

Teacher Profile: Howard Cohn

INTERVIEWED BY WALT OPIE



Spirit Rock: What originally drew you to meditation practice and who were your first important teachers?

Howard Cohn: As a competitive athlete in my younger years, I was always interested in the mind and body connection. The real spark though was meeting my freshman college girlfriend. Her brother was an early Transcendental Meditation teacher. I became interested in learning about it. Our romance didn't last, but my interest in meditation did.

Then I went to a Ram Dass retreat and met Stephen Levine, who was offering vipassana practice on the retreat. I soon moved to Santa Cruz to sit in Stephen's weekly sitting group. Within several months, I sat my first 3-month retreat, followed by many more. I consider Joseph Goldstein to be my root teacher in vipassana. He was such an inspiring guide for me on those early 3-month retreats. I still carry his depth of wisdom and commitment in my heart.

In 1985, I became part of Jack Kornfield's first teacher training group, along with James Baraz, Sylvia Boorstein, Anna Douglas and Sharda Rogell. Jack has been a wonderful teacher and mentor for me.

SR: Could you tell us about how your time with H.W.L. Poonja in India influenced your vipassana practice or the way you teach?

HC: When I first went to see Poonjaji in India, my vipassana practice had become a little stale. I had unknowingly adopted many views about what practice should look like and my ideas were limiting my experience of freedom.

In my first conversation with Poonjaji, he asked me why I had come to see him. I said, "I know that the seeker and the sought are one, but I've traveled halfway around the world to see you, so I must want something from you."

He replied, "Remove the seeker, and remove the sought."

Upon hearing those words I experienced a gap in consciousness and the next thing I knew I was laughing a laugh I had never heard. Those simple words had shocked me out of all my identities—the notion of a seeker fell away; the sought fell away; the idea of a teacher fell away; the idea of a man fell away... all of my various identities were gone. This revealed an immaculate presence and freedom that is always available—right here, right now.

“My attention naturally shifted away from the objects of awareness, and more toward the nature of awareness itself.”

I hadn't realized the extent to which I had subtly clung to the identity of seeker, meditator or person until they were gone. The identities have mostly come back and are useful for living in a conceptual world, but I now know them as limited abstractions or stories. They can never capture the depth of our direct experience.

So my vipassana practice has become much more about enjoying the true gift of being aware in the present moment. The more conscious I am of being present, the more I notice about myself and my surroundings. I naturally become more clear, loving and altruistic in my motivation and less likely to cause harm. In my teaching, I try to invoke that ever-available sense of presence.

SR: Which specific Buddhist teachings have most influenced your practice?

HC: My early practice followed the Burmese stream of Theravada Buddhism. It was very technical and intense, with precise attention given to the details of experience. This precision helped me to see the way my mind embellishes immediate experience. The difference between the stories my mind creates and the simple reality of things came into stark contrast. This period of practice also allowed me to see more clearly the three fundamental aspects of experience—impermanence, the unreliable nature of experience, and the self-less nature of all changing phenomena. Even the most delicious experiences are marked by these aspects.

In 1989, just prior to meeting Poonjaji, I became much less drawn to the objects of awareness, and much more drawn to awareness or consciousness itself. The more I practiced and paid attention to changing objects, the brighter and clearer my mind became. My attention naturally shifted away from the objects of awareness and more toward the nature of awareness itself.

At that point I was introduced to the Tibetan Dzogchen teachings that have as one of their central aims the introduction of this intrinsic awareness, called rigpa. My first Dzogchen teacher was Chögyal Namkhai Norbu. Then I had the good fortune of spending time with Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, and now for 16-17

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years I've joyfully studied with Tsoknyi Rinpoche (Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche's son). The Dzogchen teachings provide a beautiful and subtle language to describe our consciousness, and practices to enhance our experience and confidence in awareness.

More recently, the teachings of Ajahn Sumedho seem to synthesize the influences of my original Burmese teaching and the Dzogchen teachings with a very earthy and accessible emphasis on realizing the Four Noble Truths in real time. We can use the struggles of our everyday existence to see through the self illusion and experience the heart's release. Ajahn Sumedho was actually at my first 3-month retreat at IMS in the late 70's; he was very inspiring then and he still is.

SR: How long have you been leading a sitting group in San Francisco now?

HC: I've been leading a sitting group in the Mission District every Tuesday night for 23 years. As much as anything in my life it has kept the fire of the dharma burning brightly. And I would speculate that this is probably true for many of the people who have taken advantage of the group over the years.

A majority of the meditators show up to the group having been buffeted by the waves of their mind (such as worries about the future, obsessions about the past), and are very identified with distorted views of themselves. They seem palpably relieved to be reminded of and returned to present time and the healing power of awareness. 🌱

For more information on Howard's sitting group, call (415) 447-7761.

Story of Forgiveness: In a Texas Prison

BY TOM HUDGENS

The following is a brief excerpt from a longer account written by a Vipassana practitioner learning how to forgive the man who was found guilty of murdering his sister 30 years ago. Certain names and identifying details have been changed to protect privacy.

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Dear Friends,

It is not easy to know how to begin this story. As many of you know, last week I went to Texas to forgive the man imprisoned there who raped and killed my sister 30 years ago. The realization that I could actually do such a thing came unbidden. It wasn't something I struggled to attain; I just looked one day and there it was: my own voice saying, "You can forgive him." It was too much at that moment—too big, too scary—so I put it aside, occasionally taking a glance to see if it was still there. It always was.

Three years ago, after a miserable year in a career I loved in theory but not in practice, I was struck with the idea of attending a silent meditation retreat—I'd heard a friend's friend talk about a retreat. I typed "silent meditation retreat" into my search engine, and so discovered Spirit Rock Meditation Center. I chose a smaller retreat, and hoped that whoever Donald Rothberg was, he would be a good teacher. I arrived excited and ready, and received the traditional insight meditation instructions for the very first time: "Sit quietly and comfortably, your spine erect, and follow the sensations of your breath..."

When I was nine years old, my family received the news that my 22-year-old sister had been killed, and our lives changed utterly and forever. The man, John Black, also 22 years old, was caught, gave a full confession to the police, was tried and found guilty. John Black received the death penalty, but two years later that sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Well into

adulthood I believed he should have died and that in his case, the death penalty was just.

A month or so after I attended that first retreat and began meditating, delving into all the insight meditation literature I could get my hands on, the realization came to me that I could forgive John Black. It was a quiet realization, arising simply, with no fanfare. About a year later, I was able to attend a second retreat, a much larger one, co-taught by Sylvia Boorstein and Christopher Titmuss. There, one day, I listened to a powerful "inquiry"—a woman very bravely told Christopher Titmuss she was so beset with fear for her family in our increasingly uncertain, unsettled, unbalanced world, that she was considering buying a gun. (In the context of meditation, using a gun seemed unthinkable.)

At that time, I couldn't logically connect the realization of forgiving my sister's murderer with this woman's honest telling of her fear, but my realization became, in that moment, very, very insistent: it had "knocked on my door" very quietly at first; now it was pounding, almost breaking the door down. A day or so later, my whole body literally shaking violently, I inquired of Christopher Titmuss, "Can I trust this realization to forgive? Does it mean I really need to do it?"

His reply was a cut-to-the-chase question: "Will you do it?"

And I said, "Oh yes."

You can read the full story on our website at www.spiritrock.org.

