



34. STEPHEN SYNDER

Stephen's mission for his life and teaching is to foster awakening and its embodiment in worldly life, though the modern application of authentic, rigorous Buddhist practices. Described as warm-hearted with a resonant presence, he finds fulfillment in supporting students as they re-discover deeper inherent authenticity in the unfolding of their true nature. This deepening authenticity leads to a more profound, experiential knowing with greater refinement in everyday life.

Stephen has been a Buddhist practitioner for more than 35 years. After traveling through Asia as a youth, Stephen began practicing Buddhist meditation in 1976 at the age of 19. Following his awakening experience at 28, he continued the opening process of deepening and integrating the "unconditioned" in his everyday life.

In 2005, Stephen attended a two-month retreat with the Burmese meditation master, Ven. Pa Auk Sayadaw. He completed the entire Samatha path as presented by the Sayadaw, becoming the first American male to complete this attainment. The Sayadaw authorized Stephen to teach in 2007. With his wife and teaching partner Tina Rasmussen, Stephen wrote the book, *Practicing the Jhanas*, published by Shambhala Publications in 2009. Stephen and Tina now offer retreats and spiritual mentoring to students worldwide.

Tina and Stephen are a married couple. They met in June of 2004 and married a few months later.

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INTERVIEW

Q: What about if someone does have these realizations and ends up walking away from the world and wants to become a teacher.

How does one support themselves in the west outside of a traditional Buddhist system. Is it OK to charge for teachings instead of the traditional way of dana?

Stephen Snyder: In the West there are many models for teachers. It's fairly standard within the Theravadin tradition that teachers do not charge directly for teaching relying on dana (generosity). When I practiced in the Zen and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, I found the retreat costs were higher and the average donation to the teacher was consequently less. So that model was to charge a retreat price that provided some compensation to the teacher.

In the Theravadin tradition, dana is an important part of each of our practice path. When we gather on retreat we are each offering the dana of our intention, behavior, and actions to all. Are we offering support to our own practice as well as the other retreatants? Are we each being generous with ourselves by attending retreat and wholeheartedly participating? The idea, as I understand it, is for there to be a symmetry between the teacher's dana and the yogi's dana. Each should be giving as generously as is allowed by their circumstances. It allows us each to cultivate greater depth in both giving and receiving. Of course we are talking about the meeting of

the unconditioned when it manifests as two seemingly separate entities. Deeply being in touch with dana can allow the indivisibility of the unconditioned to be more embodied and integrated.

There are teachers who offer services that are complimentary to their spiritual teaching. For example there are a fair percentage of Theravadin teachers who are therapists, counselors, or coaches. Students can utilize this other offering which may be another way the teachers support themselves as lay people. So there are a variety of models available to teachers. The teacher's harmony with their personal integrity and intention is an important part of teaching.

We have so few monastic models in the West that the Buddhist monastics here can often struggle much more to receive support than their Asian counterparts. Some of the Buddhist monasteries in the West receive dana from Asian Buddhists who are more accustomed to donating to support monastics. Time will reveal how the monastic model will adapt to the Western perspectives.

END OF INTERVIEW