



Being
Light



The Lightness of Being

with Lama Surya Das

by **Julia Griffin**

It was a great joy and privilege to speak with Lama Surya Das, one of the West's foremost teachers of Buddhist meditation and one who is uniquely qualified by his own inner convictions to speak about Lightness of Being.

As a long-time friend and student of the Dalai Lama, Surya Das tells the story of how he received his first teaching about Being Light from this great spiritual leader:

In the early 1970s, I was fortunate enough to be present when the Dalai Lama was teaching at Bodh Gaya, the town in northern India where the Buddha became enlightened. Tens of thousands of people came to hear the Dalai Lama speak. ... When the Dalai Lama was finished, he asked if

there were any questions, and one long-haired American guy stood to ask the Dalai Lama the following question: "What is the meaning of life?"

The Dalai Lama answered, "To be happy and to make others happy."

At first, Surya Das admits, this seemed a superficial answer. Today, he appreciates the wisdom of those simple words.

"Think of what it would mean," he says, "if we were always able to be happy and to make others happy — truly happy and fulfilled, not just paying lip service to happiness and wearing a facile smile. ... What an amazing goal! What amazing lives we would have! What amazing people we'd be! What amazing spirits we are."^[1]

Julia: For many of us, the spiritual path has been difficult. And yet we know there must be a place where it becomes lighter — where the struggle becomes less arduous and we begin to experience that lightness of spirit we knew as children. Can you speak about this, please?

Lama Surya Das: Part of lightening up is letting go of some of the burden. We take spirituality, religion, identity, and the big questions in life very seriously. And they *are* serious. But they shouldn't be *too* serious. It's important to wake up to the funny sides of things, and not believe so much in our self-importance, our prejudices, our heavy opinions, perspectives, and beliefs.

Buddhism teaches the eightfold path, the eight steps to enlightenment. I always say that if Buddha were alive today, he would say that the ninth step was good humor (and the tenth step would be good health and exercise). If we take ourselves too seriously, life isn't much fun.

Julia: I hear you saying that our beliefs and opinions are part of the burden we need to release in order to be Light.

Lama Surya Das: The Buddhists say to cherish the truth,

but not to cherish your opinions.

Of course, we all have opinions and preferences. That's only human. But we don't have to hold them so heavily. We can wear them more lightly. For example, I'm a Buddhist, but I don't take it that seriously. I'm sure that Buddhism is not the final word.

We need to realize that we will lose some of our opinions as we travel the path. We need reality and truth, not just opinions. And truth has to be personal experience. Whether or not we decide to believe or join or sign on to some outside system, we have to find reality and truth within ourselves.

Julia: And what about the opinion we have of who we are?

Lama Surya Das: We need to let go of that. The lightness of being or joy begins with authenticity, and this means letting go of who we think we are, leaving more room in present time to find out who we really are — and letting that new identity emerge.

The extra baggage from the past is something we have to pay for, just as we have to pay for every extra kilo of baggage on a flight. Living in the moment is really the ultimate, and when we can get into the moment we can free ourselves from the burdens of the past.

In Eastern mysticism, there is a lot of thought about returning home — coming back to who we really are, finding something outside of ourselves, or even within the next life after we die. But it *is* important to realize the joy or buoyancy of being *right now*, here in this world. There is an updraft of joy and buoyancy to the spirit of Being Here Now.

This awareness of the moment frees us from our karma. It actually frees us from our karmic conditioning, and then we can let go of who we used to be. This is the subject of my new book, *Letting Go of the Person You Used to Be*. By doing this, we make room for authenticity, for who we are in

the present. We are actually free from the voices of the past and past conditioning.

How do we live more in the Now? This is the question. Of course, the Now is where we are. But we need to be aware of this, and for that we need practices — like meditation or exercise (see [Four Meditations](#) near the end of this article). We need a place in which we are aware of the time and space we are in now, but simultaneously aware of the timeless Now.

We have to connect the eternal Now with the present now — not the spaced-out presence of watching television, or mindlessly completing tasks like parking our car and not remembering afterward where we parked it.

We need to be connected in a sane, healthy way to the timeless Now — the moment — as well as the past, present, and future. I'm talking here about clarity and balance, and not going over the deep end.

In this place, we are free. We are of the world and living in it. We don't have to negate the world, we don't push anything away — but we are also not overly vested in it, either. We become One with it. This is the Buddhist teaching of the Middle Way.

There is a balance, a freedom, a lightness, a joy in this place. Spirit is joy, Spirit is freedom, and Spirit is bliss. It is not a chore, a dogma, or a mental belief. It is like rest, because it is born every minute.

And there is joy in the transparent quality of Light, not just in its degree of brightness. Instead of just seeing things "out there," we begin to see *through* things. And when we reach this point, we start to see that everything — not just human beings, but all beings, all parts of creation in every moment, every molecule of the Universe — takes on the appearance of Light.

Lightness is joy. Life is a delight. Life is a joy.

Julia: I think for me the greatest heaviness comes when I focus on the need to change someone else in order to be happy. Can you give us some advice about this habit of thinking?

Lama Surya Das: There is something that we never learn in school, an incredible secret teaching: Whenever we change, *everything* changes.

Just realize that when we fight with reality as if we are going to change it, all we do is stir up more dust. The situation wouldn't be there if we weren't supposed to see the Divine in it. If we can't see the Divine — or the joke — in it, we have to keep living through it and be reborn until we get it.

We always want to change our mates, change our present circumstances, change our child or colleague. But when we change ourselves, the world looks different.

Moreover, the more we love and accept ourselves, the more others will love and accept us. And when we accept our mate, for example, this creates a transformational magic that completely changes our relationship.

It's counter-intuitive, but we should accept this as a great spiritual magic.

Julia: Why is it so difficult to hold on to our profound realizations? Sometimes we "see" in a way that makes us believe everything is going to be Light from now on — and the next thing we know, we are back in duality.

Lama Surya Das: The problem with profound realizations is that they are not enough to overcome the conditioning around us. That's the problem. We may have a real epiphany or awakening or satori, but our habits, conditioning, and the world around are so strong that we cannot be changed by it. We fall back into our ordinary way of thinking.

We have to develop our realizations into a spiritual life, a mystical life, on a day-to-day basis — just the experience itself is not enough. So we obtain spiritual guidance from outside teachers and texts. But we also can obtain spiritual guidance intuitively from our inner guru, guides, and allies, and through prayer and introspection.

Julia: My own feeling is that we cannot really accomplish this lightness of being until we change our habits.

Lama Surya Das: That's absolutely correct. Spiritual practices come into play here, because they help us ultimately detach ourselves from our conditioned responses. Starting new spiritual practices and better eating, exercise, and work patterns definitely makes us more joyful and brings wonder and lightness into our lives. This is the way we connect to the Divine on a daily basis.

The bad news is that we really are heavily conditioned with the old habits, patterns, or karma. But the good news is that these habits, patterns, and karma are just ruts we are in, and new, lighter ruts can be made through spiritual practice and discipline. So we can recondition ourselves through better habits and thus detach from our old conditioning.

There is a great deal of freedom and joy in changing our habits and doing spiritual practice, a lot of wonder and joy in freeing ourselves from our old patterns. There is reinvigoration and refreshment from this. It is actually like having a second or third youth!

Four Meditations

1. One of the shortest and most effective meditations is to take a short breath and smile. This only takes five seconds, but it can be repeated for one minute. This can be done either sitting or standing, eyes open or closed. This is one of my favorite American meditations. It's short, easy, and you can do it anywhere.

2. Another traditional Tibetan exercise that I like is called "sky gazing." You simply lie on the grass and look at the sky. We all did this as children. As children we may have tripped out looking at the clouds and finding faces or shapes, but we don't want to do this in our meditation, because that's more like daydreaming. There is a real difference between daydreaming and meditation.

3. A third easy meditation consists of the last pose of Hatha yoga, the corpse pose or sivasana. This is a



natural meditation we all know how to do. You lie flat with your legs slightly apart, hands at the side slightly away from the body, with natural breath and energy.

Believe it or not, this pose is a great natural meditation. You can do this and the "sky gazing" meditation at the same time.

4. More formally, if you want the yoga or Buddhist style, you sit up with crossed legs and relax the breath, energy, body, and mind, breathing in the physical sensation and coming into the present moment. You observe the breath while inhaling, and observe breathing out while exhaling. You notice the physical sensations as an anchor to the present moment. You let everything be as it is, without reaction. This is mindfulness, rather than mindlessly sleepwalking through life. When we can observe our state without reaction, this is meditation.

Mindfulness means attentiveness, vigilant alertness. Awareness becomes like a mirror.

Julia: Thank you. That's great. One more question. I know that at some point on the path, everyone realizes that the Universe is One. But we move back and forth in and out of polarity. How can we stay grounded in Oneness?

Lama Surya Das: The whole question of duality and non-duality is a very deep metaphysical, mystical question. It is

addressed in many religions and philosophies. We have to move from the mere knowledge of it to some kind of experience and, ultimately, a realization about it.

Just talking about it is not enough. But generally, our human nature is the tip of the iceberg of the Buddha nature. Our mind, our neuroses even, our body, are just reflections in the Cosmic Mind of God. So reality appears to be two, although it is not really two. We appear to ourselves to be separate from our Buddha nature, just as a rainbow appears to be separate from the sky. The rainbow is part of the sky. It is not separate.

So our thoughts and our mind seem separate from our Buddha nature, but they are not. We have to be able to see the unity in the diversity, the One or the Divine in everything in order to realize Oneness in everything. Yet we still must use discernment, discerning right from wrong and left from right. That's seeing the One in the many. That's the secret of non-duality.

There really is non-duality. Everything is God or Buddha nature. Everything is as it is. Everything is radiance. It takes different forms. There is a whole spectrum of color, but all the colors are in white light, and the spectrum of light has not changed — it is merely contained in the whole. We see the many shapes of the vessels made of clay, but they are all clay. The creation is not separate from the creator.

Everything takes different forms, like the colors in the rainbow, transparent and luminous, yet all contained in the One light.

The true source of Light, the true nature of Light, is not changed in its diversity or separation. It is One and more than One. It is about seeing the One in the Many.

There is no fall from Grace. There may be a change in the state, just as water may be ice, fluid, or steam, but they are all H₂O. There are different levels of vibration, but they are all the same essence.

This is really a dance of the universe. All of the movement of the universe is the undulation or dance of the universe. Everything is One with the dance.



Lama Surya Das says that he was "born Jewish" as Jeffrey Miller before studying with Tibetan gurus in the Himalayas, including the Dalai Lama, and with the great masters of Asia. His parents now call him the "Jolly Lama."

Today, he lectures and teaches around the world. With the Dalai Lama, he founded the Western Buddhist Teachers Network, and is the founder of the Dzogchen Center and Foundation in Massachusetts and California.

A prolific writer, in addition to his new *Letting Go of the Person You Used to Be: Lessons on Change, Loss, and Spiritual Transformation*, Surya Das is the author of the "Awakening Trilogy" (*Awakening the Buddha Within: Eight Steps to Enlightenment*; *Awakening to the Sacred: Building a Spiritual Life from Scratch*; and *Awakening the Buddhist Heart: Integrating Love, Meaning and Connection into Every Part of Your Life*) and *The Snow Lion's Turquoise Mane: 155 Wisdom Tales from Tibet*, and is coauthor of *Natural Great Perfection: Vajra Songs and Dzogchen Teaching*.

For more information about Lama Surya Das, or about his workshops, books, and classes, please visit his website at Surya.org.

Footnotes:

1. See [Awakening to the Sacred, Part IV](#).

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