

AN INTERVIEW WITH GAVIN HARRISON FOR ODYSSEY MAGAZINE
CONDUCTED BY WENDY WAGNER

Gavin Harrison is the author of *In the Lap of the Buddha* (Shambala Press), a renowned dharma teacher and a recipient of the "Unsung Hero of Compassion Award" presented to him by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Gavin will return home to South Africa in March and April 2011, offering meditation retreats at the Bodhi Khaya Retreat Center near Gansbaai and continuing his work with AIDS orphans and vulnerable children in KwaZulu. I am interviewing Gavin for this article in his home on the Big Island of Hawaii, where he lives and offers teachings.

How did your spiritual journey begin?

In the late 1970's I was working as an accountant on Wall Street, living in a splendid apartment upon the Hudson River, overlooking the Empire State Building. One evening I arrived home to my Persian carpets, fine silver and the looming trajectory of a pretty successful career, and everything felt utterly meaningless. It was shocking! The center had fallen out of a life I'd worked so hard to cultivate and sustain. The subsequent despair and confusion eventually brought me to my first meditation retreat in KwaZulu, Natal.

How was that retreat for you?

Within the unfolding of the retreat, there were intimations of a kind of freedom I'd never considered possible. I found the teachings of the Buddha compelling and inspiring. Meditation practice felt like a trustworthy way to look within myself and grapple with the immense feelings of crisis and confusion. I spent a year at the retreat center, before ordaining at a Burmese forest monastery and doing many lengthy silent intensive retreats in Massachusetts and England.

In 1989 I was diagnosed HIV positive. Close to death, meditation practice was the blessing within which I began to find my way with both the physical and emotional challenges and the precariousness of my situation. The roots of my teachings reach deeply into this fragility.

What is alive within you and your teachings today?

This heart has turned unequivocally to the possibility of complete awakening within this lifetime; and this is the fundamental invitation within the teachings

Could you say more about awakening?

We all yearn for wholeness, oneness, and a return to the deepest Truth of who we are. It is painful to be disconnected and distanced from who we really are. Awakening is a movement out of the dream of identification with form and the illusion of separation, to the recognition of the absolute freedom and unchanging peace that is the Truth of our being right now! We make this journey, not by circumventing or transcending the relative reality of our lives, but within a paradigm of ever deepening acceptance and openness towards every aspect of our humanity, to all people we encounter and every situation in which we find ourselves. Rumi, the great Sufi poet, calls this "becoming a True human being."

What is the place of meditation in this adventure?

Awakening is the recognition of the deepest Truth of who we are. It is not something created, perfected or found outside of ourselves. It is already given. Therefore, meditation practice must serve a fortifying of that ground upon which a revelation of our True nature flowers.

In essence meditation is a resting, relaxing and wakeful receptivity to the Truth of what is happening right now. Because our attention can be scattered and our minds very active sometimes, it can be initially helpful to engage meditation practices that support the mind to settle, to calm down: always inclining towards doing less, and simply being awareness-without control, argument or fixation.

What is this Truth?

There is of course the relative Truth of this moment: what's happening right now. And then there is the Absolute Truth of Existence, variously referred to as the Infinite Mystery, the Divine, the Tao and so forth. This Truth cannot be held in words or language.

The best I, as a spiritual teacher, can do is point, with humility, to the Unnamable, and fall short ... gracefully if possible!

What are the retreats like?

Silence is the retreat container to which all participants dedicate themselves, for it is within inner silence that deep realization blooms. Most people appreciate the silence as blessing and relief. In the end silence is our ultimate teacher

There are periods of silent sitting and walking. Meditation instructions are offered. There is a talk each day. I meet individually with retreatants. There are periods set aside for inquiry, investigation, as well as optional yoga or Chi Gong. And of course there is nourishing and delicious food, and time to be quietly alone within the beauty of the environment.

Can you give me an example of what you mean by inquiry?

Here's an example: when we long for freedom and peace deeply, it's understandable that we probably have a bunch of ideas and notions about the journey Home; and what it's going to be like when we get there! There are as many mythologies, beliefs and preconceptions about awakening as there are words in the spiritual lexicon: every one of them, in the end, will obscure That which can never be held in words or language. It is therefore critical that these mythologies be recognized and renounced. On the journey, inquiry becomes the overt expression of one's inner devotion to Truth. We are willing to question everything including our most sacred beliefs, views and opinions.

How do we get copies of your talks in South Africa?

Talks are recorded and available through the website and at retreats. .

Who are your primary teachers?

My teachers include Joseph Goldstein, Michele McDonald, Adyashanti and my Sufi mentor, Vanessa Stone.

I love the title of your book.

During a talk, His Holiness the Dalai Lama suggested: “When your heart is broken and things feel hard, lay your head *In the Lap of the Buddha.*” How lovely is that!

What has been the response to the book?

It has been well received and certainly has a life of its own. Recently translated into Chinese, I understand there are 800,000 copies of the book available on mainland China today. The book has also been translated into Italian. I am touched by different directions the book has taken in the world. Currently, nuns in a Thai Monastery are studying the book and a gay men’s group in San Francisco are doing the same thing.

What aspects of the book have been most impactful?

The book was an endeavor to celebrate and document how the meditation practice has come alive, particularly in the more complicated aspects of my life. The chapters that have generated much correspondence include: Transforming the Legacy of Sexual Abuse, Dancing with Life and Death, Grappling with My Gay Sexuality, Anger Self-Hatred and Self-Love, Dealing with Fear and Forgiveness and the Practices of Lovingkindness.

How can we get a copy of the book?

The book is available at retreats and can be ordered from bookstores.

How is your health today?

I have been living with HIV for over 30 years now. I am perpendicular, breathing and more grateful to be alive than I can ever put into words. I swim, mountain bike, hike, do yoga and Chi Gong., and dance at the drop of a hat.

Your poetry readings are different from anything I've experienced: sacred, intimate, joyous, passionate, exuberant, infectious, inspiring- a lot of fun! What's this all about?

The poetry adventure began a year ago and is one of the most joy-filled cycles of my life. It is certainly the most effective and evocative way to express what lives within me today

and what sets this heart increasingly afire. I am head over heels in love with Hafiz, the wild Sufi poet/ maniac for God, who lived in the 14th century and to whom millions of Iranians pay the deepest homage, as do I. During my years in Iran, I visited his hometown of Shiraz, near the Afghanistan boarder and was deeply touched by the stories of his life and devotion. He liberated within me an unambiguous, overt, ribald, passionate and "out of the closet" fidelity and devotion to Truth. This Truth I call "My Beloved."

What are the themes of your poems?

The overarching Karen are of longing, devotion, gratitude, celebration, happiness, the fire of Truth and of course Homecoming. The poems can be rather sensual and evocative.

I love the poem accompanying this interview. How do I get more of them?

One way is by subscribing to our monthly newsletter which contains a poem each month. Scheduled poetry readings in South Africa are detailed on the website.

Could you tell me more about your work with the AIDS orphans and vulnerable children in KwaZulu Natal?

Although I live in Hawaii, which literally is on the other side of the planet, a significant piece of this old African heart forever rests in the beloved Ufafa Valley near Ixopo. For reasons I'm sure you can appreciate, I will do anything possible to serve the children and the people of this valley who have been profoundly impacted by AIDS- without the blessing of the kind of care and support I have received. Over the last two years, with friends, we have together sponsored the schooling of over 100 kids, built a huge Children's Community Center, sunk a water well, and helped feed families. The organization that I support is the Woza Moya Project. Woza Moya means the coming of the Holy Spirit. Please see my website for the link to this incredible community endeavor.

Is there anything you would like to say in closing?

If a guy as complicated, quirky, weird as I am can be this free, happy and contented then I have absolutely no doubt that not only is awakening the birthright of all of us but that

coming Home to the very deepest Truth of who we are is a preeminent possibility for us all!

Visit Gavin's website for information about Retreats, Poetry, Newsletter, CDs, Books and the Woza Moya Fundraising Project

<http://www.gavinharrison.net/>

1661 words not including the poem

Poem has 207

Total 1868 words