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saying yes to love

Maura Sills



Maura Sills, born in Scotland, is a Buddhist psychotherapist and co-founder of the Karuna Institute, situated on the wild and bracing heights of Dartmoor. Briefly a Buddhist nun, she is now married with a young daughter. She has great energy and gives herself deeply to her students and clients, combining professionalism with an elegant, light touch.

## A Spiritual Marriage

What is said about sex in Buddhism can be confusing. Meditation and living as a couple can help value the importance of separation in relationship. Sex is very important within a relationship. My sexual relationship with my husband and my own sexual nature have informed my meditation, and my meditation practice has deepened my sexual experience.

Most relationships end up in deep conditioning and dependency. Knowing this helps me realize that fundamentally a relationship is a paradox. I am totally alone and this liberates me within the relationship. I am not looking for security in my relationship; actually Franklyn and I got together because of our meditation. We married because we felt ready to marry and we knew it would be a spiritual marriage.

At times in my life I have chosen to be celibate, and I honour that choice and anybody who makes it. However, within some forms of Buddhism there is bad press about sex, the idea almost being that to be spiritual you must be non-sexual. My spirituality and my sexuality are so deeply connected that one is the door to the other. Sexual intercourse is part of lay and married life, and if spirituality and meditation cannot also be present, there is a basic mistake in the teachings. It is unhealthy if the teachings cannot inform sexual life and are only judgemental.

Some of my students project ideas about me because I practise Buddhism. One is that I must not have sex, another that I do not like it. Thus I become asexual in their eyes, which is strange because this is not how I experience myself at all. They have the idea that sex is at the lower end of human nature.

Most reports from Buddhists about sex come from celibate, non-married people. I am not only talking of physical sex, but of the inner relationship between male and female, which is essential and central. To ignore male energy, female energy or sexual energy in yourself, or in a relationship, is to ignore a

whole illumination into the nature of life, into the nature of being a woman.

### Saying Yes to Love

I am not referring to sex without love. You cannot separate them once you go past a certain point. It is a wonderful joy to practise sexual love and it has a place in Buddhism. When I got married to Franklyn, as part of our wedding vows we chose the words from John Donne: 'I will choose to say yes to love as often as I can.' For me an adult relationship gives you that opportunity.

To choose to say yes to love is a practice and, like a meditation practice, sometimes it is very difficult. It is a vehicle to cultivate the opening of the heart with somebody who is also practising and hopefully who accepts the shortcomings of the other person. I do not mean colluding; I mean accepting. This can be an enormous encouragement and I believe people need encouragement to love.

This is one of the dilemmas of modern life that, for whatever reason, many children have not experienced adequate loving. They have experienced other things, but they have not really experienced total acceptance, total love. Most of our hearts have been hurt either by being open and betrayed or abused, or by being so closed off they could not feel love. Being in a continuing relationship where both of you are choosing as often as possible to say yes to love is an ongoing practice.

### The Way of the Warrior

There are enormous dangers in committed relationships and the biggest is fear of losing the relationship, whether it is with your partner or your children.

Recently I witnessed two pieces of therapeutic work, one

with a woman who lost her eight-month-old daughter four years ago. She could not bear this loss and had been in the hell realms for the last four years. It became apparent to me that this is the risk you take when you become a mother and I realize I am also attached to my daughter.

The other situation was a woman whose husband suddenly died within three hours a couple of years ago. She had totally died inside, and though functional and successful in her job, she was frozen. One woman was distraught and in the hell realms and the other looked like a hungry ghost, with nothing to take the place of the loss of her husband.

So for me, choosing love in a committed relationship, choosing love full stop, is the way of the warrior. It is the courageous way to live, to risk everything. I feel love and death are close together.

### Psychotherapy and Meditation

Meditation helps us to risk opening our heart to bring in love and kindness. It is essential to cultivate our ability to love, which feels almost artificial unless it is put to the test. Meditation can also enable us to survive the distress and pain of feeling mortal love. It can help in experiencing the cost of not-loving, but also in loosening our grip when we are attached and dependent in love.

Meditation connects us with the universal qualities of love, totally non-dependent on a personal connection, perhaps the sense of something that will not change. It is not just understanding the larger context, but experiencing support from the universal nature of life. This can be called faith.

There is a strong connection between therapy and meditation. Psychotherapy often says things similar to the early teachings of the Buddha: his search for truth, his inner inquiry, what he designated important. The journey, the inquiry in therapy, is

very compatible with the journey and inquiry a meditator would make.

The power of psychotherapy is very similar to the power of meditation, which is the cultivation of awareness. A psychotherapy which is not involved with the study of consciousness, or does not have awareness practice as central to being human, cannot meet human needs today. Psychotherapy does not only concentrate on the cognitive mind, it also has the potential for a deeper, inner response or healing. The subliminal mind, the wise mind uncovered in our attentive awareness, is the mind we need to be reconnected with.

In Buddhism experience is not seen as a problem; it is how we respond, react and relate to an experience which is problematic. In transpersonal psychotherapy we see no matter how pathological or difficult the symptoms, they are trying to give us some information, to teach us something; they are the doorway to the subliminal mind, the wise mind.

There are differences between Buddhism and psychotherapy too. Within traditional Buddhist practice there is very little attention given to the personal, the self. Westerners who have a healthy sense of self can use meditation as their only tool, but there are many Westerners who have not even separated from their mothers. They have not gone through the maturation process that maybe most Easterners would have automatically negotiated. Because of a different sense of the individual and of the group, psychotherapy can help in working with the personality, the unresolved, maturational, individuation issues which must be dealt with in order to have a successful practice of meditation.

Sometimes Buddhism and psychotherapy are considered to be in opposition. This is a misperception. A meditation practice that embraces the personality and a psychotherapeutic practice that embraces an understanding of the nature of consciousness are both skilful models and can work in harmony. I see a movement

of meditation practitioners starting to embrace psychotherapy and of psychotherapists being open to exploring the nature of consciousness.

Meditation has brought to my psychology a sense of the mystery of being human. It has helped me trust the unknown in psychotherapy and has allowed me to develop more patience, tolerance, acceptance and awareness of the multiple layers of resistance. It has enabled me to see the psychological layers the person is struggling with and where they are free. It has helped me to help the person.

### Relaxing the Tension

In 1971 I was attracted to Chinese medicine and tai-chi, and my teacher was as much Taoist as Buddhist. Gradually I realized we were meditating. We were doing mostly inner energy practices, using the breath to circulate energy [chi] and very slow-moving chi kung exercises to develop an awareness of the chi. At other times we were told to sit silently and just watch the mind.

I studied Chan Buddhism for about eight years, then in 1978 went to America, where I started to practise psychotherapy.

Franklyn was a student of Rina Sircar and I also felt inspired by her. When her teacher, Taungpulu Sayadaw, came to America, I decided it would be a great opportunity to take temporary ordination and practise with him.

He taught simple insight meditation, a mindfulness practice with special attention given to different personality attributes. I watched many sensations, many feelings and spent a lot of time looking at the body, which I found very helpful. However, neither psychotherapy nor meditation had altered the tension in my body, though through these practices this anxiety was kept tolerable.

One of my teachers recommended the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley and their technique, *Kum Nye*, which was described as

relaxation. I thought a Buddhist form of meditative relaxation could help me lose this anxiety. However, I realized after the first few days of the practice that it was not about making me feel better. It was about working with all the resistances and failings of the personality. I did a three-month intensive practice which at the time was very hard for me. It was only when I left the institute years later that I realized how important that practice was.

Now I both teach and practise *Kum Nye*, but I would not say that it is my main meditation practice. I feel it is more a maintenance practice for the body-mind and energies, and in some ways it is similar to the earlier practices of the Taoist/Chan tradition. My personal practice is insight. I just continue to practise sustained attention, watching to see if I can keep my mind sharp for the impact of perceptions.

### Two-Person Practice

For a long time I thought sitting silently on a cushion on retreat or during the day was meditation, but over the years my practice has evolved and I have become more active in my daily life and in my work as a psychotherapist, trainer and teacher. Now my meditation is to be with another person in relationship.

Sustained attention is still vital and this has been my main learning vehicle. Although I have moved to a two-person joint practice, I still need to sit and withdraw from relationship. The change is to see the value in both instead of only seeing the sitting practice as important.

It can be similar in psychotherapy. You see a client once or twice a week, but the mistake can be for both client and therapist to think this is the important time. In the same way for me as a meditator the mistake was to think that sitting was the important thing. Both views have shifted and I realize it is how I am outside of these times that is significant. If I have not

changed in these non-practice situations then the psychotherapy and the meditation are simply avoidances.

My two-person practice is in the context of a special relationship, but not with a special person. Two people enter a special relationship which requires joint presence and awareness practice.

I learn from relationships in general, but not in the same way as I have learned and continue to learn from being with students, clients and groups.

### Beginners

I would recommend an easy meditation practice in the beginning, giving people something to do with sensations. The ability to feel sensations is available to most people and it gives them a sense of doing something which can help transformation, or develop insight or clarity, whatever the intention of the practice is.

*Kum Nye* is a good beginner's practice, if it is taught gently. It helps concentrate the mind and reduce the amount of avoidance that quite often resurrects itself much later in the practice. You work with the personality and conditioning right from the beginning.

In psychotherapy, we start with the breath. For me, meditation and psychotherapy have the similar starting-point of following the breath into the body and becoming aware of sensations and movements so that the attention is pulled towards the physical. When we manage to become more present with our physical body then a sense of ease can occur.

### Everyday Life

In everyday life I would recommend mindfulness, sustained attention and a basic slowing down. Discipline and intention are important. I do not mean an external discipline, but taking a

certain decision about how to be in daily life. To work within these limitations and intentions feels very useful. Meditation, activities, relationships, working with what we have and what there is, this is all we need.

How I practise in everyday life fluctuates enormously. Generally I do some short physical exercises followed by meditation. I like to withdraw and disengage first thing in the morning and just be quiet, usually doing *Kum Nye* practices in order to withdraw attention from activities and come back more into myself. I am very responsive and if this does not happen for some reason I am too much in my actions and too responsive to daily activities.

As I work with people most of the time, this is where my practice has to begin, as soon as I walk through the door. So when I am with people, I see this as a good opportunity to practise mindfulness of response, action and mind-states. The sense of being in relationship with a person informs not just myself and the other person, but also the relationship, which is not independent from us.

### Loosening Up

Some students entering the Karuna psychotherapy training are from a Buddhist tradition and were introduced to meditation before they explored their personality and sense of self. Their meditation has been built upon a quite faulty or damaged ego-structure and this surfaces with practice.

Often vipassana practitioners have too much control. Their awareness has reduced the potential of experiences arising so they are only able to be with a limited range of arising experiences. Dryness can occur through control and if it does there is a need to loosen up. The naming in some forms of vipassana can also give a false sense of control, so a practice to loosen these people up is useful. Some of the transformative *Kum Nye*

practices offer a vehicle for loosening up the ego through the body taking back more control.

Certain aspects of meditation are more useful than others for Westerners. Practices which balance concentration with sustained attention and at the same time work with love or the energy of the heart are very enriching. Practices which allow compassion to arise, based on seeing the nature of suffering in other people, can also be beneficial.

Sometimes Westerners have a false sense of worth. Somehow the values of competition and achievement in Western society have extinguished an inner sense of truth, authenticity and realness. These people need a practice which opens up not only the experience of their own meditation and arising experience but also helps them to see others' experience as important.

The meditation practice of first loving yourself and then others is almost impossible for Westerners. If you can truly see suffering in another, then there is an opportunity to relate this back to yourself. Often we are more able to see and feel compassion and *metta* for other people first, and only then see that what we are actually looking at is ourselves as well. We need to see meditation as interdependent and interconnected. It is the study and nature of consciousness, so it takes us beyond the person and we do not remain quite so egocentric.

### Meditation in Relationship

In daily life you have to practise fast meditation. You have to practise meditation in relationship. Whether it is relationship with what you do, with people or with experiences, you have to be a very fast meditator. It is like fast walking practice and slow walking practice, and you must value the laylife as potentially as enlightening as the monastic one.

Obviously there are problems in laylife because of material possessions, children and partners; we become involved a lot

more and there are more positions we have to negotiate. However, it can be positive because you can watch yourself moving between positions. You can get soft, though, because soft options are there. You can be distracted and become distant from your inner life. You can avoid fear in your life because you can take drugs, food, drink or whatever. You can feed away the fear.

Conversely, in monastic life your role is pretty fixed and you work with reduced positions, but there are difficulties too. There is a lack of flexibility in catering for individual needs, though there is too much catering for these needs in laylife perhaps. On the emotional level there is less acceptance of, and fewer outlets for, emotional distress or expressions of distress. In a monastic situation you are not informed by the state of the world, so your views of it might become a little rigid.

### Teacher?

There are people I feel I can learn from who have been in practice longer than myself and who are wiser, but I do not have a particular teacher now. The teacher I was ordained by was the Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw. When I met him he was in his late eighties. He was a forest monk from Burma who had spent 13 years in solitary retreats. He did not speak English so all my instructions came through an interpreter.

Till then I never thought I wanted a teacher like Sayadaw, because of my feminist views and because there were so many people devoted to him. Before he came to California I felt some negativity towards him. It was a great surprise when we met him at the airport because I had a completely unthought response and bowed down to him, not knowing how I got down there. It just felt as if I had been put there. It was the only time in my life that I found and was found by a teacher. It was totally non-verbal and though the translated teachings were excellent, I did not feel they were the teaching. In some way

Sayadaw picked me up and his presence was the biggest teaching I ever experienced.

Nowadays my main inspiration comes from people, often from despairing of people and then watching a miracle take place. Time and again I run out of expertise and almost give up, then something changes for someone or a miracle happens in a relationship. When I think I have reached the bottom of my ability to trust, it is enriching. Through sustained attention and deep listening miracles can happen and that is what keeps me going.

### Ethics

If you come back to being a true human being, resensitizing yourself, then morality arises spontaneously. I have seen this in practice time and again. Many people have lost their inner sense of ethics, the inner self-regulating morality based upon natural responsiveness to the nature of the universe. People in the West have lost the inner sense of what they need to eat, how they need to sleep, how much to express; they have lost the whole biorhythm because of Western culture.

Because we have lost our way with ethics we are like cripples, leaning against other ethical systems and codes. Buddhism has a good ethical system and it is useful, but usually we take it on as an external ruler or use it as a crutch before we develop our inner morality and inner self-regulation. I think Westerners tend to take it on and then hit themselves over the head or measure their achievements by it. It is the male principle gone totally wrong.

### The Human Condition

The wisdom of Buddhism must become more available to ordinary non-Buddhist people. Dharma is not a Buddhist possession and we can use some skilful practices from Buddhism to

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respond to circumstances in the world today. The older historical experiences of Buddhism should not be diluted, but they must be retranslated into ways that all people can get into.

Buddhism has become enshrouded in dogma, structures and forms. Forms can be helpful in some way, but in the world today, Buddha-mind has to inform as directly as possible without cultural screens. The human beingness must be brought back into Buddhism. Some forms of Buddhism seem to have lost their trust in the human condition, but this is how we are, who we are and it is what we have to work with. It is not a mistake and we are not disadvantaged by it; the human condition is real even if total reactive ignorance is where we get the information from.

The path of the psychotherapist and the meditator is sensitivity to being human. If we are resensitized to the human condition then dharma and Buddhism will become flowing truth, not something learned and separate. It is as if we disrespect the human condition and see it as something to be transformed, transcended or let go of. I am not just talking about the ego, I am talking about the whole human condition. This is where the whole information is, embodied here in human beings, and we must re-empower the individual.