

# Coming Together to Inquire

*An interview with Nancy Brown Hedgpeth JDPSN*

**Ian White Maher:** There's a quote I heard of you where you're talking about how you came to the dharma, how you came to start practicing. And there's one portion of that I loved so much. You said, "It seemed like the places in my life that were the most dissatisfactory, where I experienced suffering, where I felt like I was contributing to other people's suffering, seemed to have to do with habits of mind." And what I really loved about that genesis quote was not that you were noticing your own suffering, but that you were noticing that you were contributing to other people's suffering. I wonder if you could say a little bit about the realization that your own suffering also caused other people to suffer.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes, that was my experience. I think it's probably most people's experience that we identify with and we live our places of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. We see not only the hurt that we feel, but the hurt that we cause other people: The fear we feel, the shame we feel, all those things are completely connected with how we are in this world. The more I read about Buddhism, the more I felt an affinity for how Buddhism talked about mind and action and karma—our mind's habits, the law of cause and effect. Buddhism has a very practical approach to how we function and how we see our hearts and minds in relation to everything and everyone. People and animals and plants and our earth—there's nothing that you can identify that needs to be left out of that.

I had a certain sense, which I think everyone does, of wanting to be helpful. I kept noticing that when I wanted to be helpful and tried, if I only followed my own ideas, I just tended to make more of a mess. This would contribute to problems rather than actually help.

**IWM:** I know that you worked on a farm for a long time, and I'm wondering if there was some overlap with how you approached the dharma and your approach to farming.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** That's a work in progress for me. I was listening to a Wendell Berry interview by Bill Moyers the other day, and he talked about meeting the place as it is, and what it asks for in terms of how to live on this earth in a sustainable, generous, cohesive way. And it really had to do with not imposing my idea. That goes back to what we were talking about before—meeting the place and the moment as it is and asking what it needs, what's called for.

**IWM:** And what does your experience say about that?

**Hedgpeth PSN:** To me it's a mixed experience. For instance, here at Providence Zen Center, last year we asked the community what it wanted to have planted, and a lot

of tomatoes were what residents wanted. Last year we had put in garlic and potatoes and flowers for the altar and a lot of tomatoes. There was a need to balance what we wanted and needed with the need to improve the fertility of the soil over last year. We had added compost, left part of it fallow, and started a crop rotation, where different plants could help other plants over the long term. So then it was balancing that with tomatoes, garlic, potatoes and flowers. What does the community want? What does the soil want?

There's something about being present in the garden that's just the same as being present with another person or with a job or at play. Whatever we're doing, when we just completely do it, we're not separate: We are not making separate. When we meet the garden, what's called for? I try to enter it and look around and see what's there—what looks dry, what looks like it's thriving exactly as it is, what place needs some weeding to let other plants thrive. Just see what's going on and try to respond to it, with the plants in mind and with the needs of the community in mind. How is it? Start with where we are exactly in this moment. What our eyes see and our ears

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hear. Just be in the moment, see how it is, and then respond—we hope appropriately—learning to be available to this moment. Practicing is that, being available to this moment.

**IWM:** There's a quote from Job that has always struck me as very compatible with my Zen life. "But ask the animals and they will teach you. The birds of the air they will tell you. Ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you." And to me I've always just took that like "Yeah go out and have a relationship with the earth that isn't me trying to figure out what I think is best, but really try to be in relationship.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** That's beautiful.

**IWM:** Because if there is a deep listening it comes alive. Just like all relationships.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes, it's in that moment, listening to how it is, and they're teaching us how to listen by simply doing what they do, being as they are.

**IWM:** I've heard you speak about the touching-earth mudra of the Buddha as an opportunity for us to ground ourselves in the face of "the demon armies of our habits of mind," as you say. When Mara is appearing, and you just touch the earth. I'm wondering if you've had that experience in your own life. How does the earth mudra appear for you, personally?

**Hedgpeth PSN:** There are some phrases that I use that help me. The one that points to that most is "How is it just now?" The touching-earth mudra is a witness to this moment, it is bringing ourselves to this moment. How is it? With that quality of inquiry, of open mindedness, open heartedness, how is it just now? The earth witness mudra to me isn't so much "Please earth, witness how clear and wonderful I've been and am therefore entitled to be Shakyamuni Buddha." Rather, it is revisiting this connectedness, this being, this quality of openheartedness, open-mindedness with the moment.

**IWM:** Could you say a little more about the mudra?

**Hedgpeth PSN:** It's simple. The left hand stays on the lap in the universal mudra, and the right hand reaches down and touches the earth.

**IWM:** There's something beautiful about it—it's sort of a kinesthetic practice. When your mind is like, "Oh my god, I don't know if I'm doing this right." Whatever the doubts are. And then you just reach down and you touch the earth. And all of a sudden, there is a witness.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** There is connection.

**IWM:** Yeah. To the relationship of all being.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes, and even that idea can fall away, of relation to all beings, and there's just fingers feeling it. That actual, as you said, kinesthetic reaching out and touching—its idea falls away in that moment. And then there's just that experience.

**IWM:** You also have lived in a number of residential communities. I'm wondering if you can say a little bit

about what it's like to live in community. What that does for your practice. Why somebody might want to do that. Why they might not want to.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** I'll tell you, the reason I actually moved in in the first place was to help me start a meditation practice, because I tried at home, but I just couldn't seem to get started. Finally out of desperation, I just said, "I have to move in and go to a place where it's happening twice a day, and I have to go." I'm one of those horses that need the whip. Not just the shadow of the whip.

So I moved in, and it was wonderful. You know, the practice morning and evening, the talks, the support—you get all of that. The group practice and support for trying that and just showing up no matter how you feel has at least for me been hugely helpful. The first time I had a fight with someone or an argument, I went and lay on my bed, and I said "Oh gosh. I can't stay here. This is awful. I had this fight." But then the *moktak* was hit, and it was time to go to practice. So down I went and sat down and just let myself sit with that. And let that digest. And it's not comfortable. That's a very significant piece of living in any community: seeing our likes and our dislikes and all of our opinions appear. Not getting what we think is the right thing, not getting what we want, and sitting with that. Seeing what we don't like in ourselves, seeing all the comparisons and the judgments and the evaluations of self and others, and seeing our attachments to those, because certainly that's part of what we do as human beings—we grasp on.

The beauty of it being a Zen center is that we all go back to the practice, and we practice together. It's not just bumping up against one another in community; this happens everywhere, in any kind of community. It has this essential piece of returning to practice together. That's the one thing that brings us all together. It's a motley crew in any Zen center.

We're not there as an intentional community about, for instance, sustainable farming. You know, we're here to practice, and we don't necessarily pick the people we live with, but we all come together. We're all here to practice, and there is such beauty in that. It's a relief as a human being to be able to just come together and inquire. Come together and just sit and chant and try to make harmony with the chanting, and sit and try to digest whatever appears. And so that happens in community, and it helps us bring that into the rest of our lives as well. It's the old potato cleaning theory. Anyone who has lived in one of our Zen centers has heard it. You can clean potatoes individually, or you can throw them into a great big pot with water and start stirring. And they bump up against each other and clean each other. Not always comfortable, but quite beautiful.

**IWM:** When I'm telling people about living in a Zen center, I say that it's quite different from other sorts of collective places or communal living places,

because behind the decision to live together with other beings is this teaching that the living together is also part of the teaching.

You have the opportunity to see your karma as it arises in your relationships. In other communal living situations, that intentional focus is just not present. For example, if somebody doesn't do the dishes, well, they're a jerk for not doing the dishes. But at a Zen center, it's more "Oh yeah, what's appearing for me . . ." rather than just "they're not doing it." Sure, they're still not doing it, but the focus is more about what's appearing for me in that. And we look at what's the right action, which is such an interesting layer aside from just the sitting and bowing and chanting.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Absolutely. We get to see our own part in the whole dance.

**IWM:** I see it as a microcosm for society at large. We may not have the extremes here where you can see how ideas can spin right out into extreme positions. But it's still all present, right here in the sangha. One of the reasons, I think, to live in community is if you want to see why society acts the way it does, then come to a temple.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes, come to a temple and sit with yourself.

**IWM:** And see what your contributions are to it.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** We get to see how our mind functions—just as everyone else's functions. We may have our own eccentricities, but it's all mind functioning: human mind functioning.

**IWM:** Which then also allows you to be helpful. If you've come to see how your mind functions, then you can also see how to be helpful.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes. Compassion can grow out of that.

**IWM:** You've been practicing since 1979. I'm wondering if there's any part of your practice that's sort of come alive to you more recently, or if there's something you've returned to recently.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** There is. We touched on it earlier. I'm going to read this quote of Zen Master Seung Sahn's and then talk a little bit about it. It dovetails with what we were talking about with the earth mudra. Here goes:

Human life has no meaning, no reason, and no choice. But we have our practice to help us understand our true self. Then we can change no meaning to great meaning, which means great love. We can change no reason to great reason, which means great compassion. Finally, we can change no choice to great choice, which means great vow and the Bodhisattva way.

I just gave a presentation at a class on the philosophy of Buddhism last week, and this was a quote that I used along with the story of Kyong Ho Sunim. When I look at this world simply intellectually, it's really hard to find any nonshifting foundations—something that actually gives some grounding. Zen Master Seung Sahn used this expression, "our true self," which is pointing to that which we share with this whole universe. When we do anything completely, that's already our true self appearing in that moment. If only for that moment.

So we practice being present, we practice being in this moment, being available in this moment, and we begin to string together the experience of moments of presence. We can talk about that as true "self" and also as the interconnectedness that we have, our interbeing, as Thich Nhat Hanh talks about: The complete connection and oneness that we are with this universe. And that experience is not extraordinary. Everybody—every human being—has that experience. Every day. Many many times a day. We just don't string those moments together enough to always notice them.

We practice that, and we find out for ourselves, from our own experience, that we are completely connected. Our school Zen master, Bobby Rhodes, once used this example, which I just loved. She held up her two hands and she said "So my right hand is stronger than my left hand. But my right hand never says to my left hand, 'You're no good. You're inadequate. I don't like you.'" You know. They help each other. They work together. They're part of the same body.

These experiences of being connected to this universe and to one another, we can build on those, and we can see for ourselves that another person is part of us. That veil that can be so thick between us and others, or us and this moment, can begin to soften and get gauzy, and we get to experience it ourselves. Not as an idea, but actually as a truth. That we're not separate from the world. Anytime we do anything completely, that's the case. We practice being present; we practice inquiry into this moment, open-mindedness, openheartedness, to this moment of our life and bring that into even the places where that's hard to do. Those places where we feel the fear, where we feel the shame, where we feel separate, where we believe we are separate. We practice so that we can bring that very inquiry and openness to those places allowing our true nature to function with less hindrance. ♦



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