

Tricycle Talks

"Breathing Mindfulness"

Episode #124 with Sarah Shaw

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Sarah Shaw: I couldn't do a meditation if I didn't feel some joy. You can't really do anything for a sustained period without experiencing some joy in it. If you are cooking, you know, there's a point where you've almost like you've got to enjoy it. You know, the best food is cooked by somebody who just is a very good cook because they love it. And you feel that when you eat it. It's not recipe book kind of cooking. You just feel their intuitive sense of the eater's needs. And I think joy is very important in our daily life as well. Even the insight teachers of the early 20th century said that there is a problem if you don't do enough *samatha*, and if you don't do enough calm meditation, if you don't experience enough joy, you don't really have enough fuel for the path.

James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen and you just heard Sarah Shaw. Sarah is a faculty member and lecturer at the University of Oxford. Her new book, *Breathing Mindfulness: Discovering the Riches at the Heart of the Buddhist Path*, lays out a comprehensive introduction to one of the most popular and foundational Buddhist meditation practices. In my conversation with Sarah, we talk about how breathing mindfulness is linked to the seven factors of awakening, the central role of joy in meditation, why the tradition of *samatha*, or calm, meditation has been marginalized and suppressed, and what we can learn from thinking about traditions of breathing mindfulness as a part of a vast ecosystem. So here's my conversation with Sarah Shaw.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with scholar Sarah Shaw. Hi, Sarah. It's great to have you back.

Sarah Shaw: Very nice to see you again, James.

James Shaheen: So, Sarah, we're here to talk about your new book, *Breathing Mindfulness: Discovering the Riches at the Heart of the Buddhist Path*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about



the book and what inspired you to write it?

Sarah Shaw: I've always wanted to read, if you like, a history of breathing mindfulness, and the real underlying motivation was that I've always done a practice, which is called samatha vipassana, a samatha practice on the breath, and when I started doing it, which is quite a few decades ago, if ever I picked up a book on breath meditations or discussions of how to do breathing mindfulness, they always said don't cultivate the *jhanas*, don't cultivate the calm, just go to insight. And it was quite uniform in all the books you could find. And I'd go to meditation centers abroad and people would say, “Oh, you shouldn't be doing that practice. And the thing is, I was getting so much from it, I ignored it, obviously, but it always puzzled me. And then I was walking through a forest in Scotland, one of the ancient forests, and I saw how the trees were all supporting each other with so much undercover and foliage and all the mycelium roots stretching out to each other, and I felt, “This is surely what breathing mindfulness practices are like.” So that was the image that really inspired the book for me, that I felt that there were many different kinds of species of breathing mindfulness, and they're all true to the sutta that the Buddha, the sixteen stages that the Buddha taught. They all seem to me to have something of that quality but are quite different. So I felt a forest, for me, explained it, just how different trees at different heights and in different soils adapt and vary. I felt this was like people in different cultures perhaps needed slightly different approaches and for things to develop with different roots and different supports. And once I'd got this model in my mind, it was much easier to find out about the different kinds of breathing mindfulness. It just helped me a lot.

James Shaheen: Right, we'll get to the different kinds of breathing mindfulness. We're translating here *anapanasati*, is that correct?

Sarah Shaw: Yes, that's correct.

James Shaheen: OK. So how did you first start practicing breathing mindfulness?

Sarah Shaw: It was just the meditation, I went to a meditation class at university, and it was just



the one that was there, and I just felt it was what I needed. It's samatha practice, so the emphasis is on calm. And I was obviously a very wound-up student, and I just felt this is exactly what I needed.

James Shaheen: You describe an important shift that occurred in your practice when suddenly something opened up and the breath was moving freely, and you now had a sense of what was possible. You know, I remember the first time I had the same thing happen to me, and I was hooked. So can you say something about this experience?

Sarah Shaw: Yes, I'd really gone along because I felt I ought to, I just needed to get calm, and I found the background about the mind really interesting about jhana factors, but it was always something of an effort, and although I always felt better afterwards, I never thought, “Oh, I really want to do meditation.” And I do remember very clearly just visiting my parents at the end of term, and I was relaxing, and out of nowhere, this very strong feeling came that I actually wanted to do my meditation. I'd never really had that before. And so I just went upstairs and did a practice, and it was just quite extraordinary. I'd never had any experience like that in my life before. I just felt so much, just so much happiness and that I was at home in my mind. It's funny because I was at home with my parents, but this was like my mind had found its home, and I knew then that I would never not do it. It was just obvious to me that it was the most important thing that I should do in my life.

James Shaheen: You mentioned a few words I'd just like to clarify before we continue: the word *samatha*, or *shamatha* in Sanskrit, and *jhana*, or *dhyana* in Sanskrit, as we're using the Pali terms here. Can you just quickly give us an idea of what samatha and jhana are?

Sarah Shaw: Samatha means calm, and that's what attracted me, that word, actually, when I first wanted to start doing meditation, samatha meditation, I thought, oh yes, I need calm. It's the companion of vipasana, or insight. So some of the methods that I talk about in the book are much more based toward insight, or vipasana, and some are based more toward calm. And I really



wanted to do the calm practice. The word jhana is used for a state in meditation where the mind becomes very free and liberated, and the hindrances drop away and there's just a great sense of stillness and what is called absorption, but with a lot of mindfulness, the mind is very alert and attentive. And I found that very attractive as a possibility, so that kept me going while it was difficult.

James Shaheen: So breathing mindfulness is said to be the practice undertaken by the Buddha on the night of his awakening, and the practice is closely linked to what we call the seven factors of awakening. So can you give us a brief overview of these factors of awakening, and in particular, how do they show up in the practice of breathing mindfulness?

Sarah Shaw: Well, it's interesting, the *Breathing Mindfulness Sutta*, which the Buddha delivered in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, he describes the sixteen stages that he gives, but at the end, he makes this wonderful play with the seven factors of awakening and says how they can come into the practice and inform it. And I think for anybody doing a breathing practice, they are really very helpful. They're traditionally felt to be the factors which denote health of mind for anybody. So, although they're called awakening or enlightenment factors, they're also there when the mind is healthy, *kusala*, or skillful, they'll be developing. And they apply to skills with the breath. So they are mindfulness, *sati*; investigation, *dhammavicaya*; vigor or energy, *viriya*; joy, *piti*; tranquility, *passaddhi*; stillness or concentration, *samadhi*; and equanimity, *upekkha*. I've always liked this list because it's not only helpful for breathing mindfulness, but to me, it describes all the qualities you'd want your child to have just in the healthy mind, that they'd be investigative, that they could get peace sometimes, that they were energetic, that they could let go of equanimity sometimes, and I just felt they denoted a kind of general health of mind, which the tradition says they do. They're also skills that are developed through breathing mindfulness because when you sit in meditation, if you watch your breath, you do start to develop mindfulness. You explore, you investigate your breath, you find more energy. And if you're lucky, you get some joy, and then that becomes tranquil, and again, if you're lucky, your mind



might go to some stillness. The mindfulness will always be there, but the stillness will be deepened by the mindfulness and then equanimity when you let go at the end. So I thought all of these seven were just a really good way, almost like tools for understanding in meditation that sometimes your meditation feels more joyful. Sometimes it doesn't, and it's hard work. And it seemed like these seven were very good ways of describing a meditation practice. In the tradition I practice, they're associated with days of the week as well, which is quite funny. If you are a Monday, you are a mindfulness person, or a Tuesday.

James Shaheen: It is like Monday's child, right?

Sarah Shaw: Yes, exactly. They're more fun than Monday's child.

James Shaheen: Yeah, when I first heard about the seven factors of awakening, I thought there were things I would be trying to get rather than descriptive of states that naturally happen over time. So different traditions emphasize different factors of awakening, and in particular you explore the distinction between the paths that emphasize samatha, or calm, which you just discussed, and those that emphasize vipasana, or insight. So could you speak briefly to this distinction?

Sarah Shaw: Yes, and that was really what I encountered. Toward the end of the 20th century, there was a very strong movement toward vipassana insight teachings, and as happens with the tides of practice, I suppose the samatha was underplayed, or rather even discredited in many ways. So a lot of practices that became very popular at that time were much more toward insight, so they would be much more directed not toward attaining stages of calm but toward a kind of letting go and an investigation of the mind and body, and that's just their slant. I think a good mindfulness practice with the breath includes all of the facts of awakening. So I would never say that any system excluded any, but some had more of an orientation that way than others.

James Shaheen: Right, many of us were steered away from samatha, but we'll get to that. And I think samatha is linked to the development of states known as what we discussed earlier, jhanas,



or states of deeper absorption. So can you tell us a bit about the jhanas and how they're developed in the context of breathing mindfulness?

Sarah Shaw: They are associated with breathing mindfulness, and, it was, I think, pretty much taken for granted in the early days that breathing mindfulness would, in a normative situation, lead to jhana and then insight. That was the more usual path. For a number of reasons, the vipasana movement really arose in what was then Burma in the 19th century, and there was a great emphasis on insight and on lay practitioners because the monastic orders were going through a crisis with the colonialist problems. There was a sense that Buddhism needed to be made very accessible in an immediate way and that one should aim for enlightenment in this life. The bodhisattva had animated so much of South and Southeast Asian Buddhism, but this sense that you should go for immediacy and just get enlightened even if you were a lay person became much more prevalent, and that was the mood. It didn't mean that other aspects were ejected; it was just a mood more toward that. And that's when you start to get the new insight movements, which absolutely fulfilled the need for people, like Westerners who wanted something that seemed more cognitive, more scientific, and were a bit maybe scared or just not interested in a lot of aspects of Buddhism which were practiced in South and Southeast Asia. They thought, "Oh, well let's try these insight practices." They seemed very, I mean, the word scientific was often used with regard to them. And of course they swept the West, really, and we can see in them the origins of the mindfulness movement really came from there. So it was an extraordinary creative venture by, I think, a few monastics at the end of the 19th century to develop a breathing practice whereby jhana was not seen as necessary, that you could just go straight to enlightenment through a breath practice. And some of them actually discouraged jhana on those grounds and said, no, we don't want to spend too much time in these states because we should go straight to insight.

James Shaheen: Right. Erik Braun wrote a book on this transition, and he emphasized more the political and colonial pressures that were brought to bear that led to this movement to preserve it



by embedding it in the people. And you do allude to that.

Sarah Shaw: It's very helpful, that book, yes.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I found that book very interesting and helpful too. I don't remember the name of it, but if anyone's listening and cares, it's Erik Braun. But regardless of their emphasis, most forms of breathing mindfulness draw from the same template of practice, and that comes from the *Sutta of Breathing Mindfulness*, or the *Anapanasati Sutta*. Can you tell us about this sutta and the sixteen stages it lays out? You say these stages offer a full path to awakening.

Sarah Shaw: Yes, it really is a beautiful text, and you can find it on the internet easily. And the Buddha's talking to some followers that he obviously regards as the very best of his followers, and he is very appreciative of them in a certain way. He says they're the heartwood of his following, and he teaches them the sixteen stages of breathing mindfulness, and it's a very beautiful and lyrical kind of formula, which you find throughout the suttas. It seems designed to be remembered, as if they wanted it to be remembered and learned by heart. I mean, in English it's, “Mindful, he breathes in, mindful, he breathes out. Either breathing in a long breath, he knows, ‘I'm breathing in a long breath,’ or breathing out a long breath, he knows, ‘I'm breathing out a long breath.’” But I'll just find the Pali, and you'll see it's got this lovely sort of, it's used as a lullaby in Sri Lanka apparently because it's got this nice lilt.

dīghaṃ vā assasanto dīghaṃ assasāmī ti pajānāti dīghaṃ vā passasanto

dīghaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti rassaṃ vā assasanto rassaṃ assasāmī ti

pajānāti rassaṃ vā passasanto rassaṃ passasāmī ti pajānāti

So I haven't read it terribly well, but you can see all the sibilance and the sense of something just very designed rather as we would use rhyme. They didn't use rhyme, but it's obviously designed to be remembered. And what it seems to me is these sixteen stages are different ways you can appreciate the breath and develop mindfulness. So we have the long breath, but we also have,



"Making the breath tranquil, he trains to breathe in, and making the breath tranquil, he trains the breath breathing out," or "Gladdening the breath, breathing in, and gladdening the breath, breathing out." And it's quite funny because if you say to somebody, "Just gladden your breath," they'll think you're mad. You know, how can I gladden my breath? But actually, you clean up. It does work. If you're sitting in a meditation and you try and gladden your breath breathing gladness and breathe it out, if you don't try too hard, something does change and it does become more glad. It just becomes lighter and finer and more appreciative. All of these stages seem to me different modes of looking at the breath, and I found it wonderfully rich just looking at the different traditions and how they worked with these different modes.

James Shaheen: You know, we read so much about the *Satipatthana Sutta*, certainly in the vipassana communities, but going back to the *Anapanasati Sutta* was a real pleasure. You give an analogy to learning a musical instrument in terms of practice. Can you walk us through that analogy?

Sarah Shaw: Well, I think we all have the experience if we've learned a musical instrument of being terrible—if you play the violin, it squeaks, and I played the clarinet, and it squeaked and things just didn't go right. But what you need to find is some sort of enjoyment and flow in the exercise and to get the technique just right so that the instrument starts, I mean, if you like, people say it sort of plays itself, which of course it doesn't. It needs you, but there's a relationship between you and your instrument where you are working together. I've got a friend who's a saxophonist, and I just see it in her. It's almost like her breath when she's playing. She's just so good. This seemed to me what the Buddha is encouraging with the sixteen stages: He's teaching us to appreciate the breath in different ways so that, and of course we'll make mistakes all the time when we start, or the beginning of a meditation, but once you start to enjoy it, you start to feel the breath as something to be appreciated and actually enjoyed and actually arousing joy. I think that's quite a change for many people when that happens, a bit like a musical instrument where you actually do manage to produce a tune, and it's very good.



James Shaheen: Mmhmm. You know, for a practice that has become so popular, there's precious little that was recorded about its history, and it's still largely undocumented as a tradition. So why is this the case?

Sarah Shaw: I don't know. And I know there's a very interesting group of scholars who are working on the old meditations of Thailand, and they're finding all sorts of manuscripts. Kate Crosby, Andrew Skilton, and Francois Bizot in the seventies were finding all sorts of manuscripts to do with the breath and its use in South and Southeast Asia. So it is gradually being more documented, but I think it was probably just one-to-one, a lot of the teaching. I suspect it generally didn't occur to people to write it down.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I mean, it was more of an oral transmission, but there was also a protective spirit around it, which we can talk about in a moment. But you mentioned the old meditations of Thailand, or the *boran kammattana*, which I found really interesting. Can you tell us about this tradition?

Sarah Shaw: Well, I shouldn't use the word Thailand, because they were actually discovered by Francois Bizot, and there's been some French scholars, Durand, Bernat, who've really carried on his research. He found a whole lot of manuscripts in Cambodia linked to living practices, which were quite different from the kind of Theravada Buddhism that was coming to the West, much more emotional, beautiful stories, a lot of alchemical symbolism, and a very strong emphasis on samatha practice, on calming the mind and transforming the energies in the body in an alchemical way so that the mind became restored and able to enter the golden city of nibbana. You know, it's these beautiful stories and images. And of course at that time, all the Buddhism that was coming to the West was very cerebral and cognitive, and this was completely different. Unfortunately, events in Cambodia meant that a lot got lost. So when I say Thai, I really mean Thai, Laotian, and Cambodian, and that whole area seems to have had this meditation system as its normal system. It was everywhere. But it's a bit like, you know, I'm up in northeast Scotland at the moment, and there are folk singing traditions. You don't get books on them, or you do now,



but it's the kind of thing you'd learn at a monastery maybe but perhaps wouldn't be written down. One presumes that is what happened.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You know, I interviewed Trent Walker, and he talked about the music of Cambodia and the songs that were sung that we don't normally associate with Theravada Buddhism. But they would evoke feelings like *samvega*, and it was quite beautiful, and he sang a few for us, so it seems interesting to me that kind of connection. But one of the distinctive features of this tradition is the emphasis on amulets and yantras, and you may have to explain what a yantra is, that encode meditative instructions. So can you tell us about how these elements of mythology and magic interplay with breathing mindfulness?

Sarah Shaw: Well, anybody who's been to an amulet market in Thailand will know them. They're the looping figures, the line drawings that kind of loop around. They're very like Elizabethan handwriting twirls. In fact, some of them are the same. And they describe often the breath and its passage, and they give encoded instructions for meditation. So the songs that Trent sang, they've actually got reference to these five Syllables, *na mo bu ddha ya*, and they come up all the time in those Cambodian songs and in Thai ones. But if you go to a hairdresser or a Thai restaurant anywhere in the world, you will be able to see these amulets because everybody thinks they're good luck. So they have multiple levels of meaning just as being really nice and auspicious, but also as encoded, if you like, encoded instructions for meditation, because they describe almost an experiential body. If you think of Elizabethan handwriting, those lovely, generous twirls and curves, you make designs from them, and you can describe what it feels like to be meditating. They are considered to contain encoded instructions with all the syllables of the *na mo bu ddha ya*, homage to the Buddha, and it's earth, water, air, fire, and space, the associations of those syllables. So it's a very complex system, but there is something very simple and intuitive about it as well.

James Shaheen: So the Boran meditations often focus on the *nimitta*. So can you tell us about the role of *nimitta* in the Boran meditation tradition? You'll have to tell us what *nimitta* is and



what is distinctive about the nimitta here.

Sarah Shaw: Yes. The thing about these old meditations, and it's a very loose label. People sometimes criticize it, but I can't think of any other one. They seem to have originated in Siam or Tai regions. But they seem to put a great deal of stress on arousing samatha and jhana through nimitta, and it's almost like if you were trying to look at a manual of some medieval recorder music or something, it will give you lots of guidelines and explain things for you. The nimitta is something which is mentioned in the canon not a great deal, but is more a commentary phenomenon, which is the sign. It means a sign or a cause or a mark of when the mind comes to balance. So when the mind comes to balance, there will be some sort of sign that arises. For South and Southeast Asians, they're very visual cultures, so it will usually be perhaps a bright light or a sense of the moon or the stars, as it is for many Westerners. But we are a less visual culture, and quite a lot of Westerners experience the nimitta in another way. All of this is explained in the commentaries. Buddhaghosa says it's like just touching soft cotton, a very fine feeling of cotton in the area of the breath. And these are always of saying that the mind is sending, showing its unification through a reflection, its own reflection in the breath, if you like.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I mean, the nimitta as an object, we once ran a section on the jhanas, and nimitta of course came up, and they were represented as these almost blocks of light or objects in the mind that emerged when you reach a certain level of jhana. Is that fair?

Sarah Shaw: It can be seen as that, but the early commentaries are very fluid in how they describe it, and that's why I'm being very cautious because it's sometimes felt as a sense of touch or perhaps even a sense of sound, a kind of rushing, a quiet, rushing sound. And I think in very visual cultures like Southeast Asia, they have manuals of nimittas. You can look up and see which one you've got.

James Shaheen: Right. I think that's where we got the images.

Sarah Shaw: Yes. And our culture is very different, and I think for Western meditators, things



take a different form sometimes, but a lot of them do take forms of light.

James Shaheen: So the emphasis on nimitta is also connected to the emphasis on the body, and particularly the experience of joy felt in the body. So can you say more about the role of the felt experience in this tradition?

Sarah Shaw: Yes. I mean, I think a really striking aspect of these practices is how, I think the word you use now is somatic they are. They see the body and the mind working together. Certainly, looking at early Buddhist philosophy, I feel I've got a new appreciation of how bodily it is, that really the mind is seen as part of a body. I've just been to a very good conference on neuroscience, but the mind was definitely something that was slightly different from the body in modern Western psychology, whereas I would say that South and Southeast Asian psychological systems and Buddhist theory tend to assume a very strong body experience in meditation and in the experience of the breath. They talk about tranquility of body and mind, lightness of body and mind, softness of body and mind. The old meditations put a lot of emphasis on making your body ready to receive the meditation as much as thinking that you are working on your mind.

James Shaheen: Right. So, you know, the Boran traditions are the oldest lineages in Southeast Asia, but they're less well-known today in part because of political suppression. So why were these methods marginalized and suppressed?

Sarah Shaw: Yes. Well, that's in a way what motivated me to write the book because I thought, why would anyone not want to be happy? I couldn't work it out. So I think it was a great motivating factor in my writing the book, and I didn't know the situation on the ground well enough to be able to describe every stage of the process. But there was certainly a great deal to do with the monastic reforms that took place in the 19th century with the formation of the Dhammayut order, the New Order of Monks, the King Mongku, the man who later became King Mongku felt that monastic practices were too lax and that Buddhism hadn't really got a good impression on the international field, and he and a number of reformers wanted things to change



and wanted to get back to original texts, but that they also started to doubt whether states like jhana and enlightenment were possible. So the practices really changed quite a bit, and they introduced a lot of reforms, or so-called reforms. And gradually over time, this mood, I think it's more a mood or atmosphere, you can't attribute it to any one person, came around that somehow Buddhism needed to be a bit more scientific for the West. And it was a real worry. Thailand did not get colonized, whereas Burma did. And so it was very incumbent upon the Thais to present their traditions to the West in a way that would be acceptable, and just gradually states of great calm associated with jhana moved down the scale. It was partly because of the Burmese traditions, because Ledi Sayadaw said you didn't have to experience jhana to go to stages of insight. And that gradually changed, particularly with Mahāsi Sayadaw, that jhana just wasn't necessary, and perhaps it isn't for some people, the canon does allow for that. But the normative ways then just dropped aside. So my teacher, Boonman Poonyathiro, who was a monk in the sixties, was still learning all the old style meditations in his monastery. But that wouldn't be happening toward the end of the 20th century. So they were really pushed away through a number of quite subtle sea changes, really, in public opinion. And he became somewhat discredited.

James Shaheen: Right. I think the level or depth of calm required to practice vipassana is what the bone of contention was, like how deeply into the jhanas must one go in order to build on top of it a vipassana practice. But there is a resurgence in interest in the jhanas, of course, and despite the suppression, these traditions did survive and even made it to the West in large part due to the work of Boonman Poonyathiro, who traveled to the UK by motorbike in the early sixties. Apparently you point out that he was imprisoned briefly in Iran. He's kind of a wild character, and maybe we can do a premium event on him alone, you and I, for our subscribers. So can you tell us about Nai Boonman? First of all, what was his background?

Sarah Shaw: He came from a slightly sad background. His mother died as he was born, and I think she had wanted some gibbon soup, and pregnancy cravings have to be satisfied in Asian



countries, so Boonman's father went and shot a gibbon to make the soup, but she did actually die, and he felt very guilty and blamed the child. So Boonman was brought up by his sister and other people because his father was too upset and just left the village, so he didn't have a very wonderful childhood, and he was very naughty. He used to practice black magic and play tricks, and he was just very much a wild boy. And then he overheard his uncle saying how ashamed he was. At this point he decided to change his ways, so he became a monk, and he did change his ways. He just decided to learn meditation and practice the Buddhist path.

James Shaheen: So you say he disrobed in order to travel overland to the UK, where he started teaching the old meditation practices. So what was his style of meditation teaching?

Sarah Shaw: Yes. I mean, I think it's a development from the old meditations. It's what he was taught in Thai monasteries around the fifties and the sixties. He's now well into his nineties. So it was what he learned as quite routine, and it's jhana practice with the breath. He didn't disrobe because he wanted to stop being a monk. He disrobed because at that stage, you weren't allowed to teach jhana out of Thailand. If you went to the West, you had to teach vipassana. This was part of a movement that insisted that only the insight methods went to the West, so he wouldn't have got permission. He wanted to teach samatha, but he wouldn't have got permission as a monk, which was why he disrobed.

James Shaheen: Why would Thailand restrict the dissemination of samatha? I mean, there seemed to be so many factors conspiring against its dissemination. It is a very curious thing.

Sarah Shaw: Well, that's what's always puzzled me. I think it's partly that it can lead to very great joy. Sometimes it's a bit like in the charismatic Christian churches, where people can shake and cry, and they're completely peaceful. They're watching the breath. They've got no loss of mindfulness, but it can look quite strange to other people. And some people do experience phenomena like that. I'd say probably most people don't really, actually, but they may have felt that it didn't give a good image to Buddhism. The other thing is there was a fear, I think, of



psychic powers, that people would become too powerful in some way.

James Shaheen: Well, as for the shaking, it made me think of Pentecostals.

Sarah Shaw: Yes. Very like that.

James Shaheen: Yeah, but you say that Boonman encourages joy, you mentioned joy in the practice, right from the outset. Can you say more about this embodied sense of joy and the role of joy in breathing mindfulness?

Sarah Shaw: Yes, I think most of us, if we think of hatred, we think of a thought, whereas a breathing mindfulness practice would encourage you to see what effect hatred has on the mind and body and the knots in the breath. It will be affecting our breath if we're feeling a lot of hatred. And Boonman really encourages us to go into that. And of course, if you follow the breath, hatred sort of dissolves in the breath. And he teaches a way that you use that to arouse, to let it change. And it is alchemical. It changes into something very good, into loving-kindness and joy. And sometimes people do get, as that's happening, just as sometimes people have those gifts, the *charis* of Christianity, tears and effects like that because it is really a kind of love that occurs when the hatred goes. And I presume that there was a sense of nervousness about the implications of people seeing what they regarded Buddhism was being shown as quite an irrationalist tradition, and there may have been nervousness. I think that's gone now. It is just as scientific to be experiencing joy, and particularly a lot of research is now showing how good it is for people to be experiencing this joy.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Well, the whole science, the whole rationalization of Buddhism in order to make it viable in the West turns out nowadays not to be so necessary. If it works, it works, you know.

Sarah Shaw: Exactly. Yeah.

James Shaheen: You know, you point out that joy is the central factor of awakening. So say



more about that. It's interesting that you consider it so central, or that he did.

Sarah Shaw: Well, he did, but clearly the Buddha did by making it centrally, literally. To me it's something, I couldn't do a meditation if I didn't feel some joy in it, whether it's a personal difficulty, which could be the case. But I don't think so. You can't really do anything for a sustained period without experiencing some joy in it. If you are cooking, you know, there's a point where you've almost like you've got to enjoy it. If you're writing, there's a point when you need some joy for it to really work well. You know, the best food is cooked by somebody who just is a very good cook because they love it. And you feel that when you eat it, it's not recipe book kind of cooking. You just feel their intuitive sense of the eater's needs. And I think joy is very important in our daily life as well. I remember when during Covid and all the problems, talking to people who were working in the healthcare professions, doctors and nurses, you know, you'd ask them, “How are you managing in all this terrible situation?” They say, “You've got to have joy.” And these weren't Buddhist practitioners. These were people who could be anything. And they just said, “You've got to have something that keeps you going, that's fun,” like listening to music or whatever, dancing, something to bring some joy into your life or else you don't have the fuel, which is exactly what meditation teaches. Even the insight teachers of the early 20th century said that there is a problem if you don't do enough samatha and if you don't do enough calm meditation, if you don't experience enough joy, you don't really have enough fuel for the path.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You know, Thanisarro Bhikkhu, the Thai forest monk, has likewise cautioned me, “Make sure you're enjoying this, because if you're not, you're not going to do it.”

Sarah Shaw: Well, he is particularly good because I have come across his teachings very recently, and he seems to me to have real insights that are very much related to the old meditations, and his methods seem to be as well.

James Shaheen: Right.



Sarah Shaw: He was a pupil of somebody taught by Ajahn Lee, one of the great samatha teachers. And Venerable Thanissaro really has that quality.

James Shaheen: Yeah, he does. You know, before we leave Boonman, I just want to point out to our listeners that he's still alive, and he seems to be himself the embodiment of joy and he's quite a character. In addition to teaching meditation, he hunts for and sells pieces of tektite and dinosaur dung, also known as Buddha's dung. So I thought that was sort of delightful to read.

Sarah Shaw: Yes, he's an extraordinary man and I think particularly extraordinary because he taught meditation in the West, and then he saw the moment to disappear. He went back to Thailand for twenty-two years and left his meditators to sort it all out, and then he came back. And that to me shows somebody who is able to exercise charisma and able not to.

James Shaheen: I think Lance Cousins was one of his students, isn't that right? That's part of your connection to all of this.

Sarah Shaw: Yeah.

James Shaheen: So far we've been talking about meditation traditions in and around Thailand, but you also focus on the traditions that have emerged in Burma, which you mentioned a bit earlier, known today as Myanmar. So first, what are some of the distinctive features in the landscape of Burmese Buddhism?

Sarah Shaw: I think Burmese Buddhism, these boundaries are all very modern and difficult. I think Burmese Buddhism traditionally shared many features of South Asian Buddhism generally. And there was probably a lot of emphasis on samatha in the olden times, until the 19th century, but the Burmese were in a very different situation from the Thais because they were colonized. Buddhism was thought to be in decline. The king was thought to be a bodhisattva. So when he was thrown out, it's like the world had lost its center. The Burmese have this wonderfully rich tradition of spirits and just a very colorful cosmology, and the bodhisattva was always in the middle of that as the heart, if you like, so that when the king got thrown out, there was a sense



that Buddhism had slightly lost its way, and they did become victim to a missionary activity. In fairness to the British, the British weren't allowed to teach Christianity in schools. People don't realize this. Queen Victoria actually wanted people to keep their own religious traditions, but of course, all the missionaries didn't listen to that and came in and taught it anyway.

James Shaheen: Yeah, the American Baptists showed up.

Sarah Shaw: The American Baptists, yeah, but I'm sure they did from other countries. I don't want to get partisan about this.

James Shaheen: Well, I just read a book, and we interviewed Alex Kaloyanides, who teaches at the University of North Carolina, and she wrote a whole book about the American Baptists in Burma.

Sarah Shaw: Right. She did. Yes. And it's quite a revelation.

James Shaheen: Yeah, yeah, it was quite a read. So, you talk about the highly simplified methods that emerged during the colonial period and after, and you mentioned before this idea that anyone could attain arhatship or become an enlightened being in this lifetime. It was something new because you don't normally associate that with Southern Buddhism. So can you tell me about this belief? I mean, it seems interesting that it emerged.

Sarah Shaw: It's a belief, and obviously we don't know, but I think the assumption is that you were on a path whether you wanted to be a bodhisattva or not, because remember, you can be an arhat or a paccekabudda, whatever path you were on, it would just take many, many lives, and you saw yourself in this one lifetime as being at one moment in this vast time span. And I think the new methods tended to underplay that and stress living in the moment, which is obviously has always been part of Buddhism, but not taking into account all this great imaginative background and cosmological background and focusing just on the moment and now and lived bodily experience. Now, they didn't exclude that larger perspective, but it got downplayed, and it meant that a lot of Westerners, when they came to find Burmese methods, in a way pushed aside



a lot of what was regarded as the trappings and just took the kernel of meditative advice. So the Burmese methods are really just sometimes simplified insight practices, which amongst the original practitioners would have been practiced with a lot of chanting, devotions, dharma recitation, investigation, discussion. But the actual meditative method became very simple and direct, in many cases. So Ledi Sayadaw and Mahāsi Sayadaw's methods became very popular, and I think there were pros and cons. The pros were, of course, the wonderful thing that the Westerners felt they could try all these methods. So, Goenka and U Ba Khin, the inheritors of these traditions, started to make great inroads in the West through adaptation. That's why I like the image of trees because trees do adapt in new environments, and I felt that's what Goenka and U Ba Khin had done. They'd gone to a new setting and tried to arouse mindfulness and wisdom in a different way.

James Shaheen: Well, you say that the emphasis on breathing mindfulness was a turning point in the evolution of the practice of meditations. Can you say more about that? It's very interesting.

Sarah Shaw: Yes, it struck me while I was reading and listening and listening to talks and hearing reminisces of people, you know, tapes and things, and also people I could remember were from when I was younger, people who had been to Burma when it was a British colony, that there was just a sense that it was a very and exciting time from a meditative point of view because there was a feeling that Buddhism must go to the West, and the people who introduced this and who did this, like Goenka and U Ba Khin and others, were real, real pioneers. And by taking very simple breath meditations, it was almost as if that was the thing that they felt they could offer to Westerners that would allow them to transform their mental state and their daily lives. So it was a wonderful and revolutionary thing to do, really to take just, I mean, you could take the tip of the nose. The Burmese put great emphasis on that *anapana* spot. And there are practices that develop around that. And it has had an extraordinary success, really quite extraordinary.

James Shaheen: Right, there is so much in this book. Obviously we can't talk about all of the



traditions you discussed, but now that we've gone through a few of them and a few of the teachers described in the book, I'd like to take a step back and look at how all these traditions fit together. I mean, what makes them Southern Buddhism? So to return to the forest that you started with, how do you think about the ecosystem of Theravada Buddhism and its many lineages and traditions?

Sarah Shaw: Well, it's interesting because, in a way, if you look at Tibetan Buddhism, talk to any Tibetan Buddhist, they take it for granted that you've got lineages all over the place. And my understanding is, and I think people don't realize, that Theravada Buddhism must have been much the same, though a lot would be unrecorded. And also, I don't speak Thai or Burmese, so I can't look at the primary sources. I have to be dependent on translations, but they are just very richly intertwined. And you do get lineages of teachers, but you also get lineages of practice in a way, like the forest tradition is really a lineage of a way of life, a way of life, a kind of approach to it. And it had its founding fathers, but it is less of, it isn't guru tradition so much, although people value their teachers very highly and regard them as their lineage. It doesn't have quite the connotations of a Tibetan or a Chinese lineage.

James Shaheen: So you described the phenomenon of crown shyness in forests. Can you tell us about this phenomenon? How do you think about this in the context of breathing mindfulness? I thought it was very nice.

Sarah Shaw: Yes, and I almost didn't want to say anything about it because it's sort of almost as an image to me speaks for itself. And that's if you go into a forest, I was quite amazed at this, particularly the ancient forests, there's clearly been all sorts of maneuvering by trees to get positions at lower levels, and they've got the foliage supporting them, and they support each other. Of course, the mycelial networks and the rhizomes and the different, not mutations, but changes that occur as they adapt to different soils and elevations and climates, all of these things happen and they must really affect, because trees, I'm told, I have a friend who is a forester and she really taught me through all of this, and she's also practicing Buddhist, so she understood

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exactly what I meant, and she said the trees are really opportunistic. If a space comes, they grow there. So if you're in a forest and the space comes, then some branch will immediately grow from another tree to fill that space, so they're not being nice to each other. They're quite ruthless at ground level, if you like, but at the top, and this is what is so beautiful, and nobody I think knows the reason why, there is this thing called crown shyness whereby if you look up, you can see between each of the trees, this space, and it lets the light, the rain, the sun, the wind, in a kind of measured way because each tree leaves the other one's space at the higher level. And I just felt that was a wonderful way to describe how people and lineages can live together in a way, because of course, if they do that, it means all the small trees and the foliage at the ground level get nourishment and light and everything they need, so that it's like the elders are sustaining the whole forest with the really tall trees. And I felt, well, isn't that what we in Theravada Buddhism or Southern Buddhism should be doing? It just felt like a really wonderful image, to let in the light for newer people. You know, there are lots of people of my generation who've been practicing for decades, and I like the feeling that there's almost a kind of a sangha there for people that protects the teaching.

James Shaheen: That's so nicely put. So Sarah Shaw, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. So for our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Breathing Mindfulness*, available for pre-order now. So thank you, Sarah.

Sarah Shaw: Thanks, James.