

Establishing Mindfulness

Getting to know Jayanta (Shirley Johannesen)

Jon Clark (JC): On behalf of Calgary Meditation Insight Society (CIMS), welcome and thank you very much for coming. You are an outstanding and devoted Buddhist meditation teacher here in Calgary and have done so much to bring Theravada Buddhism (meditation) to Calgary. I thought we could start with how that came to be.

Shirley Johannesen (SJ) www.stretchawareness.com : In the early 70's, my family moved from Montreal to Edmonton, and then a couple of years later to Calgary. In Montreal, I was working at a hospital as a radiological technician, and at the same time, I was apprenticing and teaching yoga. After the move to Edmonton, I set up yoga classes and continued to teach. As a result, Dr. Hubert Dhanaraj, (now deceased), approached me about establishing a provincial yoga association. He co-ordinated a small group of yoga enthusiasts and we started discussing this idea. A short time later, we formed a board of directors, and registered the Yoga Association of Alberta (YAA) as a non-profit organization. As a provincial association, we were dedicated to continuing our learning, as well as to offering yoga to Albertans. The YAA invited many different teachers to lead workshops and training sessions. This was a very successful undertaking, and after a couple of years, we decided to have a retreat that focused primarily on meditation.

When we moved to Calgary, I was the YAA workshop chairperson. The board suggested I invite a meditation teacher to lead a retreat in Alberta. To our great fortune, Anagarika Dhammadinna, a Theravada Buddhist nun, accepted my invitation. This was our first silent residential Buddhist meditation retreat, with many more to follow. Anagarika (which is how she liked to be called), was a compassionate and wise teacher, whom I studied with until her death in 1990. Her focus was on meditation as well as the Abhidhamma, which is the psychological study of Buddhist teachings. I was passionate about the Dhamma and became a dedicated student. With her as my teacher, friend and mentor, I continued meditating, studying and organizing 'sitting groups' (initially in our home in Calgary). This was the beginning of the *Calgary Theravadan Meditation Society*.

JC: Was this still in the 70's?

SJ: Yes

JC: Did she ever live in Calgary?

SJ: No, she never lived in Calgary. Her home at that time was near Nelson, BC and she later moved to Sechelt (Half Moon Bay), BC.

JC: Was this the first Theravada retreat in Calgary?

SJ: Yes, and Anagarika was the first Theravada nun in Canada. Looking back, I can sincerely say how fortunate for us to have this opportunity to practice and learn

Dhamma. Buddhist meditation in the Theravada tradition just wasn't available at that time, and then to have Anagarika as our teacher was a true blessing.

In 1981, I chaired the first YAA International Yoga Conference, at the University of Calgary, and Anagarika was a keynote speaker on Buddhist meditation. From this conference and from the many retreats she led in BC and Alberta her reputation for being a great teacher flourished. She influenced every one she met, and I know that many will remember Anagarika and her smiling cheerful face and kind demeanor.

As a side note, next year in September 2015, there will be a 25-year memorial celebration to honor her.

JC: Had you meditated much before Anagarika?

SJ: Yes, but not in the Buddhist tradition. I had spent years studying and practicing the Eight- limbs of Patanjali's yoga, so the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism were a new experience. The Buddhadharma instantly spoke to my heart, and after that first Vipassana retreat I went home knowing that I had some very valuable 'tools' for day-to-day living and a pathway to liberation.

JC: What was your next step?

SJ: I was president of the Yoga Association of Alberta for many years and was dedicated to establishing yoga in Alberta. The YAA applied, and received, funding from the provincial government, and we set up the first YAA yoga center in Calgary and the first teacher-training program. It was a busy and exciting time as we rented a space, had weekly classes, employed teachers and started a yoga teacher-training program. There were only a few teachers at that time, but through the YAA, the foundation for yoga in Alberta was established. Today yoga studios are everywhere, and yoga is widely accepted in our society. How wonderful is that!

JC: Yes, Yoga is one of the things you are well known for.

SJ: I love yoga and sharing it with others. The opportunity was there for me to teach to a very wide range of individuals, sports groups, medical associations, educational institutions, teacher training courses etc., locally, nationally and internationally.

JC: Did you go to the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts?

SJ: Yes, I have been there, and to the Forest Refuge. My training as a meditation teacher began with Anagarika, and then continued with other highly esteemed Buddhist monastics. Anagarika had the foresight to invite wise Theravada Buddhist teachers to Canada. I have been so fortunate to study and practice Dhamma from such excellent teachers, many of whom are now deceased. One example is the late Ayya Khema, a German-born Buddhist nun. At Anagarika's suggestion, I invited Ayya Khema to Calgary in 1987, to lead a retreat. She came a few times to teach here in Alberta as well as in BC, and I studied with her in the US.

Ayya asked me to be the Canadian representative for Sakyadhita International. (Sakyadhita means daughters of the Buddha). Ayya was one of the founding members of this international Buddhist women's association, and at her invitation I attended the first North American conference in California in 1989, and then the Sakyadhita International conference in Thailand in 1991. This was the beginning of Sakyadhita Canada Association of Buddhist Women (SC). I am president of this non-profit charitable organization. SC has a great website (www.sakyadhitacanada.org), a monthly net letter and a Facebook page. With Canada being such a large country, and with few Buddhists, our main objective is to connect and share with those who are interested in the Dhamma. We are an active, volunteer association, nationally and internationally, taking part in the Sakyadhita International conferences, which happen every two years. (www.sakyadhita.org).

After Anagarika died in 1990, a series of serendipitous events happened. I was invited to teach a yoga workshop in England and lead a meditation retreat at Oxford University. With a week off between the meditation retreat and the yoga workshop, I decided to go to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery. The Abbot of Amaravati, at that time, was a Canadian named Ajahn Viradhammo. While there, I met Luang Por Pasanno, another Canadian. Both of these monks are senior monastics and abbots, and associated with the western monasteries of the late Ajahn Chah and the Thai Forest Tradition. Luang Por Pasanno is the abbot of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in California, and my teacher and mentor. The timing was impeccable, and today I continue to study and practice in the Theravada forest tradition, and am a CALM member (Community of Abhayagiri Lay Ministers).

JC: Going back to the beginning, where did you first hear of Buddhism and what inspired you?

SJ: My introduction to Buddhhadamma was the initial retreat with Anagarika, in Calgary. Anagarika practiced, taught and lived the Dhamma. She was so inspiring and through her guidance, and my own experience, I soon benefitted from the practice and became a committed student. Venerable Ayya Khema was also a great inspiration for me.

JC: What is it about Theravada Buddhism that appeals to you?

SJ: Theravada literally means 'the teaching of the elders' and the forest tradition is one branch of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Theravada Buddhism, also known as the Southern School of Buddhism, is present throughout Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia. The Theravada tradition is grounded in the discourses (suttas) recorded in the Pali Canon, the oldest Buddhist scriptures. When Anagarika introduced us to Buddhist meditation, there was not a lot of emphasis on rituals or ceremony. I liked the simple, but profound approach, studying the Abhidhamma and reading the discourses. All of teachings are very practical and offer guidelines for my day-to-day living. The forest tradition, in particular,

emphasizes practice (meditation), and that is dear to my heart. I have benefitted greatly from the many long-term retreats that I have done.

JC: Do you have a favorite Sutta?

SJ: I do have some favorite suttas, but the one I have studied the most, is the Satipatthana sutta, the Four Foundation of Mindfulness. I feel that this sutta is very important for all of us who practice Theravada meditation and for me as a meditation teacher.

JC: What are the four foundations of mindfulness?

SJ: The Satipatthana Sutta (four foundations of mindfulness) is the foundational Buddhist discourse on meditation practice. Today, “mindfulness” is a very popular word. If we look at the Pali word ‘sati’, which means *skillful attentiveness or attention*, we get a greater appreciation for its usage in the Buddhist teachings (Dhamma). Among other things, ‘sati’ is a spiritual faculty that forms an essential part of Buddhist practice. In meditation practice, we ‘witness’ the arising and passing away of everything and how this is unsatisfactory, causing us pain. It is the ‘letting go’, the relinquishing, that take us towards liberation or freedom, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.

JC: Well, I would like to thank you. Meditation and Buddhism are certainly alive and well in Calgary and you played such an important role in all this. Where do you see Buddhism going in Calgary? Do you see it growing and expanding?

SJ: Meditation certainly has become more popular and accepted in our culture – whether the meditation being taught has Dhamma as a foundation or not, I am not sure. Nevertheless, having said that, the practice of meditation offers, to those willing to do it, a way to a happier, less stress-filled life.

I am happy that CIMS is co-ordinating and posting meditation groups in the Calgary area and letting the public know when there are visiting teachers or special events. Thank you for the invitation to share the introduction of Buddhist Theravada meditation to Canada, and in particular to Alberta.

Sokhi Hontu! (May all beings be happy!)