

non-duality magazine *an investigation of self realization, awakening and consciousness*

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STEPHEN SNYDER

Interview with non duality magazine. December 2011



Stephen Snyder

Stephen began practicing Buddhist meditation in 1976 at the age of 19, and has had a daily meditation practice from that time on. He practiced for 20 years with several Western Zen masters. He participated in more than 50 retreats, receiving several ordinations. His primary practices over the years have been Zen, the Tibetan Dzogchen Rigpa practice, and the Theravadan Jhanas. He has been a practicing lawyer for more than 20 years, also serving as an advisor to a number of Buddhist and spiritual teachers.

Stephen attended the two-month retreat with Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw in 2005. He completed the entire Samatha path as presented by Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw, becoming first American male to complete this attainment. Stephen is the co-author of the book, *Practicing the Jhanas*, published by Shambhala Publications. Stephen has been authorized to teach by Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw, and works as a spiritual mentor, professional coach, mediator, and lawyer.

NDM: Can you please tell me how you first became interested in meditation?

Stephen Snyder: My earliest memories were of a deep connection in, and with, nature. This sustained connection with nature (the ocean, wooded areas, etc.) led me to be keenly interested in spiritual matters and practices in my early teens. I felt there must be a way to be in touch with feeling connected in my life away from nature. I did not commence a daily meditation practice until 1976. From the first time I sat in meditation I felt a sense of "groundedness" of "coming home". Now, nearly forty years later, this has not changed.



Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen with Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw August 2009

NDM: At what point did you become interested in the practice of jhana? Was this very early on or after you had practiced Zen, Tibetan Buddhism and so on

Stephen Snyder: I see your question as having two parts: 1) when did I become interested in, and begin practicing, samatha meditation and 2) when did I attend a retreat with a teacher with experiential expertise in (jhana) "full absorption concentration", one of the three types of meditative concentration? In the mid-1970s I read the book the "Three Pillars of Zen". It was the first Zen book by an experienced Western author I had read at that time. It suggested beginning meditators could start with the counting of breaths. This was my first meditation practice - counting breaths. Of course, this is a well-practiced introductory concentration meditation (samatha).



Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw

Many years later, after about twenty years intensively practicing in the Zen tradition with some practice time in Tibetan Buddhist tradition, I read a bit on jhana (full absorption concentration meditation) practices and began meeting people who were engaging the samatha practices with highly experienced teachers. I was intrigued to learn that a number of these people were spending significant amounts of time in Asia, principally Burma, under very challenging conditions (limited health care availability, monsoons, etc.) I asked for reading on the samatha practices they were undertaking. This led me to the Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw and the retreat he was scheduled to lead in California, which Tina and I attended. I had about thirty years meditation experience by the time of that retreat and had completed nearly fifty retreats at that time.

I did find overlap between some of the Zen practices, Tibetan Buddhist practices, and the traditional Theravadin Buddhist samatha practices.

NDM: Can you please tell me more about your jhana teacher Ven. Pak Sayadaw? Where and how he learned this practice?

Stephen Snyder: The Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw was first ordained as a novice at the age of ten. He extensively studied Pali and Buddhist texts. He was ordained a full Bhikku at age twenty (which is the minimum age allowed). By the time he was twenty-two he had passed the Dhamma Teacher examination. From 1964 to 1981 he deeply practiced as a forest dweller studying with leading Burmese meditation teachers. He was summoned to Pa Auk Monastery in 1981 by the then dying abbot who asked him to be the next abbot. A few days later the former abbot died and he took over the duties of Abbot. He is fluent in Pali and English. Pa Auk Monastery has actively welcomed non-Burmese practitioners since that time.

On retreat with the Sayadaw he meditates extensively. Whenever he is not meeting with students or otherwise obligated, you will find him unobtrusively meditating. When he is asked a public or private question, he will often quote the Pali source from memory, then give the English translation. He says he does not teach Buddhist practices but rather presents what the Buddha taught. His knowledge of the suttas, the direct talks of the Buddha, and Buddhist practice manuals is vast and comprehensive.

Personally he is warm-hearted and generous. Being in his presence is deeply felt due to his spiritual depth

.The Sayadaw also had the wise foresight when he invited Tina (Rasmussen) and I to start teaching the samatha practices to encourage us to develop and provide a broader context for the traditional practices. As we have done this we have been able to focus more explicitly on the transformative and transcendent dynamics of the samatha (jhana) practices.

serendipitous variety. As a result of focusing nearly exclusive on the transcendent, significantly less attention is directed towards the transformative, the life impact of the changes in perception of self and other. Being focused more on the transformative means looking to improve the integrative quality of each aspect of daily life. It is holding the question – “How does your inner experience find authentic, wholesome expression in your everyday life?” There are those individuals for whom this is their primary focus with little attention directed towards the mystery - experiences with the transcendent. We understand that both the transcendent and the transformational are necessary for the realization and embodiment of true nature.



Tina Rasmussen

NDM: Can you please elaborate on how you have innovated a broader context for these spiritual practices?

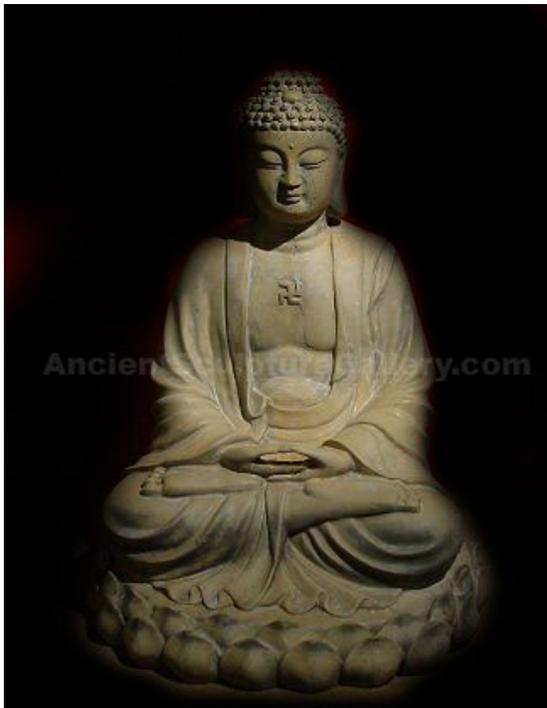
Stephen Snyder: On the retreats we lead, as well as in our book [Practicing the Jhanas](#) we present and support the traditional teachings. By this I mean being with the meditative object, with developing continuity, to the exclusion of all other stimulus, primarily thinking. As the continuity develops and deepens (ripens), the "landmarks" from 1st sit to 1st jhana may arise. This is the traditional teaching and practice.

As Tina and I led more retreats and worked with people one-on-one, we saw that there was a bigger context in operation. "Purification of Mind" was developing and unfolding with many retreatants' experience. In understanding what "purification of mind" encompasses, we need to understand that in its fullness it invites both the transcendent as well as the transformative. In my experience with the Western non-dual teachings as well as the Zen tradition, there is a tremendous focus on the transcendent, the big unity experiences and occasional emptiness experiences. This is accomplished by directing the teachings, and the focus of most practices (meditation, talks, and satsang), toward the "mystery", the unknown, ever-present awareness of the universe. Yet the transcendent experiences in these traditions are mostly of the serendipitous variety. As a result of focusing nearly exclusive on the transcendent, significantly less attention is directed towards the transformative, the life impact of the changes in perception of self and other. Being focused more on the transformative means looking to improve the integrative quality of each aspect of daily life. It is holding the question – “How does your inner experience find authentic, wholesome expression in your everyday life?” There are those individuals for whom this is their primary focus with little attention directed towards the mystery - experiences with the transcendent. We understand that both the transcendent and the transformational are necessary for the realization and embodiment of true nature.

The samatha practices of the Buddha are intended to introduce the meditator to what is greater than themselves through an undifferentiated merging with a more progressively rarefied consciousness. We can call this the transcendent aspect. This is accomplished through specific, progressive, *repeatable* practices.

The transformative quality begins with sila, what Tina and I often refer to as "wholesomeness". In simple terms we are looking to have our behavior and actions match the truth of the transcendent experience, our unique experience of the mystery. (Really it is the mystery experiencing itself in a particular location, but that is another discussion!) This also means we are looking to have our life support the relationship with the mystery more fully. Wholesome living also reduces karma, regret, and guilt.

So it is through opening to the direct experience of the mystery, *with a willingness to be transformed*, that invites something greater. Both the mystery impacting our individual psyche - the transcendent - as well as changing our perspectives, thoughts, and behaviors to more closely match the mystery's inner realization and knowing - the transformative - is "purification of mind".



Additionally, we have introduced a number of working metaphors to identify and normalize the impact and process of the samatha practices. For example we use a metaphor of a scuba diver, or team of divers, entering the ocean from the beach. The diver has full gear on and is walking backwards into the waves. In this way the diver cannot fully see what is approaching. The smallest waves near the shore may be likened to the environmental distractions when one first begins a period of meditation. The room is too hot/ cold, the cushion/ chair is uncomfortable, etc. When we return the meditative object, these small waves do not halt our movement. As we move into an area of larger waves, we each meet our habituated mental and emotional patterning. This is the mind's attempts to keep us from the meditative object by entertaining or distracting us. Should we be able to substantially keep the meditative object and not be knocked down and around by our patterning, we can move forward to the largest waves. This is a territory that is fundamentally intertwined with our sense of self - the identity which we hold with deep conviction. This is the area where people say things like "this is just how I am" when deep patterning is seen. With increased awareness with the meditative object we cultivate a neutral disinterest in "our story" and can be present without being thrown about by the internal waves of identity. Moving through these waves from the beach to eventually reach open water, outside the surf zone, is further purification of mind.

NDM: I would like to ask you about when these deep patterns, tendencies, proclivities, karma and so on. What is the long term effects of jhana meditation on these patterns?

Stephen Snyder: In response to your question about the long-term effects of jhana practice on personality patterning, it depends! We could refer to an objective model when speaking about the effects of samatha practices, but really it comes down to each individual. How truly open are they to the practice while surrendering to the depths and impact of the practices? Also, how much time has been spent immersed in the deepest jhana available? So the depth of the practice and the level of surrender to the practice, and its effects, are important for purification of mind. What is our level of faith, trust, and ease when compared to our habit of contraction, fear, and avoidance? These are all factors to be considered when speaking about the impact of the meditative practices.

Certainly in deep absorption (jhana) there is no personality patterning operating. It is a non-dual state with no self or other. One will only know the impact of the immersion in jhana once the personality structuring begins to re-form after. The personality structure does not end. Yet like rehabbing an older home, we can substantially remodel the interior and exterior to more match the truth of the present. As we purify our habituated patterning we further open to the depths of the unconditioned. The unconditioned can then permeate all aspects of our psyche and being, manifesting as our true nature. Then again we turn towards sila (wholesomeness) to see how best to match our behavior and actions to the inner compass, the deep knowingness, of our true nature. Our behavior then begins to match the internal awakens which leads to a greater internal depth which leads to more congruent actions, and so forth.

Personally the depths of samatha practice were deeply impactful. I was very rough around the edges when I undertook the samatha practices despite 30+ years of meditation experience. I had a more natural ability to experience the unconditioned and yet did not have the "living wholesomeness" part of the process as an active part of my life. As that has been an important part of my own practices in the past years, I am now more than ever able to "walk my talk".

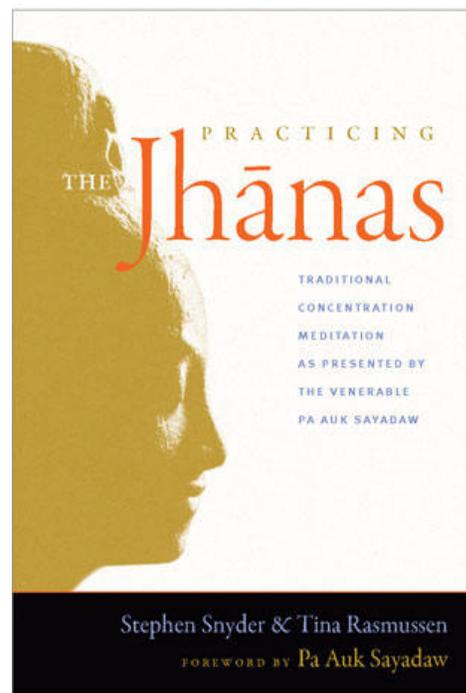
As someone driven most of my life by meeting and exceeding goals, I was gratified to realize that there is no end to the depths of realization as well as the integration of purification available. I do not need, therefore, to focus on the future when all will finally be perfect. I can be here now and know the entirety of realization is right here also. The process of unfolding and embodying realization then becomes a life journey of discovery, integration, and exquisite beauty.

NDM: Do you think there is a way to circumvent purifying the mind. Is a direct path, a magic bullet, a short cut to clearing ones karma and putting the rhinoceroses to rest so to speak?

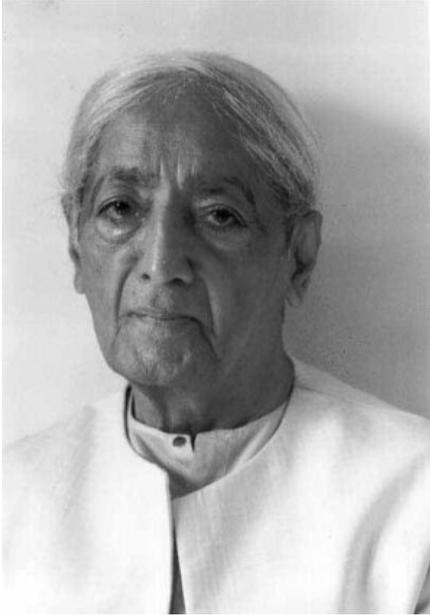
Stephen Snyder: As for the "magic bullet", there seem to be models for awakening/ enlightenment that emphasize a "magic bullet" approach to the personality structures. I have not seen anyone for whom that had the same impact as liberating the personality patterning through purification of mind directly experienced in the fullness of this moment.

NDM: What is the difference with the sukha (blissful) states of jhana and the practice of kundalini yoga or tantric Vajrayana methods like tummo?

Stephen Snyder: I cannot compare the jhana (samatha) practices to kundalini yoga or tummo. I do not have enough experience with the later two to offer a comment or comparison.



Practicing the Jhanas



J. Krishnamurti

NDM: J. Krishnamurti said that truth is pathless land? That in essence he was saying that meditation doesn't work because you are already what you are seeking?

What do you think about these "new age or neo advaita" teachers like Krishnamurti that say that meditation only reinforces the separateness of the seeker/doer. That in essence Buddhist meditation strengthens the ego?

Stephen Snyder: From the perspective of the unconditioned, of course Krishnamurti is correct that the process is pathless and goalless. That being said, should that truth not be **deeply and experientially known** right here in the location of this personal consciousness, it is only a concept. A nice concept, but still a concept. So with this wonderful concept how does one awaken from the slumber of the embedded conviction of identity of self and other than self? We must often walk a path mapping our inner landscape before we can truly know there is no one walking the path. Yet we still may be drawn to continue on a path because it is an expression of our truth.

Further, for those who enjoy and follow the new age/ neo-advaita teachers, awakening is, at best, serendipitous. There truly is no practice and no path. How then does one secure the deep personal experience that is utterly non-personal and life altering? For those who are living the subject-object split, the self and other dynamic, a time-tested path of practice can systematically lead one on interior journey back home. Home to what is utterly indivisible and simultaneously manifesting as the many. The path, in my view, is facilitated through a deep sustained meditation practice. Fundamentally each of us must feel deeply into the question – is the use of meditation an inner calling, a truism for us, or not. If so, meditation is a good choice. Many of the teachers who now discount meditation spent many, many years in sustained meditative practice. Some of these teachers still require meditation as part of their retreats. If they truly believe meditation is of no value – why insist their students meditate?

As I mentioned previously, the samatha practice path, as designed by the Buddha, and deeply practiced by modern day "urban-monastics" is one that is deeply experiential (simultaneously transcendent and transformative) such that it can be repeated under similar circumstances (meaning retreat style practice with a seasoned teacher). So a practitioner can enter this path to not only open to the pure transcendent nature of realization while being transformed in the process of integration and embodiment of that realization.

NDM: If this samatha practice was designed for a monastic lifestyle, then how suitable is it today for people who then have to go back into the world to work and so on. Lead a normal type of life?

Stephen Snyder: The samatha practices are quite suitable for today's lay practitioner. Many people turn to samatha meditation as their primary daily practice. For others it is one of the daily practices they rotate through within a given month or year. I used the samatha practice for the first two years of my meditation practice. It was wonderful to have a practice that gently supported my mind settling. This settling allowed a measure of relaxation, tranquility, and peacefulness to be a normal part of my consciousness. Others in my life, at that time, began to comment on my growing peaceful nature. I could not clearly detect the subtle changes yet others could reflect it in such a way I could see the meditation's impact.

The fruition of the samatha practices, namely the arising of jhana, is so well known it is often the primary focus of discussion. There is, of course, a fruition with the vipassana practices as well. How often is a mindfulness practitioner asked if they "got the eight stages of insight"? Mindfulness is broadly understood to provide benefit even if the eight stages of insight do not arise. So it is through greater understanding that the daily benefits of samatha will be understood, appreciated, and valued comparably to mindfulness.

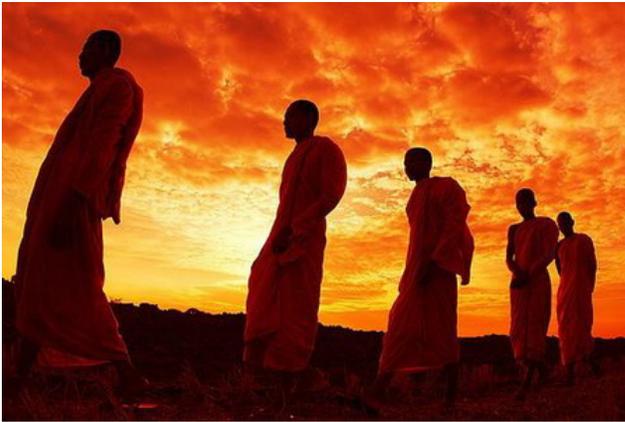
NDM: What about if someone does have these realizations and ends up walking away from the world and wants to become a teacher. How does one support themselves in the west outside of a traditional Buddhist system. Is it OK to charge for teachings instead of the traditional way of dana?

Stephen Snyder: In the West there are many models for teachers. Its fairly standard within the Theravadin tradition that teachers do not charge directly for teaching relying on dana (generosity). When I practiced in the Zen and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, I found the retreat costs were higher and the average donation to the teacher was consequently less. So that model was to charge a retreat price that provided some compensation to the teacher.



In the Theravadin tradition, dana is an important part of each of our practice path. When we gather on retreat we are each offering the dana of our intention, behavior, and actions to all. Are we offering support to our own practice as well as the other retreatants? Are we each being generous with ourselves by attending retreat and wholeheartedly participating? The idea, as I understand it, is for there to be a symmetry between the teacher's dana and the yogi's dana. Each should be giving as generously as is allowed by their circumstances. It allows us each to cultivate greater depth in both giving and receiving. Of course we are talking about the meeting of the unconditioned when it manifests as two seemingly separate entities. Deeply being in touch with dana can allow the indivisibility of the unconditioned to be more embodied and integrated.

There are teachers who offer services that are complimentary to their spiritual teaching. For example there are a fair percentage of Theravadin teachers who are therapists, counselors, or coaches. Students can utilize this other offering which may be another way the teachers support themselves as lay people. So there are a variety of models available to teachers. The teacher's harmony with their personal integrity and intention is an important part of teaching.



We have so few monastic models in the West that the Buddhist monastics here can often struggle much more to receive support than their Asian counterparts. Some of the Buddhist monasteries in the West receive dana from Asian Buddhists who are more accustomed to donating to support monastics. Time will reveal how the monastic model will adapt to the Western perspectives.

NDM: What about insights? How do you have insights in the 8th jhana for example? Don't you need to do vipassana for this reason?

Stephen Snyder: You are quite right that in the Buddhist model "the stages of insight" are part of the fruition of the vipassana practices.

Within the samatha practices there are beneficial deep dives into, and as, the mystery, as the mystery meeting itself. One way to consider the experience and direct impact of full absorption or jhana is like a radio frequency. When the individual consciousness resonates at a matching frequency to the particular jhana, and the personal side is at ease, full absorption can arise. As a reminder this is after we have exclusively and continuously merged with the meditative object for increasing amounts of time. Within the experience of jhana there is most certainly awareness. It is not a blank state of mind. Yet it is not ordinary awareness as there is no thought. There is awareness of the jhana factors comprising that jhana *as well* as the meditative object for that particular jhana. The energetic component of the jhana is the **transcendent side of purification of mind**. It is subtle intimacy within a unity experience with the mystery at that particular frequency level. To be clear, there is no actual frequency level. We are using language to communicate about something where language fails. There is no thinking in any full absorption in the tradition from which Tina and I present the samatha practices. So using language after the jhana fades is always, at best, an approximation about deep, sustained meditative experience.

As a yogi (practitioner) progresses through the different jhanas and the numerous meditative objects of the samatha practices, purification of mind is experienced on numerous levels. Within the meditative experience, the transcendent (pure energetic consciousness level) is deeply impacted. As that deep transcendent experience impacts the personality (thoughts, behavior, and actions) begin changing to more accurately reflect and support the purification experienced. As the yogi's wholesomeness (sila) becomes more refined, there is less compulsive personality patterning at work in their life. So their life continues to improve and consequently their meditation practices develop because there is less identification with compulsive thinking and behavior. So the cycle of realization, embodiment, and integration continues to evolve and purify.

In my experience with some of the non-dual teachings both within and without Buddhism, there is very little emphasis on the importance of embodiment and integration. In those traditions, yogis may well have some realization experience(s) without seating that realization within the personality patterning, thinking and behavior. This lopsided practice style, in my view, can lead to people with deep realizations exhibiting bad behavior. In the Zen tradition this has led to a number of teachers acting in harmful ways towards themselves and their students.

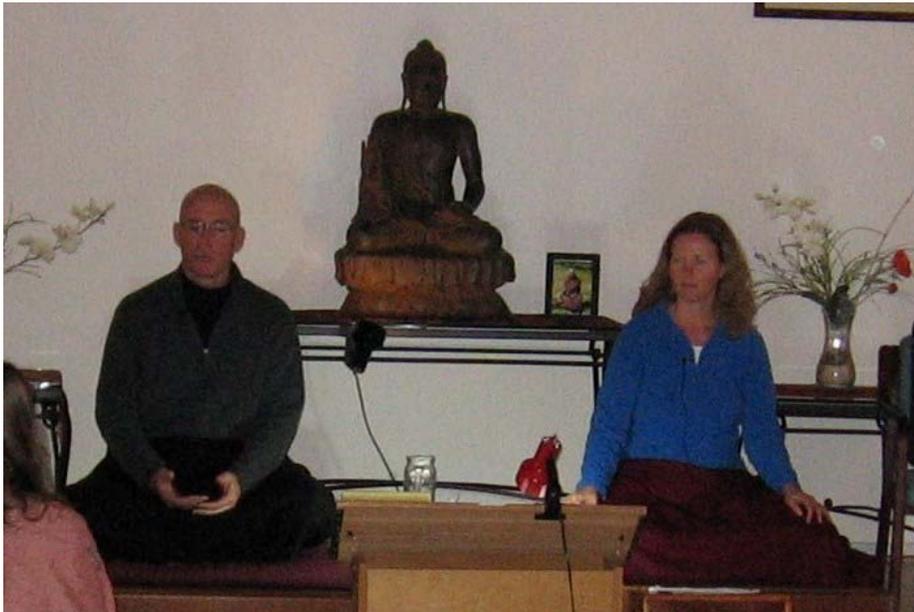
For this reason, having a spiritual practice rooted in sila (wholesomeness) established in deep meditative practices, and giving proper attention to embodiment and integration is essential to Tina and I both personally as well as in our teaching. This is a never ending journey for each of us. I am deeply grateful for that.

NDM: Did the Buddha ever teach some of these methods like Tibetan Buddhists do today such as using ones kundalini (tummo) and activating ones sexual energy in the lower chakra and so on to see the light? Or doing this secret method with a consort or a partner or a student of some kind in a sexual union?

Stephen Snyder: I have not seen references to the Buddha teaching tantric practices using kundalini or any type of sexual energy. I am not a scholar nor historian either.

NDM: What are your thoughts on the view that some Buddhist have that Theravada Buddhism is the lesser vehicle?

Stephen Snyder: There are old references to a "lesser vehicle" called Hinayana Buddhism. My understanding is that the schools of Buddhism that Hinayana refers to are extinct. I am not aware that in today's discourse there is a view of one Buddhist tradition being superior to another. Candidly, today many modern Buddhists have experience in more than one Buddhist tradition. Today, there is much more of a tone of mutual respect and appreciating the different practice paths. For anyone to undervalue or underestimate the rich ageless wisdom of the Theravadin Buddhist practices would be a tragedy. I have found a repeatable path of practice which is wonderfully beneficial to today's spiritual seekers as it was relevant to those living in the Buddha's lifetime 2,600 years ago.



Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen

NDM: How important is it to study the scripture (suttas) along with practicing jhana meditation?

Stephen Snyder: As for steeping oneself in the suttas (the talks of the Buddha), I believe it is very useful for anyone on a spiritual path. While I have ready many, many suttas, I have not read them all. The suttas are a great inspiration and, of course, they include practice directions and suggestions. When I felt myself moving away from the 20+ years of Zen practice, I gravitated to the suttas. I was really curious about what the Buddha actually said and, more importantly, did as his own practice.



Stephen Snyder

Naturally this lead me to the jhana practice as the Buddha refers to jhana in something like 60% of the suttas as necessary and as the practice definition of "right concentration", one part of the Eightfold Path. The Theravadin samatha practices, including the jhana practices, were the final acts of the Buddha at the time of his death. It is compelling to me that, after full enlightenment and decades of sustained meditative practice and teaching, the Buddha chose jhana meditation as his last act before dying. Buddhists of today need to be open to exploring these ancient, profound, life changing practices for themselves. There are many books, tapes, videos of teachers available today. Each person should follow the wisdom of their heart, their spiritual intentions, toward the literature that is most supportive to their journey of purification and liberation.

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