

***People have come to the practice by many different paths. What brought you to meditation, Sharda?***

When I was about 27, I was going through a very difficult time in my life and was experiencing an extreme amount of dukkha [suffering]. I was living in North Carolina at the time and was at a point where I really didn't have any resources. I had not adopted the religion of my upbringing (which was Judaism) and felt I had nowhere to turn. Like so many people who get to that point of feeling extreme helplessness in their lives, I had to go for some kind of refuge.

All that seemed available at the time, at least in my part of the world, was Transcendental Meditation. So I started practicing TM very intently and found that very quickly—within the first two or three weeks of practicing twice a day for twenty minutes—there was a great change in myself. It was quite sudden. As soon as I began practicing meditation I felt more at ease; I felt happier; I felt some relief from the pain that I was in.

From the very beginning I was a diligent practitioner. But after about two and a half years it just started to fade. The feeling of relief didn't fade, but I felt there was not much movement, not much happening in my meditation. I felt a certain amount of relaxation, but not much insight or understanding. So I stopped doing TM and just let it go.

A few months after that I met James Baraz in San Francisco, where I had moved, and he was offering a class in vipassana [insight] meditation. So I joined his class and from then on (that was 1979) I was hooked. Because I had the foundation of discipline and some stability in doing the concentration practice of mantra, once I started doing the vipassana there was a certain clarity of mind and the ability to see aspects of myself that I had never seen before and that was very powerful.

***Have you spent any time in Asia for your meditation training?***

I am one of the newer generation of teachers who have not practiced in Asia. I went to India for the first time in 1987, but I went to teach a vipassana retreat in Bodh Gaya.

In 1990, while I was in India, I met Poonja-ji, an Advaita Vedanta teacher, and that had a huge impact on me. Poonja-ji pointed us directly to the freedom that already is here and now, and this pointing came at a time when I was really prepared to hear it and take it in. It also created a problem for me for about three years in my relationship to vipassana practice, because in the place of freedom that Poonja-ji was pointing to I couldn't find a role for method and technique. If one could just meet a guru and have a profound realization, what else was needed? It became an important question for me to sort out.

It took me a number of years to integrate an understanding around that issue, and during the years I was struggling with my question I did some Dzogchen practice. I went to meet Tulku Urgyen in Nepal before he died and had instructions from him, and did Dzogchen practice in California with Tsoknyi Rinpoche. It was through Dzogchen

practice that I was able to understand and to hold my experience with Poonja-ji within the context of vipassana practice. I discovered that although the Dzogchen tradition had the Buddhist forms and the Buddhist lineage, it was pointing to the nature of mind that I had experienced with Poonja-ji; it has the language to explain and articulate the nature of mind.

The Theravada language is really more about a progress of insight towards a goal, at least in the way I was taught in the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition. The language of Dzogchen points towards immediate freedom. The Dzogchen experiences were—and do continue to be—a very important resource for me.

***When did you start teaching?***

In the early 80's, when I was practicing quite intently, there were really only five main teachers: Christopher, Christina, Joseph, Sharon and Jack. There were lots of people getting involved in vipassana meditation, but there were not that many teachers. So the main teachers started to ask some of the senior students, the students showing the most commitment to practice, to help out.

It was also around this time that Jack Kornfield was starting his first teacher training program. Because I had been around and was, I suppose, showing some potential, I was chosen to participate in the first teacher training program with Jack. That was really the springboard. The first time I actually functioned as an assistant teacher at a retreat was in 1987 when Christopher invited me to join him in India to teach the winter retreat in Bodh Gaya. Soon after that I moved to England and joined Christopher as a co-teacher at Gaia House.

I started to teach fairly early in my practice years--I had been practicing vipassana for about five years before I started the teacher training. Now that I have been involved for about 20 years, I see that this was a little early. I wouldn't advise somebody to start that quickly, but rather to mature in their own meditation practice first.

***What aspects of the practice or the tradition do you most emphasize when you teach?***

Because I was teaching primarily with Christopher, whose style is so unique and particularly emphasizes inquiry, I found myself following his example; but I wasn't sure what my own particular approach would be. Eventually I realized that my strong point remains investigation and inquiry through vipassana; but at the same time I have a strong interest in incorporating the beneficial influences of metta [loving kindness] as well. For me, metta is an attitude of mind which brings a compassionate quality to investigation.

I talk a lot about the qualities of heart: gentleness, patience, tolerance, kindness and compassion. I usually take a period of time each day or every other day to bring in the more formal practice of metta, because I find that it is very effective.

***And where is your particular passion these days? What is it that you really want to communicate to people?***

My own journey began with such a deep place of suffering, and I have come out of that suffering through the practice. Consequently I have so much faith—really boundless faith—in the methodology, in the teachings, in the power of the dharma, that it empowers all of my teaching. I have so much confidence in the dharma that I want to share that with others.

So my passion comes from the fact that I know the practice works, and I know the mechanics of it. Having suffered very intensely, and no longer feeling that suffering in the same way, I know the difference. I believe I bring to my students a sense of urgency, a sense of confidence, and an understanding of how the practice works. And I think I have some ability to articulate that as well. I try to speak simply, so they can understand. I just keep pointing towards the investigative quality: investigate, investigate.

I would even go so far as to say that I try to communicate a faith in the truth of happiness; the truth of freedom; the third noble truth of the Buddha. This faith empowers me and provides the energy for me to teach.

***And how do you understand the third noble truth [the cessation of suffering]?***

I have come to understand the third noble truth as the truth of freedom, through seeing into the nature of my own mind. It is the freedom that comes from seeing that the phenomena of this mind and body are essentially empty; empty of a “me,” of a self-being. So there is no longer a belief in this arising condition as anything that is going to bring me to some fulfillment. It is this understanding of the essential emptiness of things that has brought me to some level of fulfillment.

What I have come to see is that I am not moving towards some goal or some end result, but in a moment of clarity, wisdom itself sees the empty nature of retreat and not being on retreat. The body doesn't have to be in any particular posture; the mind doesn't have to be in any particular condition in order to do the practice; the practice is in every moment. So I usually give people a break by saying that if you can't find time for formal practice every day, it's okay; because people are generally under a lot of pressure in their daily lives.

I encourage people just to remember that no matter where you are, whether standing in the shopping line, driving your car, having a conversation with somebody—pay attention! Keep your mind awake. Stay awake. That's where the learning and the inquiry will happen. If you can find time to sit on the pillow, fantastic. It will be incredibly enriching. But let's not set it up that if you don't you have lost the practice. We have many moments to practice staying awake.

***I understand you have recently undertaken a thorough study of the Middle Length Sayings of the Buddha? What prompted this interest in the classical Buddhist tradition?***

About fifteen years ago Christopher gave me a copy of the Middle Length Sayings as a gift—it was in three volumes then [as published by PTS]. But I found it dry and difficult to read, so I just put it on the shelf and forgot about it. When Bhikkhu Bodhi came out with his new translation about three years ago, published by Wisdom and BCBS, everything changed for me.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has made these discourses so accessible in the way he edited them, along with the explanatory notes, that I found reading them fascinating and refreshing. I took a six week self retreat and just studied it, read it thoroughly, and took notes. It opened up for me so much the understanding of what the Buddha taught. In fact, I will be publishing my notes soon to make them available to others. [Pressing Out Pure Honey is now available on-line at: <http://www.dharma.org/bcbs/publications/index.htm>.]

***Did anything you read in the ancient texts surprise you, in light of your modern education as a student and teacher of dharma?***

What stood out for me were the themes and patterns by which the Buddha taught. Before this period of self-study, most of the teachings that I had heard were by western teachers. One of the things I had been taught when I first started practicing and working with my own experience was a particular emphasis on paying very close attention to whether my mind was moving towards fear or whether my mind was moving towards love and harmony. Watch the motivation behind the thought and the way the mind is moving, toward wholesome or the unwholesome. I always liked that and always watched it within myself.

When I read the Majjhima I was really amazed to see how strongly this theme was emphasized throughout all the discourses—the importance of wise discrimination between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. On and on, in discourse after discourse and method after method, the Buddha elaborated how to do that. He continually draws attention to the dangers of the uncultivated mind, to the advantages of mental development, to working with the mind, and to how it can so easily move towards the unwholesome action, the unwholesome thoughts, the unwholesome physical movements. He shows how to actually turn that around, to transform the energy of mind and body towards the wholesome and happy mind states.

This is somewhat different from the way I was originally taught about the practice. I was encouraged primarily to practice letting go—just let go, be with what is, notice what is happening and don't get caught in it. But the Buddha, at least in my reading of Majjhima texts, seems to place more emphasis not only on seeing what is happening but also on taking appropriate steps to actually change it. He offers a lot of methodology for how to do that.

What these texts seem to be saying is that in each moment there is the fact or choice—between moving toward what is wholesome or unwholesome—and this choice becomes available only through awareness, only when we are mindful and awake. With mindfulness arises discrimination, and a choice becomes apparent. Inherent in awareness is discrimination, and then we can see: Do I want to follow that aversion, that hatred, that ill will, that anger? Or do I want to bring about some condition of mind and heart that will transform that movement of mind towards something that is more wholesome?

And when the mind becomes more refined we can see the consequences that will follow from either choice; we can know that the choice of each moment will lead to these particular consequences. That's the whole sequence: the intention, the action and the result. It's the intention of where the mind is moving, the action that starts to form from that intention, whether it's a thought or the physical body, and then the result, the consequence of that intention.

With mindfulness and wisdom we are able first of all to just notice, and then to have the strength and vitality of mind to choose wisely. We can say: "No, I'm not going to go in that direction; I'm not going to follow that movement of mind. I'm not following the old habitual tendency." We can then apply mindfulness to change that habitual tendency. This entire dynamic, which is so clear in the texts, has really become a foundation for my teaching and my own practice.

### ***Where do you go from here?***

The most important thing for me right now is to continue to work on becoming even more clear—discerning the places where I am still holding or clinging—so the dharma can flow more freely. The urgency for me to work on myself goes two ways; so that I can experience more and more levels of liberation and with that clarity, allow others to hear and experience the teachings of liberation.