



Buddhist Practice, Plant Medicine, and Healing: An Interview with Spring Washam

After doing a number of long retreats, Spring Washam became a dharma teacher, co-founder of the East Bay Meditation Center, and serves on the Teachers Council at Spirit Rock. For some years, Spring has also been exploring indigenous healing practices working with plant medicine. In this interview, Spring speaks about her Buddhist path; the healing that plant medicine provided for her; why the ritualized use of plant medicine is not in tension with the fifth precept against taking substances that result in pamāda, or heedlessness; and how plant medicine is complementary with Buddhist practice.

Insight Journal: Spring, can you tell us a little bit about how you came to the dharma?

Spring Washam: I first became interested in spirituality when I was very young in my early teens. I studied psychology then went on to Hinduism, but I kept looking for something that could go much deeper and in my early twenties I found it. Miraculously, I heard about a ten-day Buddhist meditation retreat. This was it, the break I'd been waiting for! I was truly desperate. I had been meditating on my own, but I knew I needed a real teacher and a community
Spring Washam 2022: "Buddhist Practice, Plant Medicine, and Healing", *Insight Journal*, 48: 85–92.

for support. I was so excited by the idea of having ten days of silence, healthy food, and proper meditation instruction, I was willing to do anything to get there. Somehow, I got the money together and registered.

On the day the retreat was going to start, I made the nine-hour drive from Oakland to the Southern California desert, crying hysterically, chain-smoking cigarettes, and drinking Diet Mountain Dew by the gallon. My boyfriend and I had had an extremely dramatic final break up the night before and I had all my belongings in the car, my last \$25, and nowhere to go after the retreat was over. I didn't care; I *knew* if I could just get myself to the retreat, everything would make sense. Looking back, I see that what I experienced during those ten days in the desert was a genuine awakening experience. It's not easy to explain. I spent hours in sitting meditation, and my screaming, tormented mind finally got silent and peaceful. During walking meditation, I released oceans of tears with each step. For the first time, I encountered the teachings of the Buddha and immediately knew I'd found my path.

IJ: You didn't just take up the dharma; you made the practice of Buddhism central to your life. How did you come to understand that this would be your path and how did you follow it?

SW: Everything fell into place when I met my first real teacher, Jack Kornfield. His loving encouragement and steadfast belief in me helped guide my spiritual path in those early days. In the profound stillness and silence of the practice, I was finally able to understand myself. I had the real sense that I had finally come home; it was all so familiar

to me. On the last day of my first Insight meditation retreat, I hiked way out into the desert and up on top of a small hill, where I prayed and made a vow to myself to follow these teachings “until the very end.”

It wasn't the prettiest of starts. Beginnings often aren't. After that first retreat in the desert, I went on to do many more retreats, spending a thousand days in silent retreat over the next twenty years.

IJ: At some point, you were invited to join a teacher training. In what ways did that training and becoming a dharma teacher impact your own practice?

SW: I spent nearly ten years in training programs. The first was a two-and-a-half-year Community Dharma Leaders training at Spirit Rock and that really inspired me. My vision of a new community blossomed during that training which ultimately led to small group of us founding The East Bay Meditation Center in downtown Oakland. I then went on to the formal five-year residential retreat teacher training organized by Spirit Rock and IMS. My main mentor has always been Jack Kornfield and I followed him around constantly in those early years! In between trainings I spent years assisting, serving, and sharing dharma on many different retreats and at our center in Oakland. I think those years gave me a solid foundation. I practiced intensively, studied constantly, and was steeped in the dharma for a long time. Looking back on those days I am amazed by my dedication and my deep abiding faith.

IJ: After many years of practicing and teaching Buddhism, you started exploring the healing powers of plant

medicine. What sparked this exploration and how did it unfold?

SW: I was used to the ups and downs of intense meditation practice. I had completed the three-month retreat at IMS several times, even sitting for up to six months at a time doing silent practice at the Forest Refuge. I considered myself a good meditator, and I was usually able to stay composed while navigating the emotional rollercoasters that often arise. I had been on retreats with high lamas, been taught by Tibetan, Burmese, and Thai masters. I had sat through days of grief, rage, and despair and could usually find some dignity amidst whatever arose. I generally felt great confidence in myself. However, towards the end of a long retreat while doing jhana practice, *bam!* the road disappeared, obliterated, and an unrecognizable mass of confusion took over. Within the course of a few days, everything flipped upside down. Instead of being the wise doctor, I had become the patient. I sometimes try to pinpoint the exact moment things fell apart, but it's kind of a blur now. I was caught completely off-guard as a massive tidal wave of suffering and trauma began to consume me. Not just a little pain, but an earth-shattering, holy smokes, OMG I'm not going to make it, what the heck is happening type of pain—so powerful I could feel it moving into every cell of my body and within a few days I was consumed by it. I'd been eaten alive; my entire mind, body, and spirit was a ball of pain. I had stepped into the deep end of the ocean with no life jacket, raft, or even the ability to tread water. It was beyond me.

I knew little about trauma in those days, and most meditation teachers at the time knew little about the ways trauma affects the mind and body during intense meditation

practice. When meditators displayed behavior like mine, they were usually taken out of the main retreat center and put into a small house nearby, where they were encouraged to eat heavier foods, read books, take long walks, and to stop practicing meditation all together, at least until they settled down. These remedies do help in most cases; however, a small number of people leave meditation centers very ungrounded and in need of psychological support for a longer period of time. Stan Grof, a well-known psychiatrist, coined the phrase *spiritual emergency*, and I think it's an excellent way to frame what can happen on the spiritual path and it's what happened to me. This is what led me to trying plant medicine. I was trying to work with my trauma and heal myself.

IJ: The dharma is central to your life. Now plant medicine has also become very important for you. Today, there are many Buddhists exploring how the dharma and plant medicine can be complementary. Can you please share how you see the relationship between plant medicine and the dharma?

SW: Deep down inside I knew something big had been building for a long time, but I didn't know how to meet it. I'd felt this mounting darkness inside me for several years, and I was scared to face it or even acknowledge it. It felt volcanic, explosive, emotional, hazardous to my health and the health of others because of its unpredictable and volatile nature. I guess I knew that everything had been out of order for some time and that I was very stuck. I had hoped going on a long meditation retreat would help me sail above it all, a sweet spiritual bypass, a shortcut around a huge, gigantic mountain.

I know without a doubt that it was plant medicine that helped me get unstuck. I needed a way to bypass my ego and all my masks and get down to the root. I see so many dharma students who have plateaued or feel stuck and blocked on their path. Plant medicine is a powerful tool. It's a way for us to uproot greed, hatred, and delusion. It can help us rapidly accelerate the healing process especially when combined with study and practice.

IJ: Traditionally, many Buddhists have understood lay morality to be grounded in the five precepts. The fifth precept concerns abstaining from fermented and distilled (i.e. alcoholic) intoxicants that lead to heedlessness (*pamāda*). Some texts, such as the Vipaka Sutta (translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and available at [Access to Insight here](#)) claim that indulging and pursuing the drinking of fermented and distilled liquors leads to rebirth in the lower realms of hell beings, animals, or hungry ghosts, or if as a human, one will become mentally deranged. Today, though, the spirit of the fifth precept is generally expanded to include not just alcoholic drinks, and not even just chemical or plant substances that alter the mind. The fifth precept is now often interpreted as addressing our addiction to phones and other digital devices and anything else that might be addictive or cloud the mind. According to this interpretation, and probably in the view of some of our readers, I suspect “plant medicine” might be a fanciful way of talking about substances that result in *pamāda*, or heedlessness, because one is not in control of the mind. Such a reader, then, might raise the question of whether plant medicine can possibly be complementary to a life devoted to a Buddhist path. How might you respond to such a question?

SW: Is this an intoxicant or is it truly a sacred medicine offered by mother earth? I knew it was a medicine from the start, but understandably there was some painful controversy about it all especially since I was a new dharma teacher talking about it. People were thinking Ayahuasca was some new mind-altering drug, and that triggered intense fear and negativity. It became very controversial for those healing addiction and in recovery. I have always been very sensitive to everyone's point of view. Ayahuasca is one of the oldest, most revered medicinal plants in the world and it's being used to treat addiction throughout South America. It was discovered by indigenous communities and has been widely used for healing purposes for hundreds if not thousands of years. It's a sacred plant that should be respected for its tremendous benefits for humankind at this moment in history. Words are important and using words like *drugs* or even *psychedelics* when referring to medicinal plants points toward preconceived thoughts and experiences that, in my opinion, are not accurate yet I understand the confusion. "Plant spirit medicine" is a term that has been used by ancient cultures throughout the world for a very long time. The fifth precept is very important, and everyone must decide for themselves based on their own intentions and motivations what leads to heedlessness and what leads to healing. I realized right away that this was a powerful medicine, the exact opposite of an intoxicant; for me there is no tension between plant medicine and the fifth precept. That being said I will always remain respectful of everyone's views because I do understand the relevance of having this conversation.

IJ: You have been leading retreats that integrate plant

medicine and the dharma. Can you please share a little about these retreats: what happens? in what way is there some similarity to a retreat that might take place at a dharma center? in what way might it be different from a typical meditation retreat?

SW: I have always felt a profound devotion to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. On my plant medicine retreats I always introduce the ceremonies as meditation practice and begin by invoking the Buddha and taking refuge. We sit on our meditation cushions in a circle and practice meeting every experience with mindful awareness. The focus is always on compassion, interconnectedness, and embodied presence. We have silent periods, but the retreat is interactive, and the sangha becomes a powerful refuge and a source of great learning. I give dharma teachings during the retreat and before our ceremonies. We chant mantras throughout and there are periods of meditation, yoga, and embodiment practice offered every day. I place a lot of emphasis on the first foundation of mindfulness because I created these retreats specifically for dharma communities to practice merging ancient medicine with Buddhist wisdom. I see these retreats as a way to rapidly accelerate insight and to untangle our delusions faster. There is a lot of focused work around trauma and ancestral lineages which is different from traditional insight retreats but there is a lot of overlap.

IJ: Is there anything else that you would like to share with our readers from your experience of being a dharma teacher and leading plant medicine retreats?

SW: Ayahuasca and my Buddhist practice started to come

together during my first experience when the door between my subconscious mind and my conscious mind was opened and I was able to see and touch the deepest parts of myself for the first time. It was moving me through various experiences as book chapters and revealing the critical lessons I had missed in important moments in my life. I was being educated about myself through words, stories, jokes, visions, and colorful images from childhood up to my adult years. I was able to understand all my delusions, not just on an intellectual level but deep in my body. The four noble truths, impermanence and selflessness were so clear, and it deepened my insight.

Every cell of my being was powerfully affected, and I laughed, cried, and was touched at the depths of my heart. All the questions I had were answered and the experience permanently changed me. I even got answers to the questions I didn't know I had. All I could do was cry in gratitude as important insights just kept coming, page after page, rocking me to my core. It's not the path for everyone. However, for many today, it is an incredibly valuable tool. Our world is in crisis and so many are in a state of deep despair, and I believe that every healing modality is worthy of our consideration and respect.