

In the Kitchen, Washing Dishes

Kamala Masters

In 1976 when I was twenty-nine years old, I used to listen, starry-eyed with fascination, to the exotic stories of my friends, and friends of friends, who had gone off to India, Thailand, and Nepal to practice with their guru or teacher. It was a time of aspiring for “enlightenment,” of understanding one’s “true nature,” and becoming “at one with the divine.” I had so much admiration for my friends’ courage to go beyond the familiar structures of family and Western society in order to seek out what might nourish their hearts more profoundly. Silently, I was also searching for a deeper meaning to life. But I knew that going to some far-off place like India or Tibet was not in the cards for me.

At the time, I was a single mom raising three small children. Caring for rambunctious kids, and sometimes needing to work at two jobs in order to make ends meet, kept my day-to-day focus right around home—cooking, cleaning, wiping runny noses, working, paying bills, and on and on. Through all the rewarding and hard times of family life, I was clearly aware of my own strong aspiration to know firsthand what the experience of true peace or “liberation” was all about. Reading books and hearing about spiritual awakening from others was no longer satisfying. There were some great teachers who could guide me in Burma, I had heard. But the only realistic chance for me was to find this peace, to know this truth, in my own heart, amid the joys and struggles of my ordinary life.

I had lots of questions: How could I fulfill my aspirations with so much to do—with a home, children, and a job? To have a spiritual practice, do I need to be near a teacher? Should I actively look for a teacher, or do I wait until the teacher “appears because the student is ready”? How will I recognize the right teacher for me? What qualities do I need to have or develop in order to fulfill my heart’s desire? What commitments do I have to make to be able to work with a teacher, and be worthy of his or her care?

Even though I was nowhere near having any answers, just knowing my questions clarified what was important to me and what my intentions were. That gave me just enough confidence to point myself in the right direction.

Maybe it was because I was surrounded by three playfully active and clamorous children that I had an indescribable thirst for stillness and deep silence. I happened to go to one of those “spiritual fairs” that were popular in the seventies. This one was held at the University of California **at** Santa Cruz. The campus grounds were teeming with activity and a festive atmosphere. In the air was the sweet aroma of Indian incense, a group of “flower children” were playing drums and flutes, and people of different colors and walks of life were just wandering around contentedly. But my kids were tugging at me, hungry for some lunch and wanting to go home, so I knew there was only time for a quick scan. The cavernous gym was buzzing with many different spiritual groups, sects, and ashrams that had set up booths displaying their teachers, practices, and reading materials. As I stood at the entryway and looked around, I felt dazzled and, at the same time, barraged with information and opportunities. But my attention was immediately captured by a simple sign: SILENT RETREAT.

That sign was an invitation to a weekend *vipassana* retreat, and I signed up to participate. This retreat was to mark the beginning of an enduring relationship as a student of the teachings of the Buddha, and the practices of insight (*vipassana*) and lovingkindness (*metta*) meditation. During all these years, and especially since I’ve been teaching, I have noticed that the most frequently asked questions are very similar to the ones I was asking when I took my first steps on the path of fulfilling my spiritual aspirations.

I love to tell stories about my own trials and tribulations along the path of spiritual practice, because when I hear others tell their stories it feels as though all my senses are open, and I can sympathetically participate in the experience of the storyteller. The humanness and relevance of someone’s true experience often answers questions I didn’t even know I had, dispel doubts, and infuses me with more confidence so that I don’t give up on myself in times of struggle.

Here are a few stories about what led me to practice meditation, the qualities of heart and mind that inspired me, how I continued to practice without a teacher nearby (which

was most of the time), and the balance of determination and surrender I needed in order to keep steady through the ups and downs of practice.

My first teacher was Anagarika Munindra of India, and over the years he has continually guided, influenced, and inspired my spiritual practice. He lives and teaches in Calcutta and in Bodhgaya, India, and has been a meditation teacher for more than forty years. He is also an early teacher of Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, who **were** instrumental in establishing the teachings of the Buddha in the West after their own practice in Asia. So it can be said that Munindra is one of the grandfathers of vipassana and lovingkindness meditation in the West.

It was during that weekend retreat in San Jose, California, that I first heard about Munindra. He was described as a highly esteemed and well-loved meditation teacher from India with a great deal of textual knowledge, and a wealth of experiential wisdom from his meditative practice as well. In a few months he would arrive in America for the very first time to visit his students and to teach intensive retreats. The planning was underway for Munindra to teach a one-month retreat right in San Jose, near the town of Aptos where I lived. It was during that weekend retreat in San Jose, California, that I first heard about Munindra (or, as he was often called, Munindraji, the ending –ji conveying affectionate respect).

Unexpectedly, I found myself filled with joy and anticipation at the thought of being able to devote myself to a month of practice, which was quite a big jump after having just done a weekend retreat. And I didn't even have to go to India as a part of India was coming to San Jose! Out of sheer intuition, and a bit of impetuosity, I signed up for the one-month retreat, not really knowing if this was the teacher for me or how I would work out the details of being away from home and job for that long. As I took the steps to fulfill that decision, a mysterious flood of confidence filled my heart.

There were many arrangements to make so far in advance in order to be away for that long. Getting responsible care for my children, working overtime to save enough money to cover expenses for the time off without pay as well as the cost of the retreat, stocking up on food and supplies, cooking and freezing some dishes ahead of time, and the usual endless clothes washing and housecleaning. The hardest part was preparing the children

about my being away for so long. As it turns out, I was only able to participate in half the retreat because I just couldn't stay away from the kids the entire time.

By the time I arrived at the retreat venue, I felt worn to the bone with exhaustion from working so hard to get there. The retreat was at a large estate with a two-story home and beautiful garden in a suburban area. It was called the Stillpoint Institute and was founded by the late Sujata, a former monk and student of Munindra's. They would be teaching that retreat together. Because I arrived late and all the regular beds were taken, I was assigned a sleeping space on the floor in the upstairs hallway next to the large bathroom to be used by the teachers.

As I was nervously laying down my narrow folding mat and bedding in that hallway, Munindra came walking toward the bathroom and me. I had never met him before, but I knew from his shiny dark Indian skin, shaven head, and long white robes that it must be him. As he approached, I remember feeling totally at ease with his presence, which was unpretentious and light. His grounded composure helped me to relax more. Being a beginner to this ancient spiritual tradition, I somehow thought he would say something mystically profound. But he just stood there for a moment and looked curiously at the mat I was putting down on the floor, then at my haggard-looking face, then at the mat again. He surprised me when he asked in a matter-of-fact way, "Is that where you will sleep?" After a short conversation, during which he found out I was so tired mainly because I was a mom, he paused, pensively figuring out what to do next. What I remember most about our encounter was the look of concern and compassion in his eyes when he said, "You cannot sleep well here. You must take good rest in order to practice. I will take your mat, and you take my bed."

Munindraji's kindness came forth with a practical directness. His giving came from a place of a very natural compassion for another human being and obviously not from a place of needing to impress. I was struck by the observation, *though he is a meditation teacher, he truly doesn't consider himself to be more important than me*. In fact, it was as though he was treating me as respectfully as his own mother.

In an intensive one-month retreat, most of the day is spent in silent moment-to-moment mindfulness practice while sitting in the meditation hall, or walking on the pathways in the garden. Even the activities of eating, bathing, dressing, and doing chores

during the morning work hour are all done silently with intentional mindfulness. Then, each evening in the meditation hall, the teacher offers an hour-long talk regarding some aspect of the teachings of the Buddha.

Listening to those first dharma talks, I took it all in as if the words and the meaning were like long overdue nourishment to my heart. In many ways the teaching felt very familiar to me. Munindra would speak of the importance of cultivating generosity, lovingkindness, compassion, and respect for others, and how these qualities help us to live harmoniously with our family and community. He spoke of how a harmonious life would naturally create inner harmony, a restful composure, and happiness, and that this would support the training of calming and concentrating the mind. He spoke further on how when the mind and heart are calm and concentrated, it's easier to experience more clearly what's going on beneath the veneer of our busy lives and to see into deeper understandings and truths. And finally, the Dharma talks pointed the way to how those behaviors and trainings lead to an ever-deepening, unconditioned peace.

Though Munindra can expound on profound aspects of the Dharma, like selflessness or the empty nature of all phenomena, he has a way of making it sound like it's just common sense and applicable to everyday life. Hearing the Dharma in this way filled the deep wells of my heart with more confidence—confidence that I would need to draw on during challenging times of meditative practice, and life in general.

It didn't take long for me to see that this teacher's words were not just from a book, but that he really and truly exemplified what he was teaching. Respect, kindness, generosity, compassion, inner quiet, and profound wisdom were evident in him. As far as I could tell, he was "walking his talk."

When we see the teachings embodied in someone, that living reality infuses us with faith that we have the same potential. And that faith holds us together through our practice. It's not just "good theory" holding it together. In this way, Munindra's example awoke in me the confidence and determination to realize my own spiritual aspirations. This is how I recognized Munindra as a true spiritual teacher for me.

A few years later, I began to organize retreats out of enthusiasm to share with my community the teachings I so revered, and also because I wanted to continue to hear the Dharma and practice with my teacher. We had moved to Maui, and it made me very

happy to invite Munindraji to teach in a climate that he was familiar with and could be comfortable in, one similar to his own motherland. One time when he spent a few days at our home after a ten-day retreat, he tried to get me to do sitting meditation every morning. It was pretty hopeless with the three kids—I just knew I couldn't do it all the time. Not giving up easily, he asked me where I spent most of my time in the house, to which I quickly replied, "In the kitchen, washing dishes." So we went to the kitchen, and he gave a Dharma talk right there about how much freedom and happiness there can be in the simplicity of being present with whatever is happening, and how the power of that presence of mind would uncover deeper and deeper truths. He stood right next to me at the sink, and with his lilting East Indian accent, he gave on-the-spot mindfulness instructions for washing the dishes.

He said, "Have a general awareness of just washing the dishes, the movement of your hands, the warmth or coolness of the water, picking a dish up, soaping it, rinsing it, putting it down. Nothing else is happening now—just washing the dishes." Then he told me to experience my posture, or just notice that the process of seeing was happening. He said that I didn't need to go slow, or to observe everything moment-by-moment, but that I should have a general mindfulness of whatever was happening as I washed the dishes. "Just washing the dishes."

So I continued, just washing the dishes. Once in a while Munindraji would ask me, "What's happening now?" When I replied, "Now I'm worried about paying the mortgage," he would further instruct, "Just notice 'worried,' and bring your attention back to washing the dishes." When I told him, "I'm planning what to cook for dinner." He repeated, "Just notice 'planning,' because that's what is in the present moment, and then return to just washing the dishes."

Even though we were standing in my kitchen, Munindra offered those instructions with as much seriousness as though he were teaching in a formal retreat. Learning something from his sincerity, I practiced earnestly as I washed the dishes many times during the day. Doing this ordinary task with intentional mindfulness has helped me to notice and experience many things more clearly: the changing physical sensations, the flow of thoughts and emotions, and my surrounding environment are all much more alive. This has been a steadfast training in bringing awareness back to my original

intention, the simplicity of what I am doing at the time. This helped collect or focus my mind so that it was not so scattered. To do this has required me to develop more perseverance, patience, humility, clear intention, honesty with myself, and much more. These are no small things. Just from washing the dishes! So day by day, dish by dish, a lot of the training of the mind and heart can be accomplished. The resulting enjoyment of being more fully present with life is a rare treasure in this world.

But that training wasn't enough for Munindra. He also noticed that I walked through the hallway from my bedroom to the living room many times each day. The hallway was only about ten steps long, and he suggested it could be a perfect place to do walking meditation. As we stood at the threshold of my bedroom door, he gave me some simple instructions.

“Every time you step into this hallway, see if you can use the time as an opportunity to be present with the simple fact of walking. ‘Just walking.’ Not thinking about your mother, or about the children...just experiencing the body walking. It might help you to make a silent mental notation of every step. With each step, very quietly in your mind you can note, ‘stepping, stepping, stepping.’ This will help you keep your attention connected to your intention of ‘just walking.’ If the mind wanders to something else, as soon as you notice that it has wandered, make the silent mental note, ‘wandering mind.’ Do this without judging, condemning, or criticizing. In a simple and easy way, bring your attention back to just the walking, noting, ‘stepping, stepping, stepping.’ Your practice in this hallway will be a wonderful training for you. It will also benefit those around you because you will feel more refreshed.”

It didn't seem like much of a spiritual practice, but every day as I walked back and forth through that hallway on my way to do something, I would have a few moments of clear presence of mind—unhurried, unworried, at ease with life for a precious ten steps.

As I look back now, in my heart I regard that hallway and kitchen sink as very sacred places. I extended that mindfulness practice to all the everyday chores in our household, washing clothes, ironing, wiping counters, and essentially to all my activities during the day.

This was my main practice for a few years because I couldn't sit every morning. I didn't make it to many retreats, and most of the time there was no teacher nearby to guide

me. What helped me the most when one of my teachers wasn't accessible was mindfulness itself. It is said that mindfulness is like an inner mentor. It's just common sense that if we can experience what's truly going on within us and around us with more honesty and clarity, we already have a great teacher in our midst. The constancy and accessibility of simply being present with whatever was happening helped me tremendously in terms of training the mind.

There is a saying, "Not to look to the teacher, but to the teaching. And not to look to just the words of the teaching, but to the meaning. And not to look to the meaning of the interpreter, but to the meaning for oneself." Understanding this deeply, we begin to have more reliable faith in ourselves. This transfers easily to confidence in our practice, and trust in the teachings because we begin to verify them for ourselves.

Sometimes we may have misgivings about our teachers because we discover they are not as perfect as we imagined them to be, or maybe their behavior is inappropriate according to our standards, or even harmful. But that need not derail us from staying in alignment with our own highest potential, if we can maintain faith in ourselves. One time I asked Munindra about a popular teacher whose controversial lifestyle was making news headlines. I was perplexed because the literature coming from this person was quite beautiful, and his students (some of them were my friends) seem to be benefiting greatly from their practice with him. Munindra replied with one of his wisdom-filled one-liners, "A perfect rose can come from an imperfect giver."

Later, when I was able to attend retreats of a month or more, the strengths that came from practicing at home all those years clearly paid off. Being accustomed to bringing mindfulness to every activity, whether it was tying shoelaces, opening a door, eating, or sitting on a meditation cushion, made meditation practice comfortable and seamless during those long retreats. The unbroken continuity of mindfulness practice during a day generates strong concentration, which is vitally important for the opening of the mind and heart. My gratitude for Munindraji's simple yet deep-reaching guidance runs deep.

After some years passed I remarried, and my family grew to four children. At the time, Munindraji needed some medical procedures done in the United States, so a few of his students got together to help him out. I volunteered to make arrangements with a surgeon on Maui, so that I could take care of him after his surgery for about three

months. It was a challenging time keeping up with all the kids and Munindraji too! Sometimes it was like I had five children. In fact, the children would kiddingly call me the “dhamma mama,” and Munindra would call me Mom. We all had fun with that.

Being a gracious guest, each day he spent in our home, Munindra shared the Dharma with me, because he felt that was the most valuable offering he could make. Every morning I went to his room to receive some guidance and instruction. His enthusiasm for sharing the Buddha’s teaching is quite remarkable. Sometimes in the morning I would ask him a simple question, and he would take several situations that arose during the day to illustrate the Buddha’s teaching in response. In this way he exposed me to some of the most esoteric of the teachings of the Buddha, such as the truth of impermanence, the empty nature of self, dependent origination, and karma.

A phrase he would use many times is “This is the law.” I came to understand that when he used this word, it meant “the Dharma.” One of the meanings of *Dharma* is the natural unfolding of the law of cause and effect. Another is, the truth of this moment, or the way things are. He often said that phrase, “This is the law,” when inviting me to simply open to and accept the reality of the situation.

For example, one time I asked him (probably with a complaining and blaming tone) why my life had been full of hardship. And he replied, “This is the law. What is happening now is the result of actions in the past. But in this moment, depending on how you respond, you can create a different future—one of happiness. That future will eventually become this present moment. And this present moment will become the past. In this way, it is possible for your life to be surrounded by more happiness . . . in the past, the present, and the future. Everything depends on this moment. If you are mindful, you can choose with wisdom how to respond. If you are not mindful, your life is run by reactivity. It’s up to you.”

I learned from the meaning of that phrase that accepting or surrendering to the truth of the way things are didn’t mean that I had to resign myself to some predetermined destiny, or that I just had to give up on life. It is a potent reminder that if we are clearly mindful, it is possible to take part in creating our destiny. Otherwise we live over and over again in the unfortunate realms of delusion and unhappiness because our lives are dictated by the reactive habits of our mind. The realization that this present moment

carries with it such incredible potential changed the course of my life. By compelling me to make mindfulness practice a priority in my life, my destiny was redirected.

After Munindra's surgery, I tried my best to keep the atmosphere in our home peaceful and healing for his recovery. In retrospect, I probably also wanted to impress him with how well I had raised the children and what a "meditative" life I had. At the time, the eldest three children were well into their teenage years, and the youngest was beginning to test her strength. One day Munindraji and I were quietly sitting at the dining table having a meal. All of a sudden in the adjacent family room, my youngest daughter and her father got into an argument over something fairly petty that quickly escalated into a shouting match. Then she tore through the dining room, around us at the table, down the hall to her bedroom, and with all her might slammed and locked her door. Her father was soon right behind her, all steamed up and trying to open her door.

Munindraji calmly continued to eat, but I could tell by his darting eyes that he was apprehensive. I felt embarrassed, angry, protective, helpless, confused. It wasn't the peaceful home I wanted it to be. The shouting continued, "Open this door right now!" "No!" my daughter shouted back at the top of her lungs. The whole neighborhood must have heard them. Ugh. I cringed.

"Open this door or I'll kick it open," her father warned. When she refused, he kicked the door in with an ear-splitting noise! We're a pretty average family, so hot tempers and arguments can happen sometimes. But this wasn't a family scene any of us were accustomed to. We were all in shock. By this time, I didn't know whether to run away from embarrassment, put my head down on the table and cry, or bolt toward the fight and start screaming at them too. In the midst of all this chaos, Munindraji reached over, placed his steady hand on my forearm, looked at me very compassionately, and said, "Surrender to the law."

Those few words, and the teaching they offer, have served me well many times since then. The lessons are clear. In surrendering or accepting how it is, there is a clear experience of the moment. In this way, we are cultivating nondelusion, or wisdom. From that wisdom, we can let go of our attachment to how we think it should be or how we want it to be. Letting go helps us to cultivate nonattachment, or acceptance and understanding in this case. When both wisdom and nonattachment are present, there can

be no resistance to how it is. We are simply able to see clearly what is going on, so that we can take compassionate action from that place of clarity. This engenders love.

As soon as I did ‘surrender to the law’, to the reality of what was happening in the moment, my reactive and chaotic mind settled. I was able to draw from the deep well of equanimity, and from that place I did what I could to help make peace between father and daughter.

But I also saw with deeper understanding that they had their own stuff to work out, so to speak. It wasn’t something I could control. Certainly, my attachment to how I thought it should have been perfect, or my aversion to how it was so imperfect, only brought more suffering and confusion to everyone involved. From that experience, I saw again that it was only from acceptance, clarity, and understanding that the most compassionate action could come. And with compassion, there is a better chance to beneficially influence what is happening around us, even though we can’t control it.

Munindra did not comment much on that misfortunate event afterward. I imagined that he might judge or criticize us, but he didn’t, of course. His behavior showed us that he didn’t expect our home to be a heaven or a monastery. And in fact, our home was as valid a place as any for spiritual practice. He just proceeded as usual to offer the same teachings. It didn’t matter what transpired; his invitation to be more aware, to be kind and compassionate, and to point oneself toward wisdom and peace were always the same.

Doing a major part of my spiritual practice using everyday life situations has given me the opportunity to experience an organic, homegrown opening of the heart. I have found that it is possible to fulfill one’s deepest aspirations even within a busy and sometimes chaotic life. I have also learned that at times we also need to go deep within and drink from the wellspring of stillness, silence, and clarity. For this, being guided by a teacher who inspires faith and confidence in our practice, and who shows us how to verify the teachings for ourselves, is of immeasurable value. If we are sincere about our practice and have faith in ourselves, that deep wellspring of peace is closer than we can imagine.