

Planting Seeds in the Calgary Dharma Community: An Interview with Barbara Ross

John Clark: Hello and welcome Barbara. You have been a long-standing member and leader of the meditation community in Calgary. Thank you for being here. My first question is how did you first get interested in Buddhism?

Barbara Ross: I was living at Yasodhara Ashram in BC. I had a child while living at the ashram and then moved out to the nearby community of Riondel, where the mediation teacher Michelle Calvert was living. When my husband left, I felt a lot of pain. Michelle was a tremendous help to me during those times. She was my first Dhamma teacher. Meditation with Michelle and the ashram practices I had learned helped me to cope with my loss.

JC: What type of mediation did Michelle teach, and who was her teacher?

BR: Vipassana mediation. Michelle's teacher was Venerable Piyadassi, who was quite renowned, especially for his work on the Abhidhamma. Michelle would offer retreats at her home where Piyadassi would teach. Anagarika Dhammadinna was another one of Michelle's teachers, she was very close to Anagarika who lived nearby at the time in Riondel.

JC: Shirley Johannesen also did a lot of work with Anagarika, as well as bring many, many teachers to Calgary, to support our Vipassana practice and sangha.

BR: Yes, Shirley brought her over to Canada. Much of the foundation of the senior meditation teachers in Alberta and British Columbia was based on Anagarika's work. I mostly worked with Michelle; she was very reinforcing for me.

JC: Did you bring your children?

BR: No, not when they were young. However I do want to mention that my son Ely has been a big help with supporting mediation retreats and my work in Calgary. Ely was the only child born at the ashram and he has a good understanding of the spiritual life.

JC: You then moved to Calgary.

BR: Yes and so did Michelle. I started making a line of children's clothes and I began a farmer's market organic produce business. It really started with the Waldorf School, where the families wanted bio-dynamic fruit. I also went to school for a degree as a recreational therapist. When I sold the organic fruit business and I had been certified in message therapy, I did body work for 2 or 3 years and taught Iyengar yoga. During those years I became a certified Iyengar teacher.

When the Yoga Center of Calgary closed, I began looking around for a center where all these good teachers could teach again. I then founded the Yoga and Meditation Center of Calgary (YMCC).

JC: YMCC was and is an important center for the Dharma in Calgary.

BR: Yes, and it was Bhante Gunaratana, my teacher and preceptor, who helped me set up the core programs for teaching meditation and Buddhism. Joseph Goldstein recommended Bhante Gunaratana to me as a teacher.

It was Shirley that first brought Bhante G, as he is known, to Calgary. I also attended, along with Anne Mahoney, a teacher training program at Bhante Gunaratana's Bhavana Monastery in West Virginia. Over the next ten years, I continued to work with Bhante G, as well as attending many long retreats at IMS and Spirit Rock. At YMCC, we required a minimum of 10 years' experience for teachers, who taught sitting and walking meditation and loving kindness meditation.

And it really grew from there; meditation is now a definite cornerstone at the center. I am grateful for all the teachers and monks who have taught at the center. In the beginning years we had Ajahn Sona who came from the Birken Forest Monastery in Meritt, B.C. He was the first person to give a retreat at the center. As you know, the center is in the basement, and I remember him saying to me, "you know it is like going into a cave to practice and then coming out into the light".

Over the years there has been a least one major Buddhist retreat a year in Calgary that I have been involved with. Many senior teachers, especially from the US, have come up, such as Joseph Goldstein, Sally and Guy Armstrong as well as many monks. It has been a great opportunity for the community.

JC: What was it like to do the five year teacher training program with Gunaratana?

BR: Intense. He taught the sutras, how to understand the depth of the Buddha's teachings. Many lengthy sutras had to be memorized. In addition to the teacher training program, I also attended retreats with Bhante G. I was always amazed at how as I heard the same teachings over the years, I would understand and learn something new each time they were given.

Over the years, I have really matured both in my teaching and understanding of Dhamma. I have done a lot of work and every year I sit some level of retreat. Last year it was six weeks at IMS.

JC: IMS, a great center

BR: A very powerful center. Now they have all private rooms. Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein have done a lot with the community of other teachers. Do you know they offer every year a 3 month retreat, attended by a minimum of 90 to 100 people? There is also The Forest Refuge Center at IMS, where you can do a personal retreat for as long as you wish, a place to just sit.

JC: Moving onto another key question Barbara, what is your favorite sutra?

BR: Probably the Maha Satipatthana Sutta. It is called the "great frames of reference". It is the very foundation of all the Buddha's teachings. I had to memorize it, and it holds the entire Vipassana teachings. It covers everything. I would also like to add how important it is to keep going to retreats and

meeting new teachers. When you practice, and put yourself in front of different teachers, things evolve. The teachers you need naturally come into your life, and help you up the spiritual ladder. That is why it is important to not stay stagnant, to keep going and challenge the length of your retreats. You have to stay open to new teachers. Both lay and monastic, it's good to have both.

JC: Let's go forward. Upcoming you have some retreats

BR: Yes, from April 28 to May 2, 2016 with Heather Martin. Heather has been meditating for 40 years in various traditions, and Sally Armstrong and Guy Armstrong in July 2017. These are fantastic teachers.

JC: Where do you see things going in Calgary with Buddhism?

BR: I was really happy to see that CIMS now has a very nice newsletter. It also is key to keep bringing in well qualified teachers with a lot of experience to offer residential and non-residential retreats. Things like this are very important for continuity.

There are now good steps in place to develop yourself as a teacher. At Spirit Rock, there is now a Community Dharma Leadership program. Enough information is taught, to lay a solid foundation for someone to become a teacher. However to truly teach, you need to come from your own experience. You cannot teach from theory. People need to hear when they experienced a certain problem in their practice that this is what you did to overcome that problem. Not something that you have read, but something you personally went through, something you experienced, and how you worked with it.

JC: What are the benefits of meditation?

BR: For me personally I find that the practice of mindfulness meditation, keeps me in the present moment, aware of impermanence, and acting out of compassion and out of loving-kindness, which opens the heart and mind in a natural flow of energy, the flow of everyday. By being present in the moment, not attached in the natural flow, everything you need is presented to you.

I might also add how important mindfulness is as we age, watching our steps, mindfully careful as we go about in the world so as not to injure ourselves.

JC: Well, on behalf of CIMS, thank you so much

BR: Let me conclude by saying that when I take my last breath, I will feel happy for the opportunity that I have had to walk on the path of the Buddha and to have shared that experience. I will rest knowing that I have done my work. Metta and thank you.