

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Finding Meaning: An Interview with Catherine Ingram

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Hello, welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. I'm delighted to welcome Catherine Ingram to The Seekers Forum this month. Catherine is an international dharma teacher with communities in the US, Europe and Australia. She's a former journalist who specializes in issues of consciousness and activism. She is the author of two books on non-fiction, In The Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations With Social and Spiritual Activists, and Passionate Presence: Seven Qualities of Awakened Awareness, as well as a novel: A Crack in Everything. Catherine is a unique teacher on the spiritual landscape who focuses on contentment, simplicity and silence as the foundation of spiritual practice. She's also the co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts and has led Dharma Dialogues which are public events that focus on directing awareness toward greater well-being in an ethical and happy life since 1992. Catherine and I talked about storytelling and survival and how to integrate our spiritual lives with the everyday lives that we lead in the world.

MM: Welcome Catherine, it's so good to have you with us today. Thanks so much for taking the time. I'd like to start by asking you about the famous Joan Didion quote when she says, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." What do you think she means by that?

CI: Well, I think that whatever meaning one is giving to one's existence is giving some kind of sustenance. Sometimes it's negative, of course. People have negative stories that give them a sense of being alive. That's what they're used to, that's their conditioning. Other people may put positive spins on their stories. I think that human animals, in particular, tend to have a narrative starring the famous "me" in each of the stories, without which people go a little crazy.

MM: Why do you think that is?

CI: It brings to mind a quote I heard recently, a quote about understanding two kinds of happiness. (I don't remember who the quote is from.) One kind of happiness is momentary happiness, or momentary pleasure which we and all the other animals experience. For humans in particular, there is this greater realm of happiness about meaning, about one's life having meaning. So sometimes you can be in a context of a greater happiness – having a purpose, having meaning, having connection, a sense of belonging and all of those things that are in the greater realm of well-being. Even though you might be having little minor difficulties, you still sort of feel that you're happy. And conversely, you might have a whole bunch of little pleasurable moments through the day but not necessarily feel overall happy because this realm of meaningfulness is not strong in your life. So I think part of the whole thing about narrative also has to do with giving meaning to this existence.

MM: But the narrative, the meaning, is itself a story, of course.

CI: Yeah, actually it is. I suppose some have more inherent validity than others when you're actually taking care of other little beings, as when you're a parent taking care of children, or in some sort of service work, anything that requires your full focus that is

really helpful to others, then there is something very valid about that. But some types of stories and ways that people give meaning are entirely made up, of course. They are just kinds of fantasies. Whatever gets you through the night, I understand it.

MM: Well, that's the other thing. One person's magical thinking is another person's survival.

CI: Exactly.

MM: Story serves a purpose, but it's just "story" and it's always changing, right? What do you say to a student who comes to you and says, "I don't feel that my life has meaning."

CI: That happens quite a bit and I so deeply understand that, knowing that so much of it is simply arbitrary, it's whatever meaning you give it. I often, of course, recommend focusing on gratitude, focusing on little ways one might be helpful.

There's another quote I love: *Action absorbs anxiety*. Very basic things, not trying to make them find some gigantic overall meaning, that might be hard for that person, but rather, I try to help them find smaller realms of meaning, things that may be at hand. Even just doing something very simple in the day for someone else, or focusing on gratitude, that helps a lot.

MM: And what about the person who says, "I can do that. I can be of service and that gives me a sense of pleasure and usefulness, but I want a sense of over-riding meaning to my life. I don't know what my life means in that capital 'M' sense." How do you, as a spiritual teacher, address that kind of longing?

CI: Often, honestly Mark, I will tell people that this is a meme that we've been landed with and that we're incredibly indoctrinated with and that, in many ways, it's oppressive. The whole idea of having to find your life's purpose, it feels like too much. Every time someone brings this up to me, and this has always been the case, it makes me nervous. I feel that we, in some way, have to challenge this, and in a sense it produces this constant engine inside of oneself. It doesn't allow for much contentment, it doesn't allow us to be as the lilies of the field, to just BE. It's part of being someone with some sort of purpose, some presentation, some way that you've made your mark here, it's connected.

Now, obviously some people's lives have great meaning to others, and to them, almost like destiny or fate in some way, and that's how they're made and it's how it expressed itself. But let's face it. With 7.3 billion people on the planet, many of them just scraping to survive, having these kind of lofty demands of these higher realms of meaning and purpose, presentation and all of that, I just think it's unrealistic and oppressive.

I often encourage people to go simpler, to ratchet it down and not be looking for some gigantic stage on which you're playing but rather be content, be more simple.

There were lots of cultures whose ethos was to leave no trace, leave no mark on the world, to leave the world as you found it and not be sucking anything out of it. I admire this a lot. I feel that we've gotten very, very far from that. Even people in spiritual circles are driven in a sense about being somebody.

MM: And making a difference and leaving your mark on the world, these are the memes that we are raised with and they come from a sense of deficiency, that we have to earn our right to exist.

CI: Absolutely.

MM: I like what you say about contentment, Catherine, because spiritual teachers don't talk about contentment very much. So, how do you work with people? I know you do Dharma Dialogues but you also do silence retreat. How does the silence bring people deeper into this sense of contentment and sufficiency that you're talking about?

CI: It's amazing how fast they get into that actually. Because, at our retreats there is no goal, we're not trying to go through any progress of insight, we're just simply relaxing and letting ourselves be as awake animals, feeling and experiencing your senses. The quietness starts to happen and the delight in just being in simple, simple pleasures, what that allows is an arising of insight that is super powerful. People have major shifts into realizing how burdensome their minds have been in their workaday, usual lives where they were on a track of productivity and consumerism and getting somewhere, getting ahead, making your mark. All of it ends up for naught. We all die and in ten minutes it's as if we were never here. People move on, fast. Even the people who love us, we live with their memory in our hearts, but people move on. I see it even in my own case. People I loved deeply who have died, there is a period of grief and mourning, but then, you just get back to your life, on the playing field of life.

And so, the recognition of that is incredibly freeing. It takes the pressure off of needing to make some gigantic statement here. Then, one falls into a lot more contentment. I do talk about contentment a lot. I feel it's given very short shrift in our culture. Many of the people I have most admired understood this. They were not out trying to climb some mountain of presentation or "somebody-ness". You can smell that on someone, can't you? When someone is just driven by their ambition, you can feel it. It causes anxiety in many people.

At our retreats, it's the absolute opposite of that. The people are relaxed, calm and there is this sweetness that starts to be the fragrance. No one is trying to get ahead, there is nowhere to go.

MM: Right. Is this what you mean when you write about *Passionate Presence*, which is the name of your wonderful book?

CI: Yes, and it's about a very relaxed, open awareness and it's kind of flowing along, it's not having to note anything. It's just experiencing. When you're tasting something, you

don't have to note that you're tasting it; you're experiencing it, your senses are awake. When you're making love, imagine how silly it would be if you were noting every little part. I look at the deer in my yard and if there is one little sound in the neighborhood, they take off, their senses are entirely alert and I'm sure they're not "noting" anything. It's this understanding of an embodiment that we're gifted with as creatures, as fairly complex creatures, an embodiment that allows us to rest in that awareness and just direct the mind lightly into this open, expansive awareness.

MM: Is this a practice? I know you don't like the word practice for obvious reasons, but is this an approach to being that you learned from your teacher, Punjaji?

CI: It's been a long time since I was with him, and while he was an incredibly important, de-constructing teacher, deconditioning me out of the old practice model of understanding, I'd say that since then I've developed and made my own experiments and I have my own way of perceiving and languaging this, but yes, you end up in this passionate presence. That means a very enlivened presence, very relaxed. As for the word "practice", what I prefer to use is the word "intention", a light intentionality. You understand that it feels better to be flowing along in present awareness, paying attention to what you're doing, experiencing your life while you're living it instead of in a conceptualized version of it.

Many people are living a conceptualized life. They're like a Greek chorus in their own head, talking about other things even in contrast to what is happening, and this is counter to that. You're really WITH what you're doing or how you're being. If someone sits before you and you're talking, you're actually listening to what they're saying and perhaps some element of empathy is coming up in your heart because your attention is fully there for them. It's a very different way of approaching this idea of awareness. It has this element of "light intention" and I use an example. If you put a plant that needs sun in a window and you turn it in a direction away from the light, the plant will actually turn to the light; the plant itself will start to move itself toward light in an organic way. It's probably not thinking. In that same way, because this feels better, one begins to realize it's better for one's relationship, one is actually more efficient in one's work, one has more of an elegance in the way one does things, it works better for living. There is this light intention that arises in the heart and, and it moves the attention more into this flowing, easy, open awareness.

MM: Beautiful.

CI: I've met a lot of people who had done no other practice at all and they get into this quite easily and in fact, many people who haven't done any other practice get into this the most easily.

MM: Right, because they're fresh, as you say, they're not living conceptually as much in their spiritual practice, and they are actually THERE. They are present.

CI: That's right. Exactly. And they're not having to be deconditioned from some other belief system.

MM: Right. I would like to get back to the question of imagination and survival. How do you think imagination plays into human survival? How does it help us through the limitations of the story that we may be living, the story that may be too small for us, not true for us? Can imagination be used to transcend the limitations of personality and narrative?

CI: It's an interesting topic. One has to be careful in using imagination in which you're living in a fantasy all the time, sort of dreaming your life away. On the other hand, imagination is really often very necessary for a rich, well-lived life. We are creatures who can picture something and then move toward it with our actions. All of our planning is based on some form of imagination. There is a quote by Mark Twain that I love: *You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus*. If you're not picturing clearly, if you're not having some sort of idea of where you'd like to head in your life, you end up stymied a lot.

Of course imagination is very, very useful. In the creative process, it's completely necessary. If you're going to be writing a novel or screenplay, or even planning a trip, we use our mind imagery and we have certain pictures that we then move toward. It's beautiful in that regard.

MM: It seems to me that a lot of unhappiness comes from failures of the imagination, whether you're talking about your spiritual practice, talking about your relationship, talking about your career in the world. When we fail to imagine our lives get smaller and it's like being in a cul-de-sac and you can't see any way forward.

When someone is unable to access their imagination because it scares them or because they've been taught not to be original, how would you counsel them?

CI: It would probably be case by case. Sometimes I've sensed when people have described what you're saying here. I've sensed depression. So, I might be addressing the depression more than the failure of imagination, I sort of see it then as the cart before the horse in a sense. When you're deeply depressed it's hard to generate anything, it's hard to generate any pictures at all, you hardly see anything or maybe you're only seeing negative pictures.

Someone was speaking to me just recently and she said she was reluctant to put herself out any further because she had a lot of rejections all in a row. She tried a bunch of things and none of them had worked, so it was rejection, rejection, rejection. So there was this kind of collapse inside her, not wanting to go forward anymore into that rejection any further, understandably. So in this kind of case, it does take some kind of added wherewithal. What do you think? You deal with this a lot with people in writing. What is your sense of this?

MM: My sense is that life requires an ongoing suspension of disbelief. Just like the theatre. If you look at the odds against you, if you look at impermanence, the fact that mortality is breathing down your neck all the time, a lot of folks wouldn't get out of bed in the morning. There needs to be a suspension of disbelief that says, "I'm going to live AS IF this matters. I'm going to live AS IF this has meaning." And that for me, coexists with being in the world, being engaged. It's knowing that from an absolute perspective, it doesn't matter, but from a relative perspective, on a personal level, it matters profoundly, and that both are true. I find that my absolute mind, my witness consciousness, whatever you want to call it, there needs to be a willing suspension of disbelief to live as fully and as passionately as I want to in the world. Both are true. That's how I work with the paradox of things mattering but not mattering and avoid the tendency to go down into depression or a dark place or a visionless place and stay there where it feels like things don't matter. Do you I understand what I mean?

CI: I do, I really understand it. My only wonderment in this, is that I think some people have more ability for that willing suspension of disbelief than others. It's something I actually talked with Sheldon Solomon about, the psychologist that I interviewed some time back. I know you listen to that show. We talked about this very thing, some people are just more adept at suspending disbelief than others. So, I do hear you. For anyone who is able to set aside this oppressive view of reality that basically says we're just here for a minute and then we're gone, that's a better way to go, you would have a lot more energy.

MM: Right, exactly! Catherine, I'm so happy to talk to you, thank you for taking the time. This has been a great conversation, it's given me a lot to think about.

CI: Thank you my dear, it went by very fast.

MM: I'll talk to you again very soon.