

Tina Rasmussen & Stephen Snyder

Introductory Talk – Italy 2018

- Interviewer: Dear friends, today we are here with Tina Rasmussen and Stephen Snyder. Welcome. Tina learned meditation at thirteen and after years of practice in Buddhist and non-dual traditions completed the entire Samatha path under the guide of the venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw. Stephen, after many years of practice in Buddhist and non-dual traditions, also attended and completed the same retreat. He has been a Buddhist practitioner for more than 42 years. They wrote a book called “Practicing the Jhanas” which explains in detail the Samatha practice, and the various absorbance that can be experienced on the path.
Can you talk about your starts in the meditative practice? What moved you to practice?
- Tina: Well, I had the good fortune to learn meditation at the age of thirteen, and I actually learned it at the Christian church that my family attended. And I’m imagining that the person who taught it - this was a family day and they had different events going on - I imagine that he maybe had gone to Asia and come back and wanted to teach what he learned. So I happened to go in there without my parents and learned the practice at that age. And it was very helpful as a teenager because it’s kind of stressful being a teenager. So I practiced it informally until my twenties and then I really got deeply interested and started doing long retreats and so on.
- Stephen: And for me, it started younger. I grew up on an island near Hawaii, and was raised by a native woman there who had a great love of nature and taught me to appreciate nature, which always lasted and stayed with me. And in addition my family travelled in Asia quite a bit, and my first trip to Japan was when I was three years old in 1960 and I saw Zen monks running around Tokyo with the shaved heads and the black robes trailing behind them. And my first thought, the first impact of seeing that, was: there I am. And so when I got into my teenage years, at about nineteen, with the teenage angst we can have, I remembered this and I turned to Buddhism and started with Zen.
- Interviewer: So now we can come to the question: what is meditation?
- Stephen: That’s a very good question. In its simplest form we can say that meditation is quieting down, turning in and orienting ourselves towards the mystery, towards the ground of being that is the source of all manifestation and form.
- Interviewer: We can see that you have had an extensive training and different meditative methods. Can you tell us more about them? What are the most important practices you would advise to undertake?
- Tina: Yes, our backgrounds have similarities and differences. I really started in my twenties reading about many, many different paths. And ultimately I found Buddhism, and the Theravadan Buddhism that is taught most widely in the United States which is Vipassana or Insight meditation. And started doing short retreats and then longer retreats, and went from a weekend or ten days, to a month. And then over years, did many month-long retreats mostly doing Vipassana. And I also was very interested in Tibetan Buddhism and practiced in the Dzogchen path, and also in the non-dual traditions that are widely available in the United States.

Stephen: For me, I started as I mentioned in the Zen tradition, spent twenty years there. At the same time I was in that tradition, I was exploring Tibetan Buddhism. In the States at that time there was a lot more overlap between the Zen and the Tibetan Buddhist worlds. So I also began studying Dzogchen at that time. And then after twenty years in the Zen tradition became very interested in practicing what the Buddha practiced. And that's what led me to the Samatha practice, and eventually our retreat with the venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw.

Tina: I don't know that we answered what was most important.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Tina: Do you want us to come back to that?

Interviewer: Mmm, well, there's the question: what role retreats had in your life? - which basically is the same, similar question. Would you like to say something about this?

Tina: Sure, do you, do you want to take that one first?

Stephen: Sure. Well, I think early on, for both of us, we realised the value of retreats and so we really made it a practice to do a number of retreats every year. So I found that all was very valuable and in terms of the meditation, the concentration meditation was the first meditation I started with, that was taught in those days in Zen, the counting of breath. And so I started and did that for several years and found great benefit. I didn't tell anyone I was practicing and people around me began telling me how much calmer and relaxed I was. So getting their feedback was very encouraging. So I think it's a very valuable practice just as a layperson.

Tina: Yes, and for me I, as I mentioned, started doing more and more retreats and longer... and at one point I had a teacher who had done a year-long solo retreat where she was basically meditating, up to ten or twelve hours a day for a year. And I was very inspired by that, as well as reading about the Tibetan cave yogis who had done this throughout history. And this was before Stephen and I met, and I was single at the time. And also I was self-employed and I had a mortgage, so it was a very big deal to give up my employment without having a lot of wealth or anything else and do this, not knowing if I would be able to work after doing that for a year. And so I did a solo retreat, and I did many practices on that retreat, which kind of answers the other question, and that included the Samatha that we taught on this retreat here, Vipassana, the Dzogchen including Rigpa, the Brahmaviharas – the heart practices of Buddhism, as well as yoga and qigong.

Interviewer: So this comes to a more general question. Is it important to take retreats? And specifically, can you talk about the one you just taught here in Marola?

Tina: Yes, we feel obviously that retreats are very important and beneficial, and that a daily practice is extremely important. And at the same time, retreats allow us to really go deeper. I believe the Buddha talked about swimming out from the shore, that if you have a short time you can't go out as far, but if you have a longer time you can go further away. And so to start, as we did, with shorter retreats, weekends, and then once those are comfortable to go to longer retreats, and it really allows for a deepening of whatever practice we're doing. All meditation practices--to go to the deepest possible place with them--require more time. And so this is one of the benefits. And it really saturates our consciousness to be on retreat.

Stephen: In addition, the going on retreat is an accelerant to our daily practice as, as householders. And it's generally considered that a retreat is equal to multi-

years of sitting at home. So you're getting a really deep experience that advances your practice in a way that then your home practice is at that deeper level as well. So it really has a lot of benefit to laypeople.

Tina: Yes, and for people that are interested in awakening, retreats are pretty essential. So this is one of the beauties of our time, is that as householders, there are retreats available and we don't have to become monastics. And with enough planning, most people can get to a retreat and really over the course of many years and a lifetime, can go deeper and deeper within this mystery, and gain mastery over these practices to where their spiritual unfoldment can really happen.

Interviewer: So, to come to Marola, can you say something about the retreat in Marola?

Stephen: Well, we always enjoy teaching the retreats in Europe. The yogis, the students are always very eager and interested in developing their practice and learning more. So there's a lot of openness and receptivity here. And the facilities here are really quite superb, in our experience. In the US, it'd be very unusual for everyone to have a single room, and most particularly, a single bathroom. It's usually shared rooms.

Tina: That never happens.

Stephen: When I was in the Zen tradition, we had almost dormitory type... you know, we were sharing a couple bathrooms with a lot of people. So this is very luxurious by our standards.

Tina: And there aren't any yogi jobs, so all the retreats that we go to, you have to work. You work in the kitchen, you clean the toilets, you clean the floors. And nobody had to do that, so that was nice.

Stephen: And that takes time away from their sitting. That engages some of the thinking so it actually does help - they surface a little bit doing these jobs.

Tina: And we just heard the impact on people of the retreat, and it was really beautiful to see how affected people were, and how it is inspiring many of them to really want to continue and deepen their practice.

Interviewer: So now to come back to you, how is your daily practice when you come out from retreats?

Stephen: Well like anyone, our daily practice has benefitted from retreats because even teaching retreats, we're sitting more. And the fact that we're holding the space, and we're also doing some level of transmission with the people, it definitely seats us in a deeper place. And as laypeople, the big question, the big task for us is, how do we integrate these retreats? And how do we let it inform our lives and our functioning in the world?

Interviewer: Do you think that different kinds of meditation practices can be integrated in daily life or do you prefer to be focused just in one?

Tina: We feel that there are many different practices, and even categories of practice, and that all of them are beneficial and they do different things for our consciousness and for our capacity in life. They all have benefit, and we feel that really if a person is serious about their practice, to have some experience in each of these which I kind of named before: of the Samatha, Vipassana or an open awareness practice, something like the Dzogchen Rigpa that's a self-realisation, self-transcending practice, and then also the heart practices like Metta, Bodhicitta, that, they are all very important. And they do different things. So there's a purpose to the differences.

Stephen: And in our perspective, really all of these practices make us a more well-rounded human being and it really affects our consciousness in all the

different ways that we need. So it allows us to go deeper in whatever other practices we're doing.

Tina: We recommend that people, if they're going to choose a practice, to undertake it for some block of time, like a few weeks, or a month, or even many months, rather than switching around every day because that way they can go deeper within that practice. And they might have a period of life say, when they're very stressed, they might choose the Samatha meditation because it cultivates serenity. Or if they're in a period where they're working with a lot of heart issues, they might choose Metta because it helps to purify and heal the heart. And so each practice can be applied depending on the need of the person.

Interviewer: What has been the value for your personal practice of dedicating extensive periods exclusively to the practice of Samatha?

Stephen: Well, as we mentioned, the Samatha practice, because it's a unifying of the mind, it allows the mind to rest more in the stillness and silence which cultivates tranquillity and serenity within our system which is very, very helpful. And in addition, by unifying the mind, it allows us to get more and more meditatively concentrated where we can progress along the steps, the levels of concentration from momentary, to access, to potentially jhana or absorption so... and, and that's a non-dual state, so our consciousness is profoundly affected with that contact.

Tina: Yes, the Samatha practice, as Stephen said, it has a lot of benefits. The ones from a practical, daily standpoint are the serenity that is cultivated and also on retreat of course, and then the concentration. And with today's world where we have devices and entertainment coming at us all the time, there's actually a lot of brain research that's showing it's actually changing the software and the hardware of our brains. And this practice is an antidote to that. And then the other, more mystical developments that are cultivated through this practice, in particular are what's called purification of mind. So just by coming back to the breath over and over we're loosening the grip of our thinking patterns and the grooves in our mind, and that is called purification of mind. And that leads to what we call a "thinning of the me," but basically, it thins out the veils of the personality so that we can potentially have access to more transcendent aspects of what we are.

Stephen: And in addition, it also cultivates a neutrality towards our compulsive thinking behaviours, and also the behaviours that we call in Buddhism the defilements or the hindrances. So it helps us recognise those and recognise those as what I do rather than who I am.

Tina: And we found over time, the people who've studied with us for many years, that these things thin out, and their lives are clearer, patterns that maybe caused them suffering their whole lives become looser, and some of them have access to transcendent experiences that really are so profound that they're some of the most meaningful moments of their lives.

Interviewer: So I come to the next question which you have partially maybe already answered but you might want to add something. What is the value of practicing Samatha outside retreat conditions when usually the discursive mind is much more agitated?

Tina: Right. Well, this is really true of any practice, that when we do it at home versus on retreat we're going to have more thinking mind that's happening. And the Samatha practice really is designed to build that muscle of capacity of turning away from our story and just residing with the breath in a way that can

- give us a sense of peace in the middle of a busy life.
- Stephen: And as Tina was saying earlier, what this does is it supports our unplugging from all of the, what we call, electronic leashes that we all have these days with our phones, computers, et cetera, with instant information, that it's really affecting people's psychology, their level of empathy--all that's being impacted. So by home practice we're learning again to cultivate a neutrality towards that, and realise it's a device to be used, it's not an identity, it's not an extension of our personality or ego.
- Tina: Every meditation practice has attainments that are part of the possibility of it, so these are kind of milestones on the path, as does the Samatha. And for all of the other meditations as well as Samatha, those aren't going to be possible in a daily practice. So with Samatha it's no different than any other meditation, but what is cultivated in the daily practice is what the Buddha called, one drop many times. So it's a drop and it may not feel like as it's doing anything, but if you look at rocks out in nature that have had water dripping on them many times they become hollowed out. So there is an effect that is cumulative from daily practice.
- Interviewer: We know that recently you introduced Dzogchen practice in your series of teachings. Can you explain what it is and why do you think it is very important to practice?
- Stephen: Why don't you go ahead and start?
- Tina: Sure. Yes, well you could see from our own histories that we have practiced both the Samatha intensively and the Dzogchen, as well as other meditation practices. And within Tibetan Buddhism, in the Dzogchen, in the Nyingma lineage which is where we learned (mostly), the Samatha is a very important part of the Dzogchen progression: of Samatha with support, Samatha without support (which is very much like Vipassana) and Rigpa. So the two naturally fit together, they're already part of how the Tibetan Buddhist framework is set up. So it's kind of a natural next step for us to include that for people who are interested in going on to that practice which is a potential pathway to non-duality just as the Samatha is through jhanas, but it doesn't require the same level of concentration. And within Tibetan Buddhism, at least the retreats that we've participated in, there's a lot of teaching and there isn't as much opportunity to actually meditate. And so we wanted to be able to offer people a deeper experience, more hours a day actually meditating, doing the Samatha, and then the Samatha without support and then the Rigpa practice.
- Stephen: What we've seen is, because we present the Samatha teachings in their traditional form as we learned them from our teacher, we see that students really develop the ability to be very concentrated. And when that level of really deep concentration is applied to the Dzogchen practice, we've seen a lot of students realising the fruit, and in fact, realising Rigpa. And so we can see that the level of Samatha we teach really has a relationship to people having the, these Rigpa experiences, which really is a recognition of Rigpa in the location of the person but it's, it's an awakening of sorts.
- Tina: Right. These moments are tastes of awakening. So with jhana, if a person is able to attain jhana, or even access concentration which is much more available to more people, there's a thinning of the me and the potential of a deep, non-dual experience. Whereas with Rigpa it's more momentary, but it's more accessible because it doesn't require the same depth of concentration. So we feel that this gives more people the possibility of accessing a very

profound taste of their deeper nature.

Stephen: Also, the jhana non-dual experience is an interiorization experience, and the Rigpa is an exteriorisation experience. So the, the reason the Rigpa is so valuable is because we can function in the world and, and be realising and, and stabilising Rigpa as we're functioning as laypeople in full lives.

Tina: And it's also more congruent with our own practice because we practice both the Samatha, and then the next stage which is like Vipassana, and the Rigpa. And so we feel that this is a way for us to have all of our own practice be part of our teaching.

Interviewer: So what moved you to share your experience with students around the world?

Stephen: Well, initially it was our teacher, Pa Auk Sayadaw, who asked us to first write a book, and once we wrote the book, then he brought us to one of the retreats he was teaching in the US for a week to do teaching, and to do interviews under the supervision of very, very senior monastics. And so that led us to becoming teachers. But we initially didn't have an aspiration to teach, we wanted to remain private and just be practitioners. But our gratitude really was so enormous that we really wanted to offer this as our gratitude to the world, for the tremendous experiences and learnings we had in the Samatha practice.

Tina: Yes, this really found us in the middle of lives that were full, filled-up with regular things that everybody does like jobs and mortgages and family and, you know, all of those things. And we wrote the book really because many of the monastics at Pa Auk monastery, or who had come back from Pa Auk monastery, wanted us to share our experience so that it could benefit them. And so that's how it started, was we really wrote it for them. And then the Sayadaw was doing a four month retreat, and he had done prior a retreat and felt that people didn't understand as well as they could, so he wanted it for them. And it just got bigger and bigger as more people wanted to benefit from our experience. And so it was really, as Stephen said, our calling to help other beings who are interested in this path to become liberated.

Interviewer: Is your professional career at the moment exclusively focused in spiritual mentoring? Or you also combine your ministry with worldly professions, so to say? How have you managed to integrate your practice with worldly affairs?

Stephen: Well, at this point we both still do work part-time. The Dharma teaching doesn't yet financially support us. Early on, when we began teaching and also as a practitioner, I had the idea I needed to keep separate my work life and my spiritual life; that somehow if I combined them it would be bad for both. And I found it harder and harder to keep them apart. And at some point they just began to merge over, and I realised my lay work life was no different than my spiritual life. It was an opportunity to practice. So once you understand that all of your life is an expression of your practice then it becomes easier to not have distinctions. And you can apply what you're learning in your growing edge to life.

Tina: I went through a similar series of stages where when I first started practicing and going to retreats and so on, I didn't always tell my work associates what I was doing. This was, you know, twenty, twenty-five years ago, something like that. And over the years, as meditation has become more mainstream and as it has been a bigger and bigger part of my life, I did start sharing it at work and found that there were people who were interested and some of them may have been inspired to meditate because I was so open about it. So the two became more and more integrated. And the work that I do has always been about

human potential and human development. I have a PhD in that, I have published books in it, and so this to me always felt consistent for myself, it felt like part of the potential of a human being to experience life with less suffering, or no suffering or from the awakened state. So in that way, I always saw the work that I do in the business world is kind of at the more practical end, and this is more at the mystical, spiritual end. And I've actually now done a few meditation workshops for corporate groups. So they've actually integrated in such a way that occasionally I do that. But for me, what I love about the spiritual teaching is the deep work, and so I'm not necessarily aspiring to that (meditation in business settings). But, as Stephen said, it's more about, for me, the growth has been where I'm coming from, for me to be authentic and be the same person no matter what kind of work I'm doing. And so I do each about half time at this point.

Interviewer: Where can we find more about your teachings?

Tina: Well, the easiest place is our website and that can be accessed via awakeningdharma.com or jhanasadvice.com – they both go to the same website. And on that we have some information about ourselves, we have hotlinks to talks that can be downloaded for free, we have our book as well as Pa Auk Sayadaw's book that can be purchased – there's a hotlink to Amazon. Also on our website there's information about doing one-on-one sessions with us, and then of course all of our events are on there. And at some point in the near future we hope to have home retreats-in-a-box that people can purchase, as well as we hope to be offering online daylongs and maybe even retreats that are done virtually. So all of the information about our events past and future are available on the website also. Anything you want to add?

Stephen: No.

Interviewer: So we know that there will be a retreat in the UK, in Wales specifically, in February 2019. Can you say something about it?

Stephen: Yes, the retreats that we offer are for people who have both Buddhist backgrounds as well as other religions and spiritual traditions because virtually all of these have a concentration meditation as part of their system. So we're familiar with having people from all these traditions come. But it's a chance for people to really learn how to take a practice, the Samatha practice of concentration, and to be with the breath and really learn how to establish themselves in that practice. And take a deep dive with us as the guides and coaches. But it's something they then can take into their life because they've learned enough of the practice to where it's seated in their consciousness.

Tina: Yes, the, the Wales retreat will be at a beautiful location (we've been told, we haven't been there) right on the ocean, and will be taught in English, but if a group wanted to bring a translator and have that happen that would be okay too. And, as Stephen said, the week-long retreats are a good way for somebody to come without the commitment of a two week like what we just did here, but still have a deep experience really learning the Samatha practice, and turning inward and having some time to really orient toward the mystery as well as to learn and develop skills and capacities around this practice for informing their larger spiritual practice that may include other meditations or even other paths. We had a Catholic nun attend one of our two-week retreats in the United States, and we've had people from many different traditions and paths who want to understand more about concentration meditation. And so we're very welcoming of people from all paths and traditions.

Stephen: Another part of the benefit of these retreats like the one in Wales is that again, it really lets us slow down and become more silent so we see the workings of our ego structures and our personality. And we learn to both understand the importance of the ego in terms of having a solid base, in terms of a sense of I, but we need that solid ego in order to transcend it. So this lets us both identify what that is as well as learn how to put that down effectively and open to the mystery that we are.

Interviewer: So Tina and Stephen, thank you very much for having shared with us your inspirational teachings.

Stephen: Thank you.

Tina: Thank you.