do. Rather than necessarily bashing the ego, or pointing fingers, facing the spiritual ego and ego at large is coming to peace with how it inevitably manifests along our path.

Questions to face the spiritual shadow:

- Where do I use my spiritual practices to escape from everyday life?
- How do I use my spiritual beliefs to put myself above or below others?

- What labels do I use in relation to spirituality, do these limit or expand me?
- What resistance comes up in confronting this aspect of ego?
- How do I respond when someone contradicts or questions my *spiritual identity*?

The spiritual shadow is not so much a distinct shadow or a separate shadow, it's an extension of our regular shadow. I place focus here because this side of the shadow is simply more insidious and harder to pin down because it can appear like spirit.

Yes we are spiritual beings having a human experience, but it is also true that we are humans having a spiritual experience. Which is to say that our spiritual practices, beliefs and concepts are all shaped by the human ego and shadow.

While spirit itself comes with a purity, how we approach, contextualize and use spirituality comes with blindspots. We often confuse the two, and believe that if we are practicing spirituality we must be infallible or above others in that.

We all battle this seeming contradiction between the spirit and ego/shadow on the spiritual path. Just as before, the best way to meet this side of our shadow is with loving awareness.

The ultimate goal of ego work isn't to eliminate your ego, but rather to better integrate it as part of your whole.

This is also the essence of shadow and inner child work. In coming to integrate the ego, it's common to find that you feel even more connected to your spirit.

When you don't feel the need to separate yourself based on your spirituality, gaining a deeper sense of oneness and connectivity with all.

The ego gets in the way a lot of the time. The ego likes to tell stories and create tension and separation where there isn't any. Awakening is realizing this, and practicing observation rather than judgement when it happens.

Spiritual Bypassing

With the spiritual ego in effect we tend to place ourselves above (feel more aware or enlightened) or below (feeling more humble) other people on the spiritual path, and those outside of it.

The ego appears to operate in a spiritual fashion, and with this spiritual ego in action the separation is created that allows for spiritual bypassing.

Spiritual bypassing is defined as *"the tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks."*

This term was first introduced in the 1980's by John Welwood, a Buddhist psychotherapist.

We see this in the New Age in particular, but it can appear with any spiritual community or practice. The shadow that comes with attempting to maintain a *high vibration* at all times.

This encompasses our thoughts, emotions and outward behaviors - with the goal to bring our spiritual awareness *higher and higher*.

The terms 'high' and 'low' vibration can help describe certain levels of consciousness in a rough way, but they also simplify things and create black and white thinking towards our emotional, mental and spiritual states.

This is where we aim to go higher and higher, with no way to ground ourselves or our spiritual awareness. A lot of our focus goes onto the top four chakras of the main seven, neglecting the bottom three (which act as our energetic *roots*).

While we are limitless spiritual beings with an unlimited source of energy flowing through us, we reside in human bodies which can only contain so much, and we have human minds that can only contextualize so much.

The higher we wish to rise the deeper our roots must be.

We can often begin viewing our spirits in the same mechanical way we are led to view our bodies; which is to push things as far as we can with no rest or end-point. More specifically, we try to embody *perfection* through our spiritual practices.

This looks like claiming to have no human emotions, to see and perceive everything clearly all of the time - to be infallible.

Without a practice of grounding, we rapidly rise through layers of consciousness but inevitably come crashing back

down - and in the process become overwhelmed by the physical duties, obstacles and shadows we were bypassing before.

Just as residing solely in the first three (physical) chakras can bring a shadow with it through materialism, rigidity and a lack of self-awareness - residing only in the higher chakras brings a different type of shadow, through ignorance and an inflated sense of self.

Spiritual bypassing is the spiritual equivalent of using our physical vices and habits in order to avoid our other responsibilities. It isn't distinctly different from other coping mechanisms, it simply takes on a different appearance.

Contextualizing spiritual bypassing

Spiritual bypassing often occurs when we don't have the right context for our spiritual experiences, therefore the way we practically integrate them into our day to day life creates distortion.

Our modern world is often not best equipped for spiritual awakening. Spiritually as presented to us often leans towards a form of individualism, isolated from wider society and heavily commercialized.

When we have these large life-shifting transcendental experiences without the proper guides or community

structure in place, we have to work backwards from them and contextualize things as individuals.

Being on the spiritual path, at least in the West and certain communities, does create a sense of alienation.

It's natural to approach our spirituality with this in mind, creating separation between ourselves and others, while also bringing that collective shadow (isolation) into our spiritual practices.

When we have a transcendental experience with meditation, psychedelics or out of body experience, there's often nothing to ground this into in day to day life.

We have an experience of spiritual nature and have to go to work the next day!

We don't tend to have a physical community or structure to support us through awakening, and therefore things often stay at a detached mental level.

With our energy remaining at such a high level, when we try to re-enter everyday life or go about our day to day duties, there is an inevitable drop in this energy. We have to come right back down to a physical level - it's a harsh landing.

Questions to face spiritual bypassing:

How do I balance my human and spiritual awareness?

How do I use spirituality to escape or avoid human responsibilities?

How do I contextualize my humanity (and that of others) within my spiritual practices?

How do my spiritual practices inadvertently bring me away from the present moment?

Knowing what spiritual bypassing is and how it might look, we can become more aware of the ways in which our spiritual practices become distorted. In a wider context, we can see where certain spiritual concepts or beliefs might be misleading us.

This knowledge is best used as a self-reflection tool, rather than another way to point fingers or blame others. However it can be useful in discerning which spiritual teachers/teachings we wish to explore further or release.

As well as asking ourselves these questions, spiritual bypassing can be overcome by approaching our spiritual practices with physicality in mind as well. Incorporating spiritual practices that bring the physical body and physical environment into focus too.

With a grounding practice we can work from the ground up with our energy. Starting from where we are, in our current environment and bringing our energy upwards.

From this starting point, we can always build our spiritual awareness up in a balanced way, and have something solid to reference and come back to. This is a process of integrating our higher selves, our soul into the physical body, rather than trying to work backwards from it.

When we are faced with everyday obstacles we don't have to quickly lower our energy to deal with them, we can remain in our physical bodies with our spiritual awareness available to us at this level.

Grounding

Grounding is a crucial spiritual practice, but one that is especially important when we are going through periods of upheaval in our lives.

Grounding practice:

1. Find a spot outside where you can stand barefoot on earth
2. Stand up as straight as you can with your hands by your side
3. Take a few deep stomach breaths
4. Focus on your breath until your mind is calm
5. Visualize roots extending from the soles of your feet into the Earth
6. As you inhale, feel/visualize energy flowing up from the Earth into your body

7. As you exhale feel/visualize any excess energy flowing back into the Earth

This exercise can also be adapted for when you cannot get outside or don't have a natural space nearby to ground physically. Instead of visualizing roots from your soles, go from the root chakra instead.

1. Sit on a cushion in a suitable meditation position
2. Take a few deep stomach breaths
3. Focus on your breath until your mind is calm
4. Visualize roots extending from your root chakra into the Earth
5. Do the following steps, as above

Rituals

Much like grounding practices, rituals allow us to make a direct connection between our spiritual growth and physical environment.

Rituals bring the conscious and unconscious into communication. Plus they don't have to be difficult or convoluted to be effective either.

A ritual can be any physical act that focuses your spiritual energy, practiced with intention on a consistent basis. This is different to a habit which is more so an unconscious act or something you simply wish to get out of the way.

Some rituals to consider:

- Lighting a candle and setting a daily intention
- Spending a few minutes in the shower clearing your energy
- Writing a hundred words in a designated spiritual/intuition journal
- Mindfully drinking a cup of tea or eating a meal

As you can see, all of the rituals above can be incorporated into your daily life without sticking out too much, and that is what makes them so useful.

By incorporating a ritual or two into your routine, your spiritual progress isn't relegated to the mind as some undefined, abstract thing, it becomes physical too.

Dark Night Of The Soul

One of the key stages in a spiritual awakening is the dark night of the soul. This is the phase during our spiritual awakening where we feel completely disconnected from our soul, this is sometimes referred to as a sort of 'spiritual depression'.

This can happen to those who are not spiritual inclined in the slightest, all the way to those who are deep into their spiritual journeys. The dark night of the soul can be understood in many different contexts: existential, spiritual and religious.

A dark night of the soul can happen when we are least expecting it. Through suddenly losing our jobs, a loved one, or when we are on our spiritual paths feeling secure in the progress we've made.

It is beyond a regular depressive spell, and encompasses our entire being - our sense of belonging and self. We feel completely alone, uninspired, uninterested in the things that would usually bring us joy or structure, but most of all it brings into question who we are at our core.

This often happens on the spiritual path because we become much more aware of the ego. Awareness is an amplifier and that goes both ways! We become more

aware of the good already in our lives, but we can also feel and see our shadows with a deeper intensity.

This often happens because *spiritual seeking* is in itself a paradoxical venture. We try to seek a deeper connection to our spirit, but there isn't actually a defined path or goal to reach with that. We are often searching for spirit in a very human way, as if searching for a lost set of keys.

But it is not the spirit that hides from us but the ego - it is the ego which camouflages and obscures itself. So often what happens on the spiritual path is that we end up *finding* our ego instead of our soul. We feel the weight of the ego as if that was all there was.

We can keep this in mind as we go through a dark night of the soul. To get familiar with the deep loneliness, disconnection and forms of grief that come through. Allow these emotions to be felt without judgement.

Then it's important to shift how you approach the spiritual path, which isn't one of finding your spirit which is never really hidden, but of getting comfortable with the ego. To see the human side of yourself without somehow trying to shake it off.

See what sort of spiritual connection is still available to you and can develop within this dark state. Often on the spiritual path we look for overt signs that the Universe is

communicating with us, we search for definitive answers from our intuitive voice.

When all of this is stripped back and it feels as if there is only ego, there is only disconnection, there is only darkness, notice the layers of spiritual connection that still come through. Bring these into greater focus.

It's through this fumbling, searching in the dark, and coming to accept the paradoxical nature of it all, that we can begin to connect with our spirit more noticeably again.

Spiritual Discernment

While shadow is not always a negative thing as we've discussed, if we make no differentiation between good and bad, moral and immoral, how could we approach the darkest aspects of our individual and collective shadow that do warrant the label of *bad*? At least in this limited human perspective.

When it comes to spiritual discernment in particular - it's knowing that not all spiritual teachings are helpful, not all spiritual teachers are right for you, and not all spiritual beings are benevolent.

A key skill to develop when confronting the shadow side to spirituality is discernment. Discernment being defined as the ability to judge well.

The word judge often comes with negative connotations; but in this context it simply means having and assessing all of the information you have, as objectively as possible to make an informed decision.

We often view judgement as a bad thing because it is associated with being *judgmental*.

While judgement can be practiced negatively, for example judging someone's appearance and treating them unfairly because of it, it can also be done with neutral and positive intentions.

Judgement is an important concept when it comes to facing the shadow because we need to develop the ability to notice contrast.

Exercise to connect with your intuition:

1. Set your space with music, incense etc.
2. Get into a comfortable seated position
3. Spend a few minutes focusing on the breath
4. Allow your mind to calm
5. Ask a question of your higher self/intuition
6. Observe the thoughts, visuals and gut feelings that arise
7. Write these impressions down

It is through this simple process of self-questioning that you can better decide what is for you and what isn't. Often

we don't even consider asking ourselves questions in this way.

We don't necessarily know there is deeper guidance which we can tap into.

It's common for doubt and fear to come up when doing this exercise. You might be confused about what certain impressions mean or doubt the clearer insights that do come up.

A big part of developing our intuition is observing the distrust we have towards ourselves. The doubts and fears that appear to come out of nowhere. This isn't a sign that we are doing something *wrong*, but rather that we are learning to separate our own voice from the voice of others.

To be able to sit in a space where we can question what we think, feel and intuit without necessarily *distrusting* ourselves is how we grow a sharp discernment. This is because much of our work involves unlearning.

We have to learn how our intuition and anxieties intersect. We have to unlearn the tendency to always reach outside of ourselves for guidance, or to approach everything with rigidity.

Where we do feel confused, unsure or undecided, we can trust ourselves to come upon the answers at the right time.

We can anchor ourselves even when there are no answers, or something is beyond our control.

We develop a trust with ourselves, not through constantly affirming how right we are, but in finding peace in our convictions but also our ignorance. We're less likely to be led astray like this.

Eclipse

I hope this guide has helped clarify shadow work for you, and that it allows you to find a space where you can approach it without the usual fragmentation.

As I said earlier: shadow work isn't a way to get rid of our shadow but a way to become comfortable with it, to befriend it.

Shadow work, when practiced with awareness, makes approaching the paradoxical nature and gray areas that come with spiritual development less confusing. When you are feeling neither here nor there, you have context for it.

Shadow work is a way to understand why we might fragment ourselves into two halves - the good and the bad. It helps bring these categories into question with a discerning eye.

When we do our personal shadow work it allows us to see and appreciate others from all angles more deeply.

Don't forget that alongside this guide there is a set of 30 printable journal exercises you can do, which supplements the material presented here.

These prompts are not intended to be done one per day within a month, but at whatever pace suits you best.

As shadow work is such an ongoing process, you often will find yourself circling back to the same exercises time and time again.

All the best, sending my continued support.