

## Howard Cohn Profile

**Q: What originally drew you to meditation practice and who were your first important teachers? Also, who do you consider your primary teacher these days (if you have one)?**

HC: I was a competitive athlete in my younger years, and I was always interested in the mind and body connection. I developed some homespun theories about how to live one's life in a relaxed way based on what I was learning from sports. I probably irritated a few people with my theories about life when I tried them out. The real spark was meeting my freshman college girlfriend. Her brother was part of the original cadre of teachers that spread Transcendental Meditation in the Western world. I became interested in learning about it. Our romance didn't last, but my interest in meditation did.

Some years later I went to a Ram Dass retreat and met Stephen Levine, who was offering vipassana practice as part of the retreat. I soon moved to Santa Cruz to sit in Stephen's weekly sitting group. Within several months, I sat my first 3-month retreat, followed by many more 3-months retreats.

I consider Joseph Goldstein to be my root teacher in vipassana. He was such an inspiring guide for me on those early 3-month retreats. I still carry his depth of wisdom and commitment in my heart. In 1985, I became part of Jack Kornfield's first teacher training group along with James Baraz, Sylvia Boorstein, Anna Douglas and Sharda Rogell. Jack has been such a wonderful teacher and mentor for me and my gratitude is boundless.

**Q: Could you tell us about how your time with H.W.L Poonja in India influenced your vipassana practice or the way you teach?**

When I first went to see Poonjaji in India, my vipassana practice had become a little stale. I had unknowingly adopted many views about what practice should look like and my ideas were limiting my experience of freedom. I felt constricted. I knew that what I had been searching for was none other than the natural freedom inherent in my own mind but I still felt dissatisfied. Practice had led me to want an end to struggling more than anything.

My experience with Poonjaji ended my sense of searching and the subtle identity of being a seeker. In my first conversation with him, he asked me why I had come to see him. I said, "I know that the seeker and the sought are one, but I've traveled halfway around the world (to India) to see you, so I must want something from you."

He replied, "Remove the seeker, and remove the sought."

Upon hearing those words, I experienced a gap in consciousness and the next thing I knew I was laughing a laugh I had never heard. Those simple words had shocked me out of all my identities—the notion of a seeker fell away; the sought fell away; the idea of a teacher fell away; the idea of a man fell away... all of my various identities gone. And this revealed an immaculate presence and freedom that is always available—right here, right now.

I hadn't realized the extent to which I had subtly clung to the identity of seeker, meditator or person until they were gone. The identities have mostly come back and they are useful for living in a conceptual world but I now know them as limited abstractions or stories, and that they can never capture the depth of our direct experience. So my vipassana practice has become much more about celebrating and enjoying the true gift of being aware in the present moment...the gift that keeps on giving every time I return to awareness. I know that the more conscious I am of being present, the more I notice about myself and my surroundings. I naturally become more clear, loving, altruistic in my motivation and less likely to cause harm in this world.

In my teaching, I try to invoke that ever-available sense of presence. I try to remind meditators that what we are truly searching for is the pure consciousness or pure awareness through which we are already perceiving. I try to show that mindfulness is open heartedness and that practice leads to feeling connected. After all, the ultimate aim and fruit of practice is to unleash our love.

**Q: Is there any specific Buddhist teaching that has most influenced your own practice?**

My early practice followed the Burmese stream of Theravada Buddhism. It was very technical and intense, with precise attention given to the details of experience. This precision really helped me to see the way my mind embellishes my immediate experience and how the profound dramas that play through our minds form around the six repeating sense experiences (not as much going on in my life as I think). The difference between the stories that my mind created and the simple reality of things came into stark contrast. This period of practice also allowed me to see more clearly the three fundamental aspects of experience—impermanence, the unreliable nature of experience, and the self-less nature of all changing phenomena. Even the most delicious experiences are marked by these aspects. This understanding has had such a liberating influence on my life.

In 1989, just prior to meeting Poonjaji, I became much less drawn to the objects of awareness, and much more drawn to awareness or consciousness itself. The more I practiced and paid attention to changing objects, the brighter and clearer my mind became and my attention naturally shifted away from the objects of awareness and more toward the nature of awareness itself.

At that point I was introduced to the Tibetan Dzogchen teachings that have as one of their central aims the introduction of this intrinsic awareness, called rigpa. My first Dzogchen teacher was Chögyal Namkhai Norbu. Then I had the good fortune of spending time with Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, and now for 16-17 years I've joyfully studied with Tsoknyi Rinpoche (Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche's son). The Dzogchen teachings provide such a beautiful and subtle language to describe our consciousness and practices to enhance our experience and confidence in Awareness.

More recently, the teachings of Ajahn Sumedho seem to synthesize the influences of my original Burmese teaching and the Dzogchen teachings with a very earthy and accessible emphasis on realizing the four noble truths in real time. We can use the struggles of our everyday existence to see through the self illusion and experience the heart's release. Ajahn Sumedho was actually at my first 3-month retreat at IMS in the late 70's; he was very inspiring then and he still is.

**Q: Please tell us something about your ongoing sitting group in San Francisco. How long have you been leading it now?**

I've been leading a sitting group in the Mission District of San Francisco every Tuesday night for 23 years. As much as anything in my life it has kept the fire of the dharma burning brightly in my own life. And I would speculate that this is probably true for many of the people who have taken advantage of the group over the years. Because I meet people after the work day and in the midst of their daily lives, their daily stresses, I have more certainty about how important and helpful it can be to align one's life with awareness and love.

A majority of the meditators show up to the group having been buffeted by the waves of their mind (such as worries about the future, obsessions about the past), and tend to become very identified with distorted views of themselves. They seem palpably relieved to be reminded of and returned to present time and the healing power of awareness.

*Interview shared with BCIMS courtesy of Howard Cohn. Thank you Howard for sharing this profile with us!*