

# The Point of Contact

## By Polly Young-Eisendrath, Tricycle, Fall 2005

*Shinzen Young sat down with his student Polly Young-Eisendrath, a psychotherapist and author, at her office in Montpelier, Vermont this past February.*

You seem especially able to reach people who have resisted learning to meditate or have tried and failed. What's your secret? I view each person who comes to me as capable of classical enlightenment, at least the initial stage.

What do you mean by "classical enlightenment"? If I were forced to give a short description, I would say it is knowing for sure that there never has been a thing inside you called self. Enlightenment is not a peak experience. It's a permanent shift in paradigm that deepens day by day.

You bring a distinctive orientation to Vipassana teaching—Vipassana with a Zen flavor. I wonder if you could speak about the dialogue between Zen and Vipassana in your own life and in your teaching. My approach to meditation is built on three things. The first is the Buddha's discovery that concentration can be used as a microscope to tease out the components of our subjective experience; I take that from Vipassana. The second is Sasaki Roshi's unique reformulation of the Buddhist concept of annica—or impermanence—as expansion-and-contraction. And the third is my own discovery of how to coach people interactively during their meditation, using a decision tree that customizes the guidance based on their moment-by-moment experience.

Decision tree? Yes. A decision tree is a method of determining the best thing to do next, depending on particular outcomes. When I guide people while they're meditating, I frequently ask questions about what they're experiencing. This allows me to spot openings and to modify my guidance to take optimal advantage of the openings in the moment.

Some people might think your approach sounds mechanical. And in fact, I've heard Zen teachers, on several occasions, imply that Vipassana meditation—with its emphasis on analysis—creates a separation between the observer and the observed, increasing the sense of a witnessing self. What would you say to that criticism? I believe that each approach to practice has characteristic weaknesses and strengths. Teachers should be able and willing to discuss both. It is true that initially in the Vipassana practice, one may have to develop a sort of witness that oversees the meditative process. I compare this to putting up a scaffolding in order to build a building. Sensory clarity and equanimity are the "building"—the ultimate goal. At some point, the clarity and equanimity should become so habitual that they seep around the edges and dissolve the scaffolding of this "observing self." The fact that this does not always occur could be looked upon as a characteristic weakness of Vipassana practice. But Vipassana also has a characteristic strength: it gives a clear and systematic way to track each moment of experience so that nothing can slip through the cracks. I know people who have practiced Zen for many years. They can sit perfectly motionless for hours on end, but with the mind wandering grossly. On the other hand, there is a certain bouncy aliveness to the Zen style of liberation. In Vipassana, we teach people to

contact impermanence in their sense gates. In Zen, they teach people to express impermanence in everything they say and do.

In many lineages of Buddhism there is a strong belief that one should stay with a single teacher in order to fully deepen one's practice. Then there are people, like you, who encourage their students to go on different kinds of retreats with different teachers. What's your view of this issue? I think that some people are naturally poly-spiritual and some people are mono-spiritual. Mono-spiritual people develop overt or subtle conflicts if they go with different teachers or approaches, whereas poly-spiritual people get an immediate sense of the complementary. I've always been poly-spiritual. There's never been anything I did with anybody that didn't seem immediately to complement what I had done with everybody else. But that's my personality type. As far as my students go, I ask them to decide for themselves which type they are and to act accordingly. This perspective seems to resolve the classic conundrum of "one deep hole versus many shallow ones."

I should also say that when I encourage students to explore other teachers, I'm careful to give them a framework that reduces possible confusions and conflicts. I point out that there is a common thread that passes through all forms of mindfulness. Every style of mindfulness meditation is designed to develop two basic skills: sensory clarity and equanimity. The styles differ in regard to which aspects of sensory experience are emphasized and in regard to what focusing strategies are employed. As long as a student views the practice as the development of the generic skills of sensory clarity and equanimity, there shouldn't be too much confusion.

While many people consider science an obstacle to spiritual practice, you consider it complementary. Why? For one thing, I like science. It's fun for me. Science has beauty, depth, power, and practical utility. I believe that the two most impressive discoveries of our species are the Eastern method of meditative exploration and the Western method of scientific exploration.

Some people claim that meditation and science have mated, but I think they are just starting to date. I believe the true mating will occur sometime later in this century and will give birth to a world-transforming paradigm shift. The Dalai Lama has, in essence, called for such a mating to take place.

At a very fundamental level, science and Vipassana share the same basic methodology. Confronted with a complex and seemingly inscrutable phenomenon in the natural world, what's the first thing a scientist is likely to do? To deconstruct the phenomenon into a few basic components and then track how those components interact to create the complex system. Vipassana meditation also addresses a complex and seemingly inscrutable phenomenon in the natural world: the experience of "I am." Early Buddhism analyzed I-am-ness using a five-component system—the so-called five-aggregate model (matter, feelings, thoughts, habit forces, and consciousness). Personally, I prefer a somewhat streamlined version using three components: body sensation, visual thought, and verbal thought, which I refer to, for short, as Body-Image-Talk, or shorter still, BIT. Whether one uses a five- or three-component model, the result is the same. By tracking the components in real time, one is able to experience how the self of the moment arises through their interactions. This leads to a radical paradigm shift called enlightenment.

I know that many Vipassana teachers emphasize breath practice, but you center your teaching around BIT. Why is that? In general, I encourage students to use whatever procedure seems to work best at a given time,

including, perhaps, breath focus. However, I emphasize BIT because I want to give them something that they can apply immediately in the real world when real things happen. In general, people in North America are not going to voluntarily put themselves in intense meditation training situations, but eventually their life circumstances will bring the monastery to them. Life challenges trigger Body-Image-Talk eruptions. For example, after an argument with your partner, you review the scene in your mind's eye and replay the tapes in your head. Meanwhile, the "juice" of the experience courses through your body as emotional sensations. If you can track those Body-Image-Talk components, then you won't be trapped in them, but if you lose track they'll reinforce each other in a n overwhelming way. To give another example, say you have physical discomfort such as a backache. Once again, if you can track the physical and emotional sensations of Body and the Image and Talk components, then you can transform the experience from abject suffering to spiritual purification. I want to equip people with a procedure that will allow them to extract maximal spiritual growth from BIT eruptions. That way, life challenges can play the role of monastic practice.

Your first example uses a personal relationship. I wonder what you think about the dialogue between Buddhism and psychotherapy. Both meditation and therapy emphasize self-awareness. In meditation, however, one develops extraordinary states of concentration that allow for the examination of subjective experience at a microscopic level. Ordinarily, therapy doesn't develop that kind of detailed awareness. Using the analogy of anatomy, therapy clarifies gross anatomical systems, but meditation gets you down to the cellular level. This quantitative difference in concentration leads to a qualitative difference in outcome. Meditation has the potential to place you in direct contact with the spiritual nature of experience—24/7!

Are you implying that meditation is more fundamental than psychotherapy? If you mean more important, no, I'm not saying that. The spiritual path consists of two aspects: seeing beyond the limited self and refining the limited self. As you move along this path, you have to consistently attend to both. The second aspect is also addressed in traditional meditation practice—through the cultivation of ethics, lovingkindness, and compassion, as well as through feedback from teachers and fellow practitioners. Sometimes, however, all of that is not enough. One may need to go to the people who specialize in refining the limited self—that is, psychotherapists. I've heard it implied that one should do the psychological work first and then the meditation, and it's been my experience that even very advanced practitioners may need therapeutic help.

In my own case, for example, I'm in my fourth decade of practice and I've still got this unresolved problem in my life. I have always been a compulsive procrastinator in a pathological way. This has prevented me from writing books and from doing a lot of things that I would have liked to have done with my life. I've been in therapy for more than a year on this issue. Perhaps meditation would have eventually solved this, but I needed to look into another modality.

Obviously you've made some progress, because your first book—Break Through Pain—just came out! Why that topic? Working with physical discomfort has been a theme for me ever since I began sitting because I had to deal with so much of it, especially in the early years of my practice. In fact, the first time I ever experienced samadhi [meditative absorption] was during the closing minutes of my first meditation retreat in Japan—after a week of "samurai boot-camp Zen." My whole body was shaking uncontrollably from pure pain. I was on the verge of tears. Then suddenly, it all went away. For the first time ever in my life, thought stopped and stayed

stopped. The pain turned into a massage of waves and vibrations; it seemed as though I could have stayed there forever.

I've spent the last thirty-five years trying to figure out a systematic method that anyone in pain could follow, regardless of the source of the pain, to come to that kind of breakthrough. That, in essence, is what the book is about.

When you describe the gut-wrenching effort involved in your first experience of samadhi, I find myself thinking back to what you said at the beginning about seeing every student as capable of classical enlightenment. Your opening statement seems to belie the determination and endurance that you yourself needed for a breakthrough. How would you respond to that? It's true that in the early years of my practice I had to rely a lot on brute force and sheer willpower. I quite agree that not many people are going to voluntarily do such a thing.

Your challenge makes me realize that what I said at the beginning was not quite accurate. It's not so much that I see everyone as capable of enlightenment. It's more like I see enlightenment as a natural state, always just waiting to happen. When I interactively guide someone, I think of Socrates describing himself as midwife. A midwife does not give birth to the baby, but understands exactly how to help nature do its job. Nature is constantly presenting little windows of opportunity for insight and purification. These are often subtle and fleeting and go unnoticed. My job is to point out these windows, explain their significance, and suggest an optimal meditation strategy. When we know how to use these openings, we don't necessarily have to go through the kind of ordeal I went through in Japan. This is an aspect of upaya, skillful means.

Every time I lead a retreat, through the feedback my students give, I learn more specific details about how to assist nature. So, for me, teaching is a collaborative research endeavor—always fresh and fascinating.

## Go with the Flow

### Guided Meditation with Shinzen Young

Take a moment to settle into your posture. Place some of your attention on your body sensations. At the same time, place some attention behind your closed eyes, where mental images are likely to be seen. Also place some attention in your head, where internal talk is likely to be heard. Get a sense of what it's like to simultaneously focus attention in these three areas.

Now, if you're aware of body sensation and nothing else, say "body," out loud or to yourself. If you're aware of visual thinking and nothing else, say "image." If you're aware of verbal thinking and nothing else, say "talk." If you're aware of more than one of these at the same time, choose one and focus on it. Label your awareness in this way every few seconds for ten minutes or so.

Now we're going to add some detail. When you label "body," that body sensation may last or disappear. If it disappears, say "gone." Similarly, when you label "image," that mental image may stick around or vanish. If it vanishes, say "gone." When you label "talk," that particular burst of talk may continue or die away. If it dies

away, say “gone.” So, now you have four labels: body, image, talk, and gone. Continue in this way for another ten minutes or so.

Now, I would ask you some questions and give you some choices. If one of the elements (body, image, talk) was strongly activated, we might decide to work with that element in more detail. On the other hand, we might decide to pursue the opposite course of paying attention to the least active, most restful element. Or we might decide to simply continue with the procedure as we have been doing it. Let’s say that body sensation was very active and we decided to work with that. The continuing guidance might go something like this:

Bring all your attention to your body sensations. When you’re aware of a body sensation that seems solid and unchanging, say “solid.” When you’re aware of a body sensation that seems soft or flowing, say “flow.” Whenever you’re aware that a solid sensation or a burst of flow vanishes, say “gone.”

As you label in my presence, I would carefully listen to your tone of voice and pace. The goal is to note continuously, but not frenetically. I might give you feedback to speed up or to slow down. Furthermore, the tone of your voice gives me an indication of the depth of your equanimity, so I might ask you to change the tone.

I’d also be listening for what proportion of the time you were noting solidity, fluidity, or vanishing. I would guide you differently depending on what predominated. Say, for example, that every three or four labels was “flow.” In that case, my continuing guidance might go something like this:

Now focus all your attention on that flow. Flow can occur in various “flavors”: waviness, vibration, expansion, contraction, and so forth. Focus all your attention on the flow in your body, ignoring solidity just for now. Also let mental images and internal talk be in the background. Each time you note “flow,” go with the flow. Let it massage you. Let it nurture you. Let it meditate you.

Thus, through an interactive decision tree, we would be able to spot a natural opening—in this case, insight into impermanence.

—SHINZEN YOUNG

The entire article may be viewed at [http://www.tricycle.com/issues/tricycle/15\\_1/interview/703-1.html](http://www.tricycle.com/issues/tricycle/15_1/interview/703-1.html)  
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