

Does Meditation Lead to Enlightenment?

Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen with Iain and Renate McNay

Iain: So, hello and welcome back to conscious TV, and this time we've got Renate and myself, and Tina and Stephen who we have interviewed separately previously. So you're watching this on the back end of the previous interview. We're gonna have a general discussion. I should say first they've written this book about the jhanas which is very interesting, which is titled "Practicing the Jhanas" which is available, I'm just being told, not only in English but in Korean, and Italian, that's very impressive isn't?

Renate: And German

Iain: And will be available in German.

Tina: Spanish.

Iain: And Spanish. Fantastic. So welcome back Tina and Stephen and Renate's got a question to kick us off I think.

Renate: I have a question yes. So my question is, it seems, and we also experience to some extent that people are waking up all over the place and have deep profound experiences of the nature of reality without ever having meditated. Now why meditate? And how do those people be motivated to meditate? You know grace seems to happen and maybe it has to do with our time, I don't know. Yes, so why do we meditate?

Tina: Especially since we're non- dual Buddhist teacher who encourage meditation that's a good question!

Renate: One year long, solitary retreat. And you meditated 35 years. I don't know how many years?

Tina: It's been since 1976, so it's a long time. We actually started meditating the same year.

Renate: Well you meditated 30 years? Didn't you?

Iain: Oh no, longer than that.

Renate: 40 years

Iain: Yeah, at least.

Renate: I meditate some times.

Tina: Well one thing is that some people meditate just because they enjoy it. So that's good to say. But meditation--one could make an argument that all of this is manifesting from the ground whether we meditate or not. Awakening happens and it may not be linearly caused. For example, we can't say that if you meditate you'll wake up. We can't guarantee that. So meditation isn't a guarantee. That's the first thing is to say, that is acknowledged pretty much everywhere. And yet at the same time, for people who feel that enlightenment drive for awakening, the odds tend to increase if one does meditate. So if one has already awakened there may be other reasons to meditate that we can also talk

about. But if one hasn't awakened, meditation is a way of cutting through the veils of the personality to experience what we actually are, and can provide either glimpses or extended experiences of that, which can lead to awakening. And that's really what meditation has been for at a deeper level. There's also just meditating on a daily basis because it makes your life better. And all of the brain research that's out now, which we can talk about, really shows the health benefits.

Stephen: I think too, with meditation, it's a great process of sometimes just talked about as tilling the soil. It helps break up the ground so that if we do get these seeds that can grow into awakening or realization, they've got a place to land and be fertilised. And in addition, I think to me there's something about that when we meditate, we're orientating towards the source, the mystery, towards the Absolute. And on some level it feels as though we're offering ourselves in the meditation. So it's kind of direct contact saying, "I'm here and I'm opening to this experience." So whatever the Absolute wants to bring in.

Renate: So when we start meditating it sounds like we set an intention?

Stephen: Sort of an unspoken intention.

Renate: And then it takes its own movement.

Stephen: Right.

Renate: Would you see it that way?

Stephen: I would say it's a soft intention, but it's also a recognition that we're opening to the Absolute coming into our life in whatever way is the wisest.

Tina: Were also orienting to the present moment. So it's a practice of being present, and also meditation allows us to see the patterns that keep that from happening. And so, in some ways, a lot of people think if they go into thinking when they're meditating, "I'm not meditating" or "it doesn't work." But that actually, if we understand the purpose, that shows us the patterns that we're constantly driven by. So even by someone who is already awakened, mediation can be a way of digesting and reclaiming or really integrating the personality material that keeps us from being in the present moment. So even after awakening there's some benefits to meditation that may be different than before awakening.

Stephen: I think that absolutely, that after awaking, mediation can help us integrate the experience. It can open it more and just make it more accessible. So there's a way it can really help deepen the awakening and let it land more fully in our consciousness.

Tina: For example, with the Dzogchen practice, which is one of the main practices we do ourselves, there's what's called resting in rigpa. So when one realizes rigpa, that's realising the primordial awareness. That can happen in glimpses or can happen in extended periods. Then as a person tries to live more from this on a more ongoing basis, the practice actually helps us rest in rigpa so that this becomes more consistent all the time. So over 2500 years, millions of people have been experimenting with this trying to stabilise realization. There's some benefit from what's been learned over this 2500 years.

Renate: I heard that the Dali lama once say, I don't know if I heard it or I read it, probably I read it-- that you know, there are some cave yogis that meditate, like, 25 years, and he said "nothing will happen to them unless they follow pointers". They need to--like I experienced when I teach the

Mahamudra meditation--you know, the teacher gives a pointer and then you start seeing actually where you are in the moment. And there's the next point that he said this is important, otherwise consciousness does not move. I don't know is this your experience? Do you have anything to say to that? I found it fascinating that there's some cave yogis and they just sit there and he said nothing, nothing comes out of that.

Stephen: That's a good question. I'll answer it on a personal level. I felt that when I was in the Zen tradition, I was like a hot air balloon pilot, I could get up in the air but I never knew with the open awareness where I was going to go or where I was going to land. Where with a mediation like this, the jhana meditation, I feel more like I'm a pilot in a modern aircraft. I've got all the switches and dials and I know how to adjust them and turn them on. So it gives a lot of structure in a way that we can really keep going, as you say, in a certain direction and again we're still offering and opening ourselves to the mystery to the absolute but it gives us more of a kind of technique, and we can stand alone and then it's less serendipitous.

Tina: Right, and having a teacher is really crucial. A lot of the people have come to us, some of them have practiced and the teacher wasn't as accessible, and maybe they met with them only once on a long retreat. And what we find when we do retreats, is we meet every other day with people. And that makes it where there not wasting a lot of time doing things that are unproductive, and without some guidance that's easy to happen. So it's a huge shame that somebody would waste many years doing that, but this is part of the benefit of working with a teacher.

Iain: I think it would be useful just to highlight how the meditation you're doing is quite different from vipassana meditation, because as I understand it, in vipassana meditation you're not focusing one object. You're more open--it's about awareness, it's about being present. And if attention goes somewhere then you allow that to happen without engaging with it. The attention might go to the body, and you're aware that it might go to sound; it might go to all kinds of things. But with the jhana meditation what you're doing is your focusing on a single point and the point is, as you did in the mediation earlier, the point is here and so whatever happens you come back to here. Am I explaining that right?

Tina: Within Theravada Buddhist tradition, there're three stages. Sila and then the two you described. Samatha, which is what we're teaching: the anapanasati, the mindfulness of breathing. And then there's vipassana, which is an open awareness. So in the brain research they're doing now days, there are four categories and that is two of them. One is focused attention, one is open awareness. And they're each cultivating different things that are really important for our deepening and our unfoldment.

Iain: You also talk about access concentration and absorption concentration. Do you want to explain the difference between those two?

Stephen: Sure. We all start with momentary concentration with every meditation. As we get more concentrated, again it's that light we talked about earlier, Tina talked about in her interview that light that narrows some as our mind unifies. Then it gives us the opportunity to go a little bit deeper, and in access concentration there are also some benefits that arise that we call jhana factors. And these are things like joy and bliss and one pointedness, and this is just the meditation. So we go deeper still. So the process, all meditations have momentary concentration and access concentration. Only concentration meditation (samatha) has absorption.

Tina: For example in vipassana. Vipassana is a great practice so we're not saying anything negative about it. But because it's an open awareness and the content of our awareness is changing, it caps out at the level of access concentration. Where meditations that are focused attention, one can actually experience jhana. That's a possibility. That isn't available with open awareness meditation.

Iain: I just want, just before you come in Renate, I just wanted to also read a quote from your book here which I thought was interesting. Or it might have been a quote from Stephen, I'm not sure. "Increasing the depth of meditation serves to purify the mind more and more fully. It's like a rock polisher, as the polisher turns the rocks". I've done this wrongly. "As the polisher turns, the rocks come in contact with each other again and again, knocking the rough edges and debris off one another". So it's like the more you do the more smooth you become, I guess you're smoothing your character, your personality...

Renate: The pearl.

Iain: ...and your saying it's the pearl, the pearl beyond price.

Renate: That's how a pearl starts to shine, it's rubbing in the shell with the sand and that's what makes it shine.

Stephen: Iain, it's what we talked about in the interview, about what drew me to work with the Diamond Heart work, was the fact that I could--I had this level of contact with the transcendent but I could tell that I had these rough edges that were bumping people the wrong way. Not the way I intended, not the way I felt internally. So that's where these kinds of programs, things like the jhana practice, things like Diamond Heart, will help us develop into more whole, full people.

Renate: So after so many years of meditation and being really masters and, in meditation and teaching meditation, do you feel--do you still have your daily practice, and do you feel you're still expanding through meditation or is there still something happening?

Tina: Absolutely, we both have a daily practice, and think that's very important and really wouldn't do without it. It's kind of like brushing your teeth. It's in that category for us. It's something you do every day because it's good for you. So for us it's very important. The expansion of the practice really for us at this point, is about living from what realization we have, and how can that be embodied and lived from as much as possible. So this is really, for us, kind of the growing edge you might say, of our practice is really living from the realization that we've had, just as a human.

Stephen: And it's interesting, as you get more refined, as you let your experience land, it opens you up more so that there's more capacity to receive. So it does feel as though there's expansion as there's digestion, as we learn to live from it. So it's a self-reinforcing process.

Tina: Right, and there's also personality material that still needs to be digested and worked through and refined, that can be seen also with that clarity. Sometimes it's easier to see that patterning, that's where the stuck places are.

Renate: So, I sometimes hear about research and you kind of mentioned it earlier, there's a lot of research done around meditation, And it gets more and more scientific and more and more understood, and there seem to be changes happening in the mind. But do these changes actually influence how we live then? Do you understand what I mean?

Tina: Yeah, absolutely.

Renate: What kind of changes are those?

Tina: Well the brain research, some of it is just incredible. Like one of the things that impressed me when I started reading was that the actual grey matter of the brain changes. And for meditators and especially long term meditations, a 50 year old meditator's brain will look like a 25 year old's brain. So there's clearly benefit.

Renate: You get younger?

Stephen: Your brain becomes younger.

Renate: Your brain becomes younger.

Stephen: We've haven't found a way to work on the hair and the wrinkles yet. (Everyone laughs)
We'll let you know.

Renate: I didn't know that meditation would make your body younger too.

Stephen: Now that would be a supernormal power, wouldn't it?

Tina: We're still looking for that one.

Stephen: Well what's interesting, from the brain research as Tina's saying, is that they're finding with long term meditators is that we actually produce more grey matter. So it isn't that were taking advantage of it more. We're actually growing new grey matter. So just thinking about that, it's just magnificent.

Tina: And it can happen at any age--age is irrelevant, whenever someone starts meditating. And they've found through some of the studies of MBSR and others that have been rigorously studied, that it doesn't take that much meditation to start producing health benefits--blood pressure, stress reduction, all kinds. You know there are 250 studies a year, or more now, done on meditation. So it's extremely beneficial just from a practical standpoint. Just like physical exercise, this is exercise for our consciousness, and it's been so proven now through science it's kind of irrefutable at this point.

Renate: Yeah.

Iain: You have lots of other good questions don't you?

Renate: Our, the next question is: So I know we can have all kind of realization through meditation, yeah, waking up or I don't know if you can get enlightened just through meditation. So how do you see realization? You know, we interviewed about 400 people and it looks like there is such a variety in realization and awakening, and there's no real scientific paper out yet what enlightenment is where we can measure that. I mean you came up with the 51%. That's something.

Stephen: Well it's important to realize within the Absolute, all realizations are contained there. There's no distinction in the Absolute from religion, spiritual practice, meditation and non-meditation. Because the Absolute contains all of it. So the understanding that all these realization are available to each of us, really just depends on our consciousness and our, what we might frame as our karmic propensity. Things like this. So, but there are lots of realizations. So to say someone has one, it may not be one that we have as part of the totality of Buddhism, but for Tina and I It's not a matter of not recognising that, because it's coming from the source, from the Absolute rather than from a tradition.

Renate: So realization is a glimpse of who we are. Would you say that?

Tina: Well this is where, for us; we discovered the 51% rule, just in our conversations with each other, that is where it came from, even before we were teachers. When we met and talked about our own background and history, people can have glimpse, and for us we don't consider that awakening, we consider that glimpse. Because basically, the person still feels like a "me" that's having glimpse. I mean, it's extremely beneficial, but it hasn't changed the person's perspective of what they are. So this is where we came up with the 51% rule, of people having enough glimpses so maybe 20% of their consciousness, identifies as the ground; and then at some point, some experience can happen, maybe a big one that takes them up to 60%. But any time after the 51%, all of a sudden they experience themselves as being the ground of being, rather than being the ego self. And at that point, there's a shift that is irreversible, that keeps deepening if the person keeps practising. So for us, that's really how we define awakening when that shift of identity happens.

Stephen: And really, after the 51%, one of the hallmarks is that the person doesn't say that "I'm awake." What they realise is that awareness happened in their consciousness. So it's not an ownership. And before then it's "I'm having these realizations," there's still an ownership of it. So that's part of the shift.

Renate: Also, not only in my experience and probably in your experience, and you have mentioned it in your book--it's a visceral experience awakening, it's like something in the body woke up as well. It's not only a knowingness it is, it goes much deeper than knowing.

Stephen: We could even say it happens on the cellular level. That the cells begin to wake up in our body in the way that you are talking about. And it may be slow at first but there is a way that it does sweep through the body and it ends up activating all the little corners and nooks and crannies in us.

Tina: I think this is part of, sometimes there's the blissful sensation, and that to me feels very embodied. That just being a human, there's a lightness, there's a sense of buoyancy, and that's part of the embodiment of the awakening. It's really feeling that the body doesn't have the same density as we might as perceived.

Renate: So you just mentioned human. What is a human? When is a human...

Iain: It's a great song by rag and bone man. (Everyone laughs).

Renate: What is a complete human and what is enlightenment? You know we have the enlightenment drive. How does it look like being, is there anybody completely enlightened? Is it possible to live in this world being completely enlightened?

Tina: We've been asked if we think there is anyone who is completely enlightened.

Stephen: We should ask you. You've interviewed 400 spiritual teachers.

Tina: You would know better than anybody.

Renate: 400 different answers.

Stephen: We think we're all a work in progress and that maybe there is a place that one doesn't need to work any longer, but it seems to us at this point there's again no end to the depth and the mystery,

and there seems to be no end to the depths to the personal material that can come up that we need to work with too.

Tina: The fullness really, the way we often talk about it is the Absolute functioning through the personal--through that uniqueness that we all are--that is really the beauty of the human experience. We're all unique in that, there never be anyone like any of us again in history, and there never has been anyone. So there's a unique way that the ground that is manifesting everything, can only know itself through the human experience. As far as we know there aren't any other beings that can become enlightened. There might be some that can be self-aware like dolphins and elephants and so on. But it is really the human experience of the ground knowing itself, functioning in form. And so this is where the consciousness comes into the human form and loses contact with being the ground, through the structuring of the self-reflective awareness and the ego development. It's just a stage [of development], it's just that it's not complete. So awakening in our view is the fullness of the human experience, where the ground is actually knowing itself which is all of this and all other beings. As the ground, though--not as the ego self. So, to us that's really the journey--realizing what we really are, and then the working through all of the personality material, not that it all has to be gone, but so that it doesn't obscure.

Renate: So working through all of the material, dis-identifying?

Tina: Right, because--again this is part of the Dzogchen teaching--one is inviting in the primordial awareness that's always here for every human. Every human has it, we don't have to do anything to get it. When there's the abiding there, the personality can be active even, but there isn't the identification with it. And that's really where the suffering can often happen, is when the identification is present. So that to us is really the journey of what you asked, "What does it mean to be human and awakened?" That is, we frame it as the transformational and the transcendent. So the transcendent is the part of our experience where we're in touch with our deeper nature. The transformational is the part where the ego self becomes more and more digested and we're less functioning from the survival instinct (which the body needs to survive), and we're functioning more from the enlightenment drive.

Renate: That's something so important that you said Tina. Because I know you both emphasise in your teaching and in the book, that the transformation is sometimes not so interesting. But when we started with Conscious TV, there was still much more focus on the--that was 10 years ago--much more focus on the transcendent. You know, for example there was neo-Advaita--nobody's here, nothing to do. Some people loved it, but others went through agony with it, because there was a lot here. But that is changing, a lot more people talk now embodiment and being in the world. I know Iain interviewed the guy who is on the Ramana Maharshi...

Iain: Michael James

Renate: Michael James. You know, Ramana Maharshi's teaching where it's all going in, going in--that's the only thing. The world doesn't exist. It's all a dream. And then you ask, there's incredible beauty, is it just here to distract us from going in?

Stephen: Right, Well we could all see this is the shift in consciousness. Because again were moving out of the monasteries and the nunneries into the world and how does it work. And this is really a place in history where it seems like were really... some of the music from the 60's, were in the age of Aquarius, maybe upon us, but we're at this point where we have to make the big shift up. And that's

part of why, in our opinion, the pendulum is swinging in the other direction and we see a lot of extremism and fundamentalism in the world. Because it's really taking the pendulum back there, before it makes that new sweep into a more unified and a more whole world for all of us to live in.

Tina: Yes, we really feel the transcendent--and this is where we started out was on transcendent paths and we had capacity there and were able to do those paths--and we both thought about becoming cave yogis and turning away from the world. But there was something for both of us in not doing that. And so we were headed in that direction and we turned back to the world, because it feels like now the time is to bring this consciousness into form, so that all of materiality can be enlightened in a certain way. So it's not enough to transcend we want to actually be in the world as humans. The human experience has so much beauty and suffering. In Buddhism, this is one of the things we don't agree with, that basically you're just born to realise the Absolute and then get off the karmic wheel of rebirth as fast as you can. That doesn't make sense to us. The human experience is so much more than that and so much more beautiful.

Stephen: And why wouldn't the people who are being realised, why wouldn't they be reborn and coming back into the world and bringing that consciousness, contributing it to the collective so that everyone is enriched and every being is enriched?

Tina: This is part of the bodhisattva vow that one will continue to have rebirth until all beings are enlightened. You know, that seems like a long term project, a long term goal. But when one realizes the unity, you're not coming back for someone else. It's your own as the ground, and everything needs to be enlightened for that process to be complete.

Stephen: That's one thing with people having an awakening experience, one quality that can happen is that they can really have the sense that the collective has awakened in this location. So the whole collective has that, a charge gets sent out in some way and so everyone, we could say, is elevated by that one individual having that experience.

Renate: Yeah, that's compassion.

Stephen: It is compassion, right.

Renate: And love.

Stephen: And love.

Iain: That's quite a nice place to finish. Anything else? Burning questions you had?

Stephen: You two are so cute.

Tina: You are.

Iain: So, thank you very much Tina and Stephen for joining us on Conscious TV. And if you've watched all three segments, you've watched also the separate interview then you've done very well. So thank you for watching and I hope we see you again soon. Goodbye.

Renate: Goodbye.

Jhana Meditation: A short Guide

Tina Rasmussen and Stephen Snyder

Tina: Hello my name is Tina Rasmussen.

Stephen: And I'm Stephen Snyder.

Tina: And we are the authors of "Practicing the Jhanas." And we're going to do a short guided meditation of the anapanasati practice, which means mindfulness of breathing. And this is the practice we describe in our book which can lead to the jhanas. So I'll start with doing some posture instructions, and then Stephen will go through the actual mindfulness of breathing instructions. So sit comfortably with your eyes closed really feeling yourself sitting, and surrendering your weight to the seat, to the earth that's supporting us. Starting with your feet and really feeling your feet on the ground. And moving up to your sitting area, to the hips. And it really helps if the hips are slightly tilted. So there's a natural S-curve to the spine. If we allow that to be present, it really helps support the practice. And in this meditation, because it's a serenity and concentration practice, it really helps to have our posture set up when we start, so we don't have to move too much when we're meditating. But if you need to move that's fine. It helps to have the knees slightly lower than the hips to have that natural tilt.

And then moving up to your lower back to see if it's possible to allow that natural curve in your lower back, and in the front of your body. Really let the stomach relax, maybe take a deep breath into the belly. And then moving up to the chest, it's very easy to have our chest be collapsed in meditation. So we really want to see if we can allow the shoulders to be relaxed down the back. Chest open. And to allow the other side of that S-curve in the spine in the upper back. This really allows us to breathe fully and be open hearted as we meditate. And then going up to the neck to see if that's loose and without stress. Feeling how the neck joins the spine and really rests on top of the spine. Going down the arms to your hands. Having your hands just placed comfortably on your legs or folded in your lap, whichever is more comfortable. But really having your arms relax not having to hold them up.

And then coming to the head, really feeling the weight of the head resting on the spine so we really don't have to spend a lot of energy keeping our head in place. It's helpful to have the chin just slightly tucked as if your face is on a plane that would be, equal to facing a wall, so your neck isn't sticking out causing neck strain. And moving to the face, just let your face relax, let your eyes relax. And even the scalp. And with the jaw we hold a lot of tension there. Allowing for a space between the jaw and where it meets the skull. And this can be done by lightly touching the tip of your tongue to the top of your mouth behind the upper teeth. This naturally relaxes the jaw and allows for an energy circuit to be completed in the body. And if that is uncomfortable, then you don't need to do that. And now just seeing if you're balanced from the left side to the right, making sure your weight is evenly distributed. And finally, just feeling the weight of your body resting on the chair gently. Relaxed and yet alert.

Stephen: The simplest meditation instruction we give is to watch the breath. To know that you're breathing in the region between the nostril and the upper lip. The traditional meditation instructions are to seat yourself in an upright posture, relax your body, and let your shoulder blades melt down your back towards the floor. With eyes closed, allow your awareness to rest on the breath as it's

moving between the nostrils and the upper lip. The object of this meditation is the breath. Again you are to know the breath as it passes between the nostrils and the upper lip.

Tina: And if your awareness goes off of the breath, just return it with gentleness and kindness, without criticism or judgement. Just bring it back and rest in this region with the breath.