



Volunteering, Dysa-style

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Although the topic of our interview was volunteering in our sangha, Dysa and I almost immediately went astray. Her story of how she found the dharma amidst the hubbub of our Western culture is intimately relevant to her practice. And it turns out that we were not off topic after all because Dysa's volunteering is an integral part of that practice.

Dysa is a gentle woman with a complex and rich history. She grew up in a fundamentalist Christian family, with parents who engaged in lively, philosophic discussions. Her upbringing led her to a profession that was centered on helping, working with children as a psychologist. But it also led her to a lifetime of analyzing and criticizing her own self-beliefs, perhaps an occupational hazard for those in her field of work.

Dysa's always been an avid outdoorswoman. She loves cross-country skiing, hiking, and almost anything that gets her outside. One day about 11 years ago, on a long ride home in the back of a ski van, she got into a discussion with her seatmate, and that conversation was the catalyst that led her to the dharma. At the time, she knew at some gut level that her life wasn't working. Her immediate unhappiness will ring familiar to many of us today. In her own words, it was a...

President and an Administration that were not to my choosing. And I was so upset about politics; and I was doing my usual dealing with it – just fairly emotional and nonproductive. It was NOT helping me emotionally or physically.

Dysa's seatmate shared the same opinions but remained remarkably calm discussing them. Finally, Dysa just asked, "How do you do that?" Well, the woman was a member of SIMS. She mentioned her practice and referred Dysa to our website.

A few months later Dysa found herself in Rodney's beginner class. As she listened, she asked herself, "How does he know these things about me?" The teachings resonated with her and she realized -- "Oh, this might be something I can actually change and not be on this same path that I've always been on." She started coming to SIMS, and she says that her practice has been incredibly impactful in her life.

In comparison to Western psychology, Dysa says of the Buddhist approach to life, "It's so very kind, really. The fact that you can fall back, but you have ways to not fall completely off the continuum -- mainly to be quiet and notice the ego involvement and live with it." As her practice evolves, she realizes she is just beginning to really understand all the ways her critical self-talk has hurt her over the years. Now she says with some wonder, "What if I never had that discussion on the bus? What if I did, but didn't hear her?"

When she first started, Dysa obsessed about “doing it right.” Like so many of us, she worried about not being up to the level of those sitting around her. Eventually, she started daring “to have real conversations” with other sangha members and to get involved.

For Dysa, volunteering has always been a mix of the formal and the informal. As a Peace Corps volunteer, she trained teachers on remote Samoan islands; these days she “volunteers” informally by bringing meals to older neighbors and offering companionship to elderly people. With these people, Dysa says she just has a good time and finds that her inner focused thoughts fade. To Dysa, volunteering is a part of connecting with fellow human beings.

In the sangha and in her life, Dysa volunteers because she really wants to, not to satisfy “the tyranny of the shoulds” as she says. Her impetus for volunteering at SIMS was a desire to be more a part of the sangha. Because she’s a very physical person, she often chooses physical chores as a way to be active. She’s a regular member of the crew that vacuums, dusts, and cleans at our Center. At a weekend retreat, she’ll help set up and on residential retreats, she cleans, or her favorite thing, “crawling around on my knees pulling weeds.”

As part of the SIMS Death and Dying group, she sat with a dying person, “not as an obligation but because I wanted to.” Not too long ago, a friend suggested to Dysa that she volunteer in a formal program with the dying. Her friend said, “You would be really good at it.” Dysa’s internal voice replied, “Oh, no I wouldn’t,” but she recognized immediately that this response was a reflection of her old self-view. Her practice and her volunteering have helped her get in touch with her inner strength.

In the beginning, Dysa started volunteering with “what I know I can do” -- physical work. Gradually, over the course of her practice, “what she knows she can do” has expanded to encompass a lot more than she ever imagined, including working with the homeless and doing more formal things with SIMS. She has come a long way from the wanderer on the ski van 11 years ago!