

Meditation Interview

*Sarah Powers Interviewed by Timothy McCall, MD
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TM: I am taping. Let me just start off - what is meditation? That's maybe not an easy one to answer.

SP: Right – we'll just start off with the simplest one. I think it is both a practice and a state of mind. So it's something that one can deliberately train in as well as developing a capacity to be more spontaneous in digesting the various levels of one's experience in a non-reactive and yet very connected, responsive way. So as a practice it's taking a posture that is mostly still, so that you minimize distractions and can then pay attention, not so much to the multitude of content around you, but to the way that your organism responds to all of the content, to the sense doors, as well as through memory and associative thought patterns. It is a multifaceted training that is different in different wisdom traditions, but I think the similar thread in all of them is that it leads to a place of both restive calmness and a potent alertness. And in that state one can inquire into not only what they assume to be true, but to what is actually going on underneath our perceptual preferences and prejudices. We learn to pay attention with a kind of interest that is not resting on what one already knows, but is open to the unknown. So I think the practice moves one towards what we call meditative awareness, which needn't be confined to a posture or a particular lineage, but is a way of being.

TM: A way of being all day long?

SP: Yes. A way of being throughout one's internal and external experiences, where there is not such a definitive separation. There is instead interconnectedness, I would say, between your inner world and the complexity of the outer world going on all around.

TM: Some people say that you can't really meditate, you can only set up the circumstances in which a meditative absorption might happen. What do you think of that idea?

SP: I think that definitely points to the challenge of watching your mind with the mind that you're identified with. It also refers to the difficulty of releasing something that is the very lens through which you're looking through. It is

very hard to have the capacity to turn and observe yourself without being completely identified with what you're actually experiencing. So what we do is, yes, set up an environment with conducive conditions for one to relax that selfing, that perspective of subject/object sensing, so we can actually open to what is already present but which we haven't been able to pay attention to because we're so much in the state of guarding the world out there and protecting the world in here. So we set up an environment and then I think that meditation is almost a verb, it's a kind of meditating that arises. It isn't something you can instill and make happen. That is the statement that you are pointing to. And most of the time students are working on simply maintaining an ongoing attention span. So they're not actually meditating *per se*, which is a place of non-effort and non-conflict. They are training up the capacity to hold moments where they're not in resistance. We call that meditating because it's a kind of meditative ground that we're setting up. For many people meditating is probably little brief pockets of letting go.

TM: In a sense what we're doing mostly is trying to concentrate?

SP: As the foundation of the practice, certainly. Concentration, *dharana*, is – one pointedness. Without this steady attention, we're carried by everything we attend to – the sights, the sounds, the feelings, the thoughts, the sensations. So as soon as we're able to stay and choose one aspect to focus on, we can begin including more aspects of our experience to notice. That's why the breath is so universal in its choice of one-pointedness, because it's always there with us, as long as we're encapsulated in this body. We can both allow it to breathe itself and we can train it to have different rhythms. So it's both, as you know, a conscious and an autonomic nervous system function. To actually rest into this breathe within us, and to see that we're not actually making it happen all the time, is a way of loosening the grip, a function of the ego that often thinks it has to be in control of everything. So that capacity to relax that ego fixation for little pockets is a way of building natural concentration. This as well, can easily become a pitfall. It becomes a grasping on being one who concentrates, which prevents us from actually releasing into natural meditative awareness.

So I think most meditation teachers spend a lot of time training up people to stand at that doorway and concentrate, but in a very relaxed sense of ease. And that's why yoga asana is so essential, because the nervous system and the meridian system and the emotional body are more in a place of harmony with a quality of relaxation after a skillful asana practice. After yoga, this component of relaxed concentration becomes much more possible without it

being a kind of contrivance that one sets up, a strain within to become a meditator.

TM: We tend to think that a regular asana practice would make the body more flexible and stronger in a way that would allow you to comfortably sit for long periods of time.

SP: For sure.

TM: But it also seems that in some traditions, anyway, they really want you to do the opposite of what you've learned in Yoga, which is to kind of ignore the pain. Your knee is killing you, but you're supposed to sit there and go into that, and go into the sensation, but not actually think that that's bad for you. What do you think of that?

SP: It's a really good point, and it's a place that can be a difficult crossover for people who have initially trained in a yogic path that has not included much meditation. Yoga works a lot on enhancement disciplines, where we are using our natural intelligence to scan the body, to notice places of blockage and stagnation, and to actually move our attention and/or the body and breath in an asana so that the energy flows freely through these areas. This is the benefit of foundation training in the yoga asana practice. It also builds concentration and frees the energy to move more smoothly. So it seems so appropriate – why not do that all the time?

And then, when you come to training in a meditative tradition, and are asked to sit still, to not move, it feels counterintuitive.

Let's say, as you mentioned, the knee is aching, how might it be beneficial not to move, even if there's a kind of sharp pain going on there? I think what helps to understand this is that we're crossing over into developing another function within us that constitutes a deeper relationship between the body/mind dynamic. First we have to recognize that pain will continue to surface no matter how much asana we do, particularly when we sit still for long periods of time. Certain areas settle and after a while they do start to feel some congestion here or there, or some compression. The main point here is that if we observe the pain or discomfort in a way that is agitated and restless, we actually add another layer of discomfort onto it, which is now psychological. And so in meditation training, we're asked to look at the capacity to train up the psychological dimension of non-agitation and nonreaction, not to use our attention to try and free ourselves of pain. If we are always under the assumption that we have to mobilize an area to free

ourselves of discomfort, then that is a very limited kind of freedom, causing us to be bound to a body that we have to continually manipulate. As many of us know, especially once we're over 40, no matter how much we've been able to successfully control, there will be a huge proportion of one's life filled with pains both physical and psychological that we have no control over. The question becomes, how can we live in a way that's psychologically free of struggle even in the face of difficulties we have no control over?

That's really what lead me to meditation training. I was quite surprised when I went to a meditation retreat and found that all my yoga training helped me to a degree as far as a body that felt more flexible, more strong. But after 20 minutes into a stillness practice, I felt like anybody else. I was feeling just as much pain, and struggle with that pain. I eventually learned how to actually relax my reactivity to the pain and was amazed how many times my experience of the discomforts had a level of tolerance way beyond my expectations. At times, I became aware that the pain itself was not a static, solid entity, but that it had its own kind of breathing life. Sometimes it moved, sometimes it got worse, and sometimes it seemed to just explode with little microcosmic elements that were nothing solid I could call pain. I learned that within that investigation was a whole other world that I had ignored and hadn't had the capacity to investigate, particularly when I was under the influence of the idea that I have to get rid of this pain to be aware in this moment. So it's a training that teaches us that awareness really is primordial. It exists prior to any of the pains and pleasures, yet our tendency is to make it conditional. When we're feeling good, then we feel like we can be aware.

Having said all of that, there is a necessity for us to maintain a discernment and an intelligence that knows, okay, I've investigated this pain, I've allowed a sense of intensity to arise and even be maintained over time. But if the pain is starting to be so strong, and particularly if it's a kind of nerve pain that we then ignore, I do think that we can damage our knees, and actually breed a lack of compassion by not moving. I've seen Zen students do that and end up in knee surgery after their retreats because they refused to move, no matter what. And if the refusal to move comes from a place of complete psychological letting go and Samadhi, then I would assume there wouldn't be the tearing of the tissues. But usually that's not the case. Instead, you've got someone who's experiencing interrupted levels of concentration, who is in the midst of struggling with their knee pain, and then yes, something can get damaged.

TM: They're willing themselves through it.

SP: Yes. And so when it doesn't come from natural wisdom, then I think we have to really recognize, what is my tolerance level? And that's something that is completely our responsibility to discern. We need to develop a truthfulness that's willing to push those barriers beyond what we would expect, and at the same time trust our intuition that's saying, I have no more to give to this, I'm struggling so much, I am afraid I'm going to harm something, and now it's time to move. Yoga students tend to move sooner, and I think ambitious meditation students who aren't necessarily grounded in their bodies may not move when it would be appropriate. We have to find the middle path.

TM: It's an interesting perspective. I have heard that some experienced yoga students are fidgeting all over the place when you try to get them to sit still, probably more than other people, in a sense.

SP: Yes, sometimes. They've actually developed a capacity that works for them in many instances, and now it actually can become a distortion, led by ego control. The capacity to move over into the domains of wisdom, of clear nonjudgmental acceptance, and really allow things to be as they are, even a deep physical pain, can be a very difficult step to take. They need, I think, a lot of faith that this other allowing side of themselves will also be something worthwhile to develop. I don't think it needs to be either/or. I think it's the marriage of what the Mahayana tradition calls skillful means and wisdom – Upaya and Prajna. It's the Prajna part they are more new to. They really need to be walked through the steps of developing a noninterfering awareness, slowly and with a lot of patience, because it isn't a side they've trained up as much.

TM: Are most of the meditation techniques you teach ones that come out of Buddhist practices as opposed to out of Yoga?

SP: In my particular case, yes. I do think there's a plethora of yoga teachers with training in meditation from the yogic traditions that aren't overlapping with much Buddhism. But I think if you go back through history, it's almost impossible to find where they don't overlap, because of how they both were so deeply explored in India. And yet my particular training through whatever, exposure, karma, what have you, is Buddhist.

When I was really looking for teachings that would take me to another level of tolerance in stillness, and looking for a meditation teacher in the Bay area, they were mostly Buddhist. Although I had read about and heard a lot about meditation, it wasn't being practiced to the degree that was taxing my

restlessness and my hindrances of aversion and craving. I had read about meditation and grasping and aversion in the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali. Nevertheless, I knew I needed to sit longer than the 20 minutes that I was naturally comfortable after Savasana. And that was usually the longest meditation practice I was exposed to through my yoga teachers. Even though

I knew they had meditation practices, whether it was a time thing or whether it was that the community didn't seem ready enough for it, (even on retreats), we weren't building into it for the length of time I felt I needed.

I knew from my prior exposure to Buddhist authors, to books in my graduate program, that the Buddhists really did sit for grotesque periods of time, and I was really ready to tax that part of my nature. So the Bay area had people from all three major lineages of Buddhism. I felt very fortunate that I was exposed to some really wonderful teachers, just by barely scratching the surface of the Buddhist community, because we have so many good teachers who visit or live in this area.

TM: Taking this down a level, in a sense, because this article is going to be written for people who maybe have never meditated, maybe have never even done yoga – you hear, for example, from a lot of beginners, oh, I tried to meditate, I can't do that. That doesn't work for me.

SP: I remember feeling that way.

TM: What would you say – if you go back and talk to yourself back then, what would you say?

SP: That it does require a level of self-reflection and really a kind of self-frustration that recognizes that all of the strategies of evasion have not brought happiness and contentment. As soon as we've exhausted those to a certain degree, there is underneath that, disappointment, and eventually willingness to try something else, although we know it is at this point beyond what we have the capacity for. We learn then to start small and build on the faith of somebody we know – a friend, a teacher, somebody we admire, or an autobiography of someone whose life we aspire to.

But I do think it's not something that can be imposed on someone. It has to come from within. There has to be a place inside where we're ready to take a little more – you could say discipline. We then can tune into our mature self, almost our future selves, taking that restless adolescent and saying, okay, you need some help.

But I have found you can't do this alone. You need a mentor or teacher. You need someone in a community around you who can help you. I had tried in my early 20s, by myself, and five minutes felt like an eternity. It was not a place where I felt like I was going to grow into anything skillful; I was just going to run my habits.

So I do think the best thing to do is to acknowledge at some point that there is a desire to find a place inside that has been unfindable. To find a place where there is some calmness.

I think the main misperception I carried with me that hindered me from trying it sooner was thinking that the ground of my being, my nature, was restlessness. I thought that that wasn't a conditioned response on top of some other nature that was more connected and restive, but that was who I was and would always be. That assumption made me assume that meditation was not for me, that it's for the more quiet, introverted people. I will deal with my difficulties in every other holistic way, but don't make me sit still for too long. What I found, after exhausting all of these ways of keeping the body healthy; through Yoga Asana and through Pranayama, through diet, and through being an advocate for all kinds of animal rights issues and the environment, that I was still not at home inside. I needed to watch what was underneath all my distractions.

That main shift, the understanding that my restlessness was not something that I had to define as me, gave me immense hope, and it's where I started from in my meditation training. I wasn't expecting some grandiose ideals of liberation. I was interested in seeing if I could just come home to a moment and invite restlessness in rather than fight with it or be carried by it. That's a place where I start with a lot of people who feel like meditation isn't possible for them.

I was sure that this 2500-year-old system that had transformed so many ordinary and negative beings into ones of immense wisdom was going to have met its match with me. And I think a lot of people assume this. It's incredibly egoistic, and it's something to really investigate. Could this really be so? And if so, let me test it – not just assume it's true.

TM: All these studies that have been done, where they teach meditation to people in various settings who have no experience of it before, Jon Kabat-Zinn and Richie Davidson just did this one at this high-tech company in Madison, where they taught the workers mindfulness meditation techniques. Theoretically a lot of them are just as restless as

everybody else, if not all of them, and yet they seemed to have gotten value out of doing it, even though I'm guessing a lot of them felt they were doing a really lousy job of it.

SP: Which is what's so amazing about a practice that you can't even identify as working while you're doing it – which is why many people give it up so rapidly. It just seems to create more suffering to try and sit there and acknowledge all of your suffering. And yet these studies are showing that there are changes in the brain that are happening even when you don't feel like it's happening, and that – if you added up a momentum of continued practice, does start to have a very discernable psychological effect. But it's not felt so quickly. So that's a difficult arc to cross, to have people continue with something that's definitely feeling like, "I'm just as restless as when I started, yet somehow I find myself sitting here anyway." I think the help of a group allows you to continue, rather than just a practice on your own. I've talked to people who say, "I sit down, I intend to practice, and my distractions are so strong and so unconscious that I end up finding myself, 20 minutes later, standing in the kitchen, and I don't know how I got here." They have no memory of getting up and being carried by their compulsions.

What's amazing about this practice is, it works even when it doesn't seem to be working. The fact that you wake up standing in the kitchen is very different from somebody who wakes up at the end of the day and can't remember where they were all day. So one second of coming to the moment and realizing, "wow, my intention was to do that, and look where I am now". That second of understanding that you were distracted, and now you're back in the moment, that is what we celebrate. This helps clear the habit of only remembering the times you failed in your intentions, and then wallowing in the frustration of that. So if in one hour you come home to the moment for one breath, you might realize, "wow, I came to for one breath – if I hadn't sat today, I wouldn't have really noticed any of my moments with awareness". You build on those seemingly simple and insignificant moments of coming to the moment freshly. And if you add those up, in one session you might be aware of your moments only a few times, but this is more than had you not meditated. Like anything, waking up the mind requires training – like training the muscles in your arms to do a handstand, which may have seemed impossible in your first week of yoga.

TM: I'm sure there isn't a standard answer, but from your experience of teaching lots of people over the years, is there a period of time – say people start doing a 20-minute practice a day. Is there a range of time

where people will start to notice that somehow the rest of their life is feeling a little different or a little better?

SP: That's a really important point to make, especially with people looking at starting a practice that they have no prior discipline in. We often set huge motivations for ourselves out of the excitement of what's possible, particularly if we have a real initial breakthrough. 20 minutes is, in and of itself, a hefty amount of time to sit still. On retreat, with the guidance of a teacher every day to take you through it, and to remind you to come back, is very different than being alone at home.

When someone goes home and has a very busy life, that requirement they give to themselves to sit for 20 minutes every day can be the first way they trash the whole idea. So I really tend to give suggestions dependent on what has come before. If they used to have a 20-minute practice, and then they've come away from it for a long time, then they can reinstate that commitment and see about setting up a time frame that's not been so unusual in the past.

If they've never done any sitting before, I really suggest five or 10 minutes – just five or 10 minutes. It's not going to set up so much expectation, and yet it's going to have a great impact on their sense of accomplishment – that they actually stayed with their commitment, Short periods can tend to have a much more translatable effect on the rest of their day than committing to an hour and only being able to do it once a week, and then spending that hour very frustrated with all of the wanderings of the mind. So five minutes is what I suggest they start out with.

Five minutes at the end of when it feels good.

So people can come out of Savasana and feel that flow of prana and sit, and feel like that's meditation, but often it's really just the waves of enjoyment that are naturally there. Learning to stay past those pleasant waves, when the ordinary consciousness starts to filter through, is when the training begins. If they are used to coming out of Savasana and sitting for 15 minutes, then I suggest one add five more minutes. If they don't even do asana and are just coming to a sitting cushion as their first practice, just five minutes in the morning, and then try it again at the end of their day – five minutes in the evening.

What they need is some way to be with the mind in those five minutes. So they do need some understanding of what the purpose of the practice is, and

then they need some method. I usually teach understanding three simple pieces, and then there's three aspects to that.

So the first is, why is this valuable? Because if we don't have a context for why I ought to sit, then the doubting mind will take up the whole five minutes. We know we could have gotten this or that done. So there has to be some way to relax that skepticism, and come to the practice with some sense of interest. So understanding the overall purpose of really learning to relate to the moment with openness and free of manipulation, you could say, is an overall purpose.

TM: To watch the content of the mind?

SP: The content of the moment. Let me just see how I'm relating to my moment, rather than what someone is saying, or whether it's the beautiful day I hoped it would be, or whether I get to do what I want or I'm burdened by having to take five kids on a field trip today. That's all content. But how we're actually coming to the living, breathing, direct experience is where we're going to now pay attention. So that's an understanding of the purpose. The second is, what's the method?

How do I actually sit down and look at what this moment is about? So we have to first move the complexity aside, because there's so much going on in any given moment, and just choose one simple aspect that we can come back to. So I use what the Buddha used under the Bodhi Tree, which is breath awareness – how to just come to the simple but not always easy aspect of this breathing moment, without manipulating the breath to be a certain way. That's two minutes of teaching that can be very helpful, and it is, I find, helpful to have a live teacher.

And then the third thing is, okay, what are the overall effects, and how will I deal with what comes up when I lose that capacity to concentrate?

So that's a whole teaching on the different obstacles that arise, the different states of mind that have a kind of universal element to them that we can all watch inside. Like doubting. When that comes up, how do we actually deal with doubt, rather than get up from the cushion? How do we deal with sleepiness? How do we deal with craving this to be easier than it is? How do we deal with wanting to run away from my knee pain? How do we deal with all these different effects that have come up just because I sat down for five minutes. So learning to deal with our afflictions, and allowing them to actually move through us, without catapulting us into reactivity, is the both the ground and the fruition of the practice.

TM: So you notice when those things come up, and you see if you can notice the emotion, but not act on it?

SP: Exactly. You're creating a kind of holding environment that doesn't suppress, repress, nor act on what arises. Therefore, we get to investigate the changing nature of things that feel so overwhelmingly compelling. They in and of themselves only become so alluring when we're thinking that they are a solid thing, and we're identified with them. To see them just arise in us and pass is incredibly liberating, to not have to react from those disturbing and afflictive emotions is the main thing, the most valuable thing that translates into our everyday life.

TM: I would think, since this article is for Natural Health, that in a sense they talk about a difference between pain and suffering.

SP: Yes. The saying goes, "pain is inevitable, suffering is optional".

TM: Right. But this idea that you can learn to notice, not your knee pain during your sitting practice, but your knee pain, or whatever it is, your mental anguish during your life, and see if you can also learn to not react to it, sometimes can actually change the nature of the pain itself.

SP: And that phenomenon, to feel it inside one's own organism, is what breeds a kind of internal wisdom.

It comes out of your own experience, not something that you've read, or something you hope to be true. I think that breeds a sense of faith, or confidence in your own capacity to actually be with what's seemingly intolerable. That's incredibly freeing – to be with relationships and not have to run from them when they seem like they are pulling us apart. It's a way that we will breed a tolerance, not only in our personal life, but in the political arena as well, starting from our own inner capacities to face what is difficult with skill and compassion.

TM: You talk about relationships – one thing that comes to mind is that a lot of what causes problems and suffering in relationships are when people react to things and do or say things that end up having their own karma, that end up causing bigger problems than the original thing.

SP: I know. It's so true. And it goes on so unconsciously, and really, underneath it, everyone is trying to get their own needs met, but often unable to acknowledge and voice those needs in a way that can be heard. So learning

to actually come home to what's happening in us, and then be able to say, "what just happened made me feel upset. And what I'm really wanting is a kind of understanding of what's going on between us".

I think most of what happens is, we assume things that aren't there. And then we attack or retreat. And the other person gets defensive, and then we're far from any kind of communion. It goes on in all the minor and major relationships in our day. So for Natural Health, I think we can talk about all the psychological and energetic aspects of yoga and meditation, but life is a state of mind, so if these practices are not really bringing us to a place of psychological health, then I feel like we are really wasting our time.

TM: Obviously psychological health is itself a huge issue, but then that also ends up having all kinds of ramifications for physical health.

SP: Exactly. If you are mentally balanced, you will take care of, respect, and bring a sense of friendliness to your body as you would to your child's body. It's natural to take care of the garden that we have. I have found it helpful to remember that rather than coming to the practice to transform our bodies into their idealized version of what we'd like, how about just coming home to the body that we have and nurturing it exactly where it is. And that's where the meditative tools get transplanted on to how we do yoga. There's a feedback loop there that's essential.

TM: Can you walk me through as if I were a beginning student, the basic breath meditation you alluded to earlier? I might describe the practice and then use some of your words, as if you were talking to the reader.

SP: Okay. So, taking a posture that you feel is sustainable, whether cross-legged, propped with your back against a wall, if you feel like there are some back issues, or in a chair. I wouldn't suggest lying down only because it's the posture we naturally doze off in, and the practice is meant to wake us up rather than put us to sleep. If you can sit up without the prop of a wall, then it would be helpful to have a little cushion under your sit-bones so the hips are higher than the feet, whether your feet are crossed in front of you in an easy pose, it's called, one foot in front of the other on the floor, or you can have your feet folded back behind you, where the cushion is under your sit-bones. That particular posture would be helpful if you've experienced sciatica of late. And then, although some styles teach with the eyes open, it can be a little more distracting for people who get very involved with visual stimulus easily, so let's just close the eyes, allowing your spine to be upright, with its natural curve intact, which means a slight inner curve at the lumbar lower back, so

you're not flattening your lower back and sacrum down toward the floor, but you are grounding down through both sit-bones, and then allowing a slight tilt to the sacrum up and in towards the lower back, without leaning your pelvis forward. And then the shoulders are just above the hips. The chest is slightly lifted, yet relaxed, so the diaphragm just hangs freely, and the hands can then rest on the thighs, or one palm on top of the other in the center.

The head is held just above the shoulders, neither lifting nor tucking the chin. It just rests in about the same plane as the forehead. And then letting all the muscles of the face relax, so the jaw releases, which means we might feel our lips part a little. The teeth aren't clenched. Easy breathing through the nostrils, and if there's any deviation of the septum or congestion of the respiratory system, then breathing through the mouth gently.

Now, allowing your attention to come into the body in the belly region.

So we'll rest in the area just below the navel, but above the pubic bone, this kind of wide circumference we call the abdomen. And we reside there, as it's the center of the body, and a place where we can really feel into the way the belly moves in and out with the natural flow of breath. It's a very subtle movement; it's not one we are manufacturing, altering in any way. We're just relaxing into the center of our body, and whether there's tension in the belly or ease, we're just noticing what's here.

At this moment we're not attempting to fix, alter, or create anything new.

Just to be with the breath as it is, the body as it is, and through this attention on our physical being we'll in a few moments open up to the other aspects in our emotional and mental being that are also present.

As the breath moves in and out, we can notice if there are any other sensations that are stronger than our intention of paying attention to the natural breath flow. Attending to the breath is quite subtle, and so after a while, maybe for some people one or two breaths, our attention will go to something more dramatic than this simple instruction.

Later on the instruction includes waking up to where our attention has drifted. For now we set a simple anchor, which is the breath in the belly, and then whatever arises next, we notice, and simply come back to the breath.

After a few minutes, possibly an ache in the back might arise, or a heaviness in the heart, a sense of constriction in the knee. Something physically may

come up. Now instead of going right to the breath or ignoring it, we'll just allow the attention to move to that area of experience, and without attempting to fix it so it feels better, we'll just notice that it's an unpleasant or discomfiting sensation.

Let's pick the knee for now. Let's say the knee has some throbbing. We might notice if it's a strong, immediate sensation, which would then indicate that we might need to put a prop under the knee, that the hips may not be open enough to support the knees resting on the floor. That's important information to acknowledge so that we don't sit through a willfulness that may be harming the body. Then, having supported the body again, you settle into the breath again. The first part of the practice is a kind of arriving and centering. You've arrived into the posture, you center onto the breath, and then you notice what occurs. If it's necessary that we apply some skillful change of posture in the beginning, then we allow for that. And then you come back to resting with the belly. Now somebody who is consistently needing to make the atmosphere comfortable may, every minute, be changing posture, getting up to close the window, putting on a shawl, taking off a shawl. They never actually begin. So what we want to do is minimize the fidgeting around, and just observe if it now feels safe enough to stay still again and come back to simple breath awareness.

Now we're going to attempt to be still, even though we will move beyond our comfort zone. We'll trust for now that we can observe discomforts without having to change them, for just a short period, as an experiment.

This is the second aspect of our practice. We are anchoring and labeling.

Now, every time your attention moves from the belly to some other physical experience, we'll simply go to that area to acknowledge what's arisen, like throbbing or aching, or even itching. Instead of seeking to shift that experience, we'll simply acknowledge what that feels like, and then come back to the breath. And so what we've woken up to is the inner movement from awaring the breath, to being conscious of a sensation. We've noted the actuality of the sensation. It might be something very gross and obvious, it might be something subtle but annoying. We're just allowing it to exist it, not judging it, but aware of the fact that this has arisen. "Ah, throbbing." "Ah, aching, hardness, cramping." Whatever it is for us, we note it without any analysis or assessment, whether we believe it should or shouldn't be happening. We just let it be so, and come back to our breath at the belly. And so at this initial stage we're training our attention to know something has arisen, and without being compelled to act on that element in our experience,

we're training a concentration that can come back to our anchor, even in the midst of this discomfort.

Later, as we develop more concentration skills, we'll work with what arises in creative ways. But for now we're just seeing if we can develop a mind that knows what has arisen physically, and can come back to the anchor we've chosen.

TM: Great. That's lovely, and probably more than I can fit into the article. I think that's a wonderful introduction.

SP: How I often suggest people learn is in an environment where they will keep going back and getting instruction. Because what gets assumed so quickly is that they've heard the full instruction, and then they go home, and it's very difficult to mature, as the instructions are progressive. They go from concentration to mindfulness to insight.

TM: Do you think that people who don't live in a place like the Bay area, where they may not have access to teachers, do you think using a tape or a CD can be a good tool?

SP: I do. I think it's hard to learn to meditate from a book, but I think it can be an adjunct, something that will help inspire them. But I think the best thing is a live person, second best would be a video, third I guess would be audio, and fourth would be a book, to keep them inspired. All of those are tools to help. None of them supplant the need for having a live teacher though, as something gets transpired in the presence of someone who has trained their mind and softened their heart. They can encourage us to go beyond what we think is possible.

TM: The fifth would be a magazine article, which is a watered-down version of the written word?

SP: Oh, yes, of course.

TM: I wanted to ask you if you had any stories of students or possibly from your own life where meditation was helpful for any kind of physical or emotional problem. Any stories come to mind?

SP: One that I often do share with yoga students in particular is an old injury, a congealment in my shoulder that I experienced. There was a lot of distortion in the way that it grew, because it was an injury I had as a teenager. When I

took my first down dog, I noticed how different my shoulders were. And that's what I worked on, getting more mobility there, increased strength, through my yoga practice. But it really wasn't until my meditation practice that I learned something really valuable about letting go.

I came to a particular sit one day, and happened to feel like a train was running over my shoulder. There was a whole story I knew, and had repeated, of why it had come to feel that way, and how much work I had done on it, and how I hoped it would get better and be more functional... The meditative training that I had had for the few days before this happened had suggested we relax the stories, and not go into the reasons why something had arisen, but to really just directly experience all the sensations.

And it was the first time, because it was my first meditation retreat, that I viscerally understood the body-mind connection.

In this particular sit the pain got very intense within the first 10 minutes, and seemingly without any provocation. I hadn't been doing any yoga. I'd just been meditating for days. So here it was, and as I sat through the rest of the 50 minutes, it only got more and more intense physically, and yet psychologically, because I'd been sitting for a few days, my willingness to experience the pain without any kind of expectations that it be otherwise was also very high. As I finished the sit, and got up, as soon as I moved it, the heat that had built through the pain just moved right into coolness, and there was a sense of freshness in it as if I had just given it an injection. It was so interesting. It was like taking off a whole layer of armor.

When I did my next yoga practice, it was as if I'd been on a retreat for my shoulder. There was all this space, and I thought, wow, I never even moved it. All I moved out of the way was my resistance to feeling all the pain there. It just opened up a whole new level of being with the pains in myself. I began to trust that I could train up a capacity to be more allowing and less forceful. I knew changes could occur in my mind, which were psychological, but on a physical level, I experienced my shoulder as having more free range of motion, from just sitting still and not resisting the pain. And that was huge for me.

TM: Do you think that changed your ability to deal with other painful things in your life?

SP: Yes. Learning that I could actually allow physical space through mental training changed my perspective. I translated that, without consciously

knowing I was doing so, into a quest. So now there was a question I held: If I can do this with my shoulder, isn't it possible that I can tolerate all kinds of situations that I thought could only be tolerable if I'd manipulated them?

TM: Manipulated people, you mean?

SP: Manipulated people or manipulated myself to get out of them, changed my circumstances, etc... Even situations like being stuck in a subway that's shut down. We can believe that to be alive and free this moment, we've got to get out of this stuck subway. But isn't it possible, letting go into this moment as it is, offers another opportunity?

TM: Do you have any stories of students who have come to you with medical conditions and told you things?

SP: One that I'm reminded of this moment is about a woman who had a cyst in an ovary, she was an Iyengar teacher who had been doing a practice for over 20 years, and was a teacher in New York. She came on a weekend workshop only. She learned about the Yin practice, and particularly enjoyed learning to rest in mindfulness. I've really been interested in having these five-minute intervals in each pose be a time for people to learn to meditate.

After she went home, she continued with the practice and I saw her about a year later, She said that she'd become very frustrated with her other asana practices because she was still so sick and they wasn't seeming to help her, and yet those were the tools that she knew. She decided to add the Yin and mindfulness piece, and not change anything else about her healing modalities. When she was tested last, before I had just seen her, the cyst had completely shrunk. She attributed it to not fighting her illness, and having a part of her practice where she was just being with what was, She practiced a lot of the shoelace pose (Gomukhasana), which is a very good way of accessing the reproductive organs, because you fold forward right across the lower abdomen. She was also juicing that area with refined chi, while the Svadhishtana chakra which feeds the reproductive organs, was also being activated. So all that combined may have also had an impact. But she was feeling like it was mostly the fact that she had engendered a capacity to come to a daily practice and melt into her body as it was, not trying to fix the pose, perfect the pose, or even leave the pose so soon

TM: I remember now – a dear friend of mine, a man named Josh Summers, has been doing Yin Yoga basically – I think he has an audiotape of yours. He's been doing it – he just went on a two-month

sitting retreat in Burma. I can't remember his exact words now, but something to the effect that you saved his life.

SP: From Kripalu?

TM: Not from here, he's actually a buddy of mine from Boston. He's actually a licensed acupuncturist now, he's just finished his training. He and I were both students of Patricia's. He just really started getting into the Yin – and part of the reason I'm even doing your thing is that Josh has been talking my ear off about this for a while. So I told him you were coming, I told him I was thinking of doing this thing with you, and he said oh, if you talk to her, tell her what I just told you.

SP: That's great. Well, it's nice to know a little seed sprouted so fully in someone like him.

TM: Absolutely. It's really been enormously helpful to him. I'm interested to explore it myself, because I have a pretty stubborn body.

TM: Sarah, thank you so much. This is really great.

SP: Thank you for being interested.