

Everyone can feel the peace momentarily – An Interview with Dharma teacher Anne Mahoney

Jon Clark (JC): Welcome Ann. Let's start with how you first got into Buddhism.

Ann Mahoney (AM): I had moved back to Calgary in 1986 and felt that life was out of balance and I was not connected with myself. I phoned up the yoga center about yoga and meditation classes and enrolled in a meditation class with Shirley Johannesen, and I never looked back.

JC: So she was your first teacher, then?

AM: Yes. I took many classes with Shirley. Starting in 1987 Shirley brought in Venerable Ayya Khema to Calgary to lead a retreat, which I attended. Ayya Khema was my first monastic teacher. I also attended a weekly meditation class (Wednesday sitting group) with Shirley. When Shirley moved away from Calgary in 2000/2001 she asked me to lead the class. I was also helping Shirley with retreats around that time.

JC: When did you finish your PhD?

AM: In 1984. I started my meditation career after I graduated.

JC: Was your degree in psychology?

AM: Yes, in experimental psychopathology, which is the research arm of clinical psychology.

JC: in terms of Buddhism, what would you say is your favorite sutta?

AM: I think the sutta that has been the most important for me is the Satipatthana (the Four Foundations of Mindfulness) Sutta. One of the things that draws me to the Satipatthana Sutta is the applicability to all parts of life. Mindful awareness in daily life is a main focus in the Dharma talks I give. I believe that how one takes the practice off the cushion determines how we live the Dhamma.

JC: One thing that has intrigued me has been your blending of your psychotherapy work with Buddhism. Do you follow Jack Kornfield at all?

AM: I wouldn't say I follow Jack, but rather the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and the Noble Eight Fold path. What I have learned is that there are two ways to blend Buddhist meditation and psychotherapy. One is to just use my own practice to be more present, to listen more deeply and to attend to intuitive knowings as they arise inside me, while I am having a conversation with somebody else. The second involves using mindfulness practices to help clinical clients with their psychological struggles. I sometimes do this with clients that haven't meditated before, and I often use meditation practice with clients that come to me because they are mediators and know that I know about meditation.

JC: I was wondering about anxiety how you would use Buddhism to help people with their anxiety.

AM: Well, I can certainly talk about how I would use mindfulness to help people with anxiety, but I don't often put it in a Buddhist context. It is always how I see the world, but not how I necessarily talk about it. So in terms of mindfulness techniques it may not be useful, when anxious, to be mindful of your breath (this can cause a person to focus too much on their anxiety), but you may want to do some

walking meditation, or maybe be present with some other aspect of your body, as a way to be aware of your anxiety. Some people can be present with a sensation in their body as a way to get out of their head and stay away from the narrative, because the narrative often increases the anxiety. So, the ability to use one of the five sense bases like sounds, tactile senses (other than breath), or smells can be a good way to be present, and not overly focused on the anxiety.

JC: Yes, I have a friend with a child that has anxiety and does meditate. I wonder whether there is a need for psychotherapy in addition to meditation.

AM: I believe that meditation and spiritual practice are very important, but they are not the same as therapy, nor are meditation or spiritual practice necessarily the best tools for dealing with psychological issues. In fact, this is one way that spiritual bypassing can happen. While meditation and therapy can play complementary roles in helping people deal with their suffering, it can be a mistake to replace therapy with meditation

JC: That is one thing I admire about you, is having the tools of both meditation and psychology. What a great mix.

AM: It is, they balance one another very well. I do think that I am a better psychotherapist because of my meditation. My meditation practice gives me the ability to truly be present.

JC: Yes, we know when we are being listened to.

AM: Yes we all know it. When someone is not listening, we know. I think another piece to how my meditation practice helps my psychotherapy, is that the ability to be mindful stops the judgment. There is just listening, just space.

JC: How is depression different than anxiety?

AM: As you may know, there is a lot of work with mindfulness and depression. The narratives we create in our minds significantly contribute to our moods. With depression, people tend to create negative narratives and any practice that helps people become aware of their narratives and come back to the present moment is going to be beneficial. Mindfulness meditation helps people to develop an observing mind. That is, the ability to watch their thoughts and not get caught up in them. When one does not have an observing mind, the tendency is to believe one's thoughts. From a Buddhist perspective this is an aspect of delusion and people get stuck.

As a therapist, I initially help people stay away from their negative, depressive thoughts and work more with the sense bases. This is an effective method for staying in the present moment and not getting emotionally caught by the narrative.

JC: Yes, and even when we understand this, we can still get caught.

AM: Yes, that is true, although once we experientially understand impermanence, we have the capacity to get uncaught.

JC: I have heard great things about your retreats and your skill level. Have you been moving in any new directions with your practice and work in meditation?

AM: Certainly with my teaching, I have two focuses. One, I talk now a lot about “selfing”. Matthew Flickstein, and others, talk a lot about this. Selfing is just using what we usually think of as a noun and turning it into a verb. This is to help us remember that we are always creating a self, as a steady state of mind. I do a lot of work to help people see that their selfing is creating suffering. Selfing is involved in all craving, in not getting the things we want and getting the things we do not want. There is always selfing and the more we can understand the role of this in suffering the better we are. So, I would say this is a major focus of my teaching.

The second focus is trying to lean into the Dukkha, and not let ourselves use our practice as a spiritual bypass. It is a very seductive trap, but it is a dead end and only leads to more suffering. This idea of sitting on the cushion and staying calm, and not dealing with the reality of our lives, is not getting us very far. So, there is a lot of passion around this for myself and others to find ways to lean into the Dukkha and to hold it gently with kindness and compassion. Of course, this is not just what I am teaching, but also what I practice in my own life.

JC: How do you get people to focus on their selfing?

AM: I think they have to do this for themselves. I help people hear themselves and then drop the ego piece even for just a second. I have great faith that if we just keep doing this, everyone can feel the peace momentarily. Eventually these peaceful moments build and we can maintain this for longer periods of times.

JC: Selfing, using self as a verb, makes me think of a verb “emptying” that does the opposite in terms of moving us on to a greater understanding and freedom. Gil Fronsdal describes emptying as the act of releasing or letting go. It is this actual process that he calls something like “enlightenment” or awakening. It is not constant state but a more temporary state that is present when we let go.

AM: I would agree. If we just stop resisting, and just allow - let things be - then there is absolute peace in the moment. I think of resistance as just wanting things to not be as they are. Either for things to get out of the way, or hold onto something. I am not somehow content.

JC: And this peace is not a permanent state

AM: True, nothing that is conditioned is a permanent state. It is not stable and very fleeting. This is because of the depth of the craving we have. As our practice matures, we build more access to seeing this craving and how quickly it can take over. It does get easier with practice.

JC: I am also interested in your work with horses.

AM: That is sort of the third arm of my practice. Horses are very tuned into subtle body movements and energy. They react very quickly to aspects of human behaviour that we are very often unaware of. Also, horses only live in the present. They don’t exist anywhere else. They are not off thinking that the grass is better on the other side of the fence. So, they have an amazing ability to help us be in the present. They don’t like to be around people that are caught in their head.

If my body is standing there but my mind is somewhere else, the horse is either not interested in me, or doesn’t want to be around me. The second I come into the present then the horse is interested. I have a horse that paws the ground and flicks an ear every time the person he is working with stops being present. It’s amazing. I have seen it over and over again. And so just imagine what an amazing feedback

mechanism that is. You can really start to be present, and connect, in a very deep way. I have had clients who have been present with a horse and have had the horse willing follow them as they walk through the forest. This can be one of the best connections some people have ever experienced.

JC: Thank you very much for your time Ann!

AM: Thank you.