

PRACTICING BUDDHISM - An Interview with Sharon M

Sharon is 52 years old. She began attending A.A. meetings at age 21 and was diagnosed as Bipolar that same year. Sharon first got sober at age 35. In her early years of sobriety, what helped her to stop was to eat sugar to get rid of the craving for alcohol (a sugar). Later on, she began to adopt and follow the spiritual program of recovery offered by AA to claim and maintain her sobriety.

Sharon's first exposure to Buddhism was Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart*, a book recommended to Sharon by her therapist, who also suggested that Sharon take in Lama Marut's talk on 'Happiness' at the Rockport High School. After that Sharon attended Lama Marut's summer night teachings at Windhover. She started her journey on the path by shutting out the Media, including no TV or newspapers. Interested in learning more, she took classes and teachings at the ACI Cape Ann Vajramudra Center with Lama Phil, Mary K., Margaret Redington, and Larry Wolf, as well as Tai Chi with Bob Arnold and Yoga with Patti O'Brien. In response to Sharon asking Lama Marut online about choosing a Heart Lama, he recommended Lama Jesse Fallon.

Sharon still goes to A.A. and, when she can, practices loving-kindness by helping others in AA on a one-to-one basis. She seldom has a craving and, when out with friends who offer her a drink, she tells them she has an allergy to alcohol; "I tell them I break out in handcuffs". She says she gets angry at times, but gets over it quickly." I only look at myself, I don't worry about others." In therapy for depression she learned not to blame her parents, and was taught not to see herself as 'victim'. "They did the best they could," she said. About 7 years ago she had a 6-week relapse, but has been sober for every day since then. Not one drink.

In addition to *When Things Fall Apart* and books by, among others, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Sharon has enjoyed and continues to study the Buddhist Bodhisattva practices discussed in *No Time To Lose*, also by Pema Chodron, a Western born Buddhist Nun and a student of the late, renowned Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Another writing that has had a major influence on Sharon's practice is the Tibetan Buddhist classic Dharma teaching of the *Lam Rim Chenmo* by Master Je Tsongkapa, 13th Century. Her attendance at teachings at the Center and her independent studies have graced Sharon with periods of contemplation she said, helping her to be aware of her actions.

In Buddhism, she learned to stay away from her mental afflictions, such as anger, and became aware of 'being hooked'. She uses self-control and awareness and stays unhooked, especially when she is 'obsessing' (dwelling on a personal problem).

Jesse Fallon, the spiritual Director at the Vajramudra Center on Granite St., is her Heart Lama, and has provided teachings, guidance and support in Sharon's efforts to be a good student, doing her homework and taking Buddhist courses. As for doing what she's taught, she says: "I was 'on fire', following every suggestion" and "I do what I'm asked to do - It has always helped me - I've never been harmed - While I may have questioned the teaching, I STILL did it, and it worked."

She does the 6 times a day Book every two hours and, if she forgets, she does it when she remembers. She keeps the Book as part of her vow practice by noting down her progress in the Book with respect to each vow. If something flares up, emotionally, or she perceives things in a wrong way, she steps away from the situation, and then comes back, resolving it peacefully. She teaches her daughter (who then teaches her daughter), to use 'have-a-heart-traps', and to carry spiders and bugs outside without harm.

"Do you want to be a teacher"? I asked her? "I want to be a Nun" she said, "it would be teaching every day...my behavior is a teaching." "I don't push my religion on anyone. I honor the Altar, the incense, water bowls, and candles. I do the Preliminary Vows. I don't look at it as work. It is a lot of work, but doing it comes naturally, and it doesn't seem like work now."

"Lama Jesse is my teacher, and he teaches me the truth! Buddha is my Higher Self. I honor my Lamas and my Heart Lama Jesse. I trust him and I know it's not gonna hurt! Dharma...is the teachings, written or verbal whoever it comes from. Sangha...the real meaning is monastic. In the West, however, where we are, it can be a group of people, (the Buddhist Community)."

She continues, "I have to do the 'action' in my life for Joy and Happiness. As long as I'm not sitting back being lazy, good things happen!" "Basically Buddhism has given me a life second to none! I am grateful for a life I would never have had. I'm on a journey, a journey of the Path!"

"What about the 18 courses?" I asked her. "Courses?! I'm not pushing it! I'm taking my time. Someday, I would like to do them all. They're hard for me," she says honestly, "but, I get something from every class."

And the Hell Realms? "I don't know if it's true or not; but since I don't know, I'm going to act as if it's real; and I'm going to keep it as the real thing - I don't want to be wrong - I don't want the karmic consequences" Sharon says. "I don't always know what's for me, so I talk to my Lama; my Lama tells me what to do! I respect him."

Asked about her bout with depression, and taking prescribed drugs, she said by studying Buddhism, she is taking less of them with the advice of her psychiatrist, a Zen Buddhist. "He knows what Buddhism can do" she says. "Most helpful is doing Prayer and Meditation practices."

Sharon uses her computer as well to listen and learn and take classes. "There is something new every time I listen. If I do that, then I want to live in the world - and have the opportunity to apply what I have learned in my practice".

Based upon an interview with Sharon by Elizabeth Enfield.