

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Magical Thinking: An Interview with Catherine Ingram

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Our guest this month is Catherine Ingram, an international Dharma teacher with communities in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. Since 1992 Catherine has led Dharma Dialogues, which are public events that focus on directing awareness toward greater wellbeing in an ethical and happy life. Catherine is the author of two books of nonfiction, In the Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations with Spiritual and Social Activists, as well as Passionate Presence: Seven Qualities of Awakened Awareness. She also wrote a novel called A Crack in Everything. For the past 35 years, Catherine has helped organize and direct institutions dedicated to meditation and self-inquiry and more recently human and animal rights. She is the co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, as well as a board member for The Burma Project and on the board of the Global Animal Foundation, which works on behalf of the world's animals. I wanted to speak to Catherine particularly about this month's topic because she has some radical and fascinating views on magical thinking in the spiritual life and how to avoid the pitfalls of superstition when coming into an authentic faith and awareness of the world around us. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

MM: Welcome Catherine Ingram. It's fantastic to have you here. I always love to talk to you, and I'd like to begin by asking you: Is there a difference between magical thinking and faith in your opinion?

CI: I guess it would depend on what you mean by faith because some might use the word "faith" as a kind of confidence. And I would recommend that any kind of confidence should be borne on your own experimentation based on your own experiences. From that can arise what some might call faith. But if we're talking about faith in some supernatural thing, then I would say that would go into the category of magical thinking.

MM: Mmm. So tell me. Let's talk a little bit more about what you just said. You said that faith borne from experience is valid and helpful in spiritual life. Can that include mystery and things that one has not necessarily experienced directly but has a sense are real?

CI: Well of course a sense of mystery I would say is the most rational position, that we do obviously live in a grand mystery, I mean in that we don't know most of the answers to the big, big questions. What we do know, we can have a certain amount of – like I say – confidence in, just because we keep making the same experiments and they keep coming up the same, you know, all over the world, so, basically, the scientific method. And I think the scientific method can also be applied to our own experiments with so-called spirituality in that when we learn to direct our mind in certain ways, it calms us down. It makes our relationships more easy. We find ourselves more generous in life. Our discernment becomes clearer. So those kinds of experiments one can make for one's self and therefore have what you could call faith in that process. I would prefer the word "confidence." I think "faith" is a bit loaded with religious connotations.

MM: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. I think what I'm trying to get at is: Is there a form of confidence that leaves the possibility open for all that we do not yet perceive or just can't yet bring into our lives?

CI: Sure. Yeah. I think that every life – and even in the world of discoveries, you know, real scientific discoveries and so on – is based on that. It's based on kind of peering into the unknown and seeing, "Is there anything we can kind of know about what we don't know?" And that's a process that is part of evolution. And that's the process that's part of evolution in our own personal lives. Each moment is a possibility of deepening into some unknown territory within one's self if you're paying attention. So...

MM: Mm-hm.

CI: I don't know if I'm answering your question because I sense what you're asking has to do with something a little bit, "Is there some supernatural force?" Or is that correct?

MM: No. I don't mean...

CI: No.

MM: ...supernatural force. And you actually did answer my question.

CI: Okay.

MM: What you're saying is there is always a chink there for mystery. The problem sometimes with the hyper-rational approach is it assumes that it knows everything. And that's of course not rational, but that's where a lot of folks hang out, in that kind of skepticism that doesn't really leave room open for mystery. So that's what I was asking.

CI: Yeah. I know for sure that the real – I think the most obvious rational stance is that it's mostly mysterious, the universe, you know, that it's mostly...

MM: Right.

CI: ...completely mysterious and that, you know, we have what is equivalent to basically monkey brains trying to figure things out.

MM: Right.

CI: There's a lot we don't know.

MM: Right, right, right. And that sort of leads into the next question, which is: Why do you think that spiritual life and practice lend themselves so much to delusion?

CI: Well, the great biologist, Edward O. Wilson – you know his work, he's won the Pulitzer Prize twice, and anyway – he's renowned as a biologist. And what he proposes is quite interesting, which is that any behavior, any universal behavior that you see in any species, is usually assumed to have a genetic component. And in terms of humans, we – humans the world over for as long as we can figure out in terms of human history – have been prone to magical

thinking, to various forms of belief. Of course, they contradict each other, all these beliefs throughout the world, throughout time. But the fact that there is a human tendency to want to believe in some transcendent reality, in some supernatural force, in something that makes sense of this and calms the creature down, his proposal is that this has a component that is possibly genetically based, that we may be genetically inclined. And I think, as with any genetic trait, there would be some people on one end of that spectrum who are highly susceptible to that; and others at the opposite end who basically don't have much of that tendency at all, but most people fall in the middle.

And as you can see worldwide, most humans have belief in something, you know, magical, something else, some kind of fairy dust floating around. And it's named different things of course, but there is that tendency. And as one can imagine, if you have that belief, it gives you immortality. So that's a lot more calming for most people than to think, "You live, you die, and that's it." So, I would say that that is the primary base for magical thinking. And it comes in all different forms, not just in religious situations. But I think it's also to do with people who want to have something of a control of life...

MM: Mm-hm.

CI: ...that it's not just this random splash, right?

MM: Hm.

CI: And that they want some sort of meaning to things that are, you know, bad things that happen. And so those are the kinds of impulses that drive the tendency.

MM: Mm-hm. So, it's basically adaptive, and it's connected to survival and coping with the unknown. Is that what you're saying?

CI: Yes. Exactly. And it's connected to a wish to carry on forever.

MM: Right. So, in your *Dharma Dialogues*, how do you work with magical thinking and delusion among your own students?

CI: I usually try to just bring the conversation back to something, you know, more grounded and more directly personal or really staying with what we can actually talk about experientially, rather than get into a lot of cosmological theorizing. In whatever way I can, depending on who I'm working with and what I can sense they can handle, I try to bring it back to what we can really talk about and know from our own life experimentation, experiments with truth. But if I sense that someone is clutching to some belief system – as almost like a piece of wood floating in the ocean that they're desperate for – I don't try to disabuse them of that. I just try to kind of steer the conversation more to something that we can talk about in a, "This is my actual experience" way.

MM: Mm-hm. Right. Right. And what about among teachers? You've been around for a long time in this field. You've seen a lot of things from behind the scenes. Is magical thinking a problem among teachers as well would you say?

CI: I would say a lot of them do have it. A lot of them do have it because they're very indoctrinated in various traditions and in some kind of loyalty to those traditions or just some unquestioning kind of way that they proceed in the process. Yeah. A lot of them are I would say afflicted with magical beliefs. And they sell well, Mark. You know? Magical thinking sells really well because people love opium. You know? And it's rife in the spiritual scene. It's certainly probably the area that is most rife. And of course, the teachers are part of that. Now the people I would resonate with and listen to the most are those who are speaking much more about very direct experimentations in one's own life. And that's certainly what I most recommend. But yes, of course, it is. That's why it gets passed down.

MM: Mm-hm. Right. I remember a story you told me once about Poonjaji and some sort of way-out superstition or mythological idea that he had.

CI: Yeah.

MM: And I wonder. You as his student or as his friend: How did that affect your relationship with him and your ability to benefit from his teaching?

CI: Well by that point I had been around so many teachers and I had interviewed so many teachers. So, it was, you know, well into the time of my sort of seeking days. And I had learned along the way to, as I like to say, "Take the best and leave the rest." And my intention always around anyone is to find the points of connection and let those be what resonates and, as much as I can, leave aside the areas that maybe I don't agree with or we just simply have different opinions about. So, I didn't need him to be my idea of some kind of perfect fount of wisdom, that what he was offering was very, very powerful and in that I was able to make that experiment myself. And it released me into so much more sort of mind freedom that I was just grateful for that. And there were areas where in my opinion he seemed very indoctrinated by his culture by the time in which he arrived on earth that I could understand. I could understand how those beliefs were, you know some biologists I have listened to even propose that when you indoctrinate a child, you're actually helping form the neural pathways in belief.

MM: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

CI: You're basically really solidifying that tendency in a human, which may be already genetically based and then you're actually, you know, bumping up by conditioning. You're adding to the neural fixation you could say. And so, you know, he came from a very, very magical culture, you know, Hindu cultures, which is, you know, whacky.

MM: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. So, this was already a distance into your life as a spiritual seeker. In the beginning, were you more taken with magical thinking, the superstitions, the mythologies?

CI: Yeah.

MM: Did you try to take them on?

CI: Absolutely. Because I too was desperately seeking meaning, seeking some way to make sense of this, you know, unjust world and trying to calm my own self down in any number of ways. So, I was taking on – I took on primarily through Buddhism, you know, beliefs in karma, and afterlife, and all of those things. I said I believed them actually back then, but I'm not sure I really ever did. I mean I think I always had doubts. But I sort of mouthed the words when I was in my twenties. You know. I was very susceptible myself and hadn't really formed my own ways of perceiving and discerning, you know, as kind of a young student. So, I did. I did in those days.

It fell away, it was one night. I wrote about it in my first book, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*. I was with Jack Kornfield and his then-wife, Liana. And we were in Gaya, which is outside of Bodh Gaya. We had arrived by train in the night, and it was quite late. And Gaya is a really awful place, but Bodh Gaya, which was a village some distance away – I don't know how many kilometers but not too many, but still a bit of a ride, you took a horse to get there in those days, so I would say it was going to be like a 45-minute ride or something like that.

So, we ride in the night. And as soon as we got off the train, there were all these people clamoring to get our business, to take us to where we needed to go, but anytime we told them we were going to Bodh Gaya, they said they wouldn't take us. They just said, "No, no, no, (decoy, decoy)." We didn't even know what decoy even meant.

MM: Hm.

CI: Finally, this old man steps up and he agrees to take us. We pile into his very dilapidated jalopy, and there's this old, old-looking horse, and off we go into the night. It's midnight. And as we're getting out of town and as we're going, he's having to kind of whip this horse to make it go. And by about half this distance that we get there, while halfway there, he's really having to whip the horse a lot. The horse is clearly exhausted and looks like it's about to fall down. You know? And I started freaking out inside, kind of getting sick inside that we were the cause of this poor animal's suffering. And I couldn't do anything with it. I couldn't tell myself any story at all. I couldn't say, "It's the karma of the horse." I couldn't. There was nothing I could do with it. It was like I realized I had no belief system that was going to protect me from feeling the suffering – the raw suffering – of the circumstance. And in that moment, I realized I didn't have any beliefs in any of that stuff. And so, it was just – you can picture this in the night.

MM: Hm. Mmm.

CI: It turns out the word "decoy" meant, you know, robbers and bad men. So we were in a very risky situation. In fact, on that same trip later, in Bodh Gaya there were two bodies that had had their throats slit just on the side of that road. I actually saw those bodies because everybody was going to look at them and I'd never seen anything like that before of course, or since. You know it was a very kind of iconic moment for me, of realizing, "I am not on that spectrum at the middle or at the top end of belief. I'm at the other end."

MM: Mm-hm. And in that moment of complete disillusionment, what shifted in you?

CI: Well, it's a lot harder. I was in suffering with the horse. That's what was happening. It's a lot harder facing that. And to me it does feel a lot truer. So whether it's hard or not cannot be the basis on which one sees the truth if you're inclined to see the truth. I mean that's just how it felt. I felt that, "What I'm seeing, certainly I'd rather not be seeing. But it hurts because it hurts. But nevertheless I can't help but feel and see this."

And that's been the case ever since. I don't have any way to justify injustice. I don't have that comfort. And nor do I have a belief in any kind of a continuation. Now I'm not saying that I can know that for sure. I'm saying I don't have a belief. You know it's like when Christopher Hitchens said, "That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence."

MM: Mm-hm.

CI: So I don't have a belief in something I see no evidence for, nor can I provide evidence that it isn't so. But for me I don't have any of those kinds of comforts. Now that said, I feel that I have a great love of what I would like to call just finding the stream of harmony through any circumstance. You know it could be called a dharma, a dharma stream, using the word very literally in terms of just finding the truth of things as best one can and working with it in a very human way, without these beliefs. And that's what I've been doing. That moment I just described to you was in 1982. So that's been the program ever since, you know, that...

MM: Mm-hm.

CI: I have to look at what's happening on this earth, the massive amount of destruction, the madness of what we humans are doing, the force of ignorance and greed that is killing so much of life. I have to look at it in its raw form, you know, and feel it in its most raw intensity.

MM: And did that cause you to step away from Buddhism?

CI: That was not the only reason. I would say that it fell away. I mean I felt that it was useful for the time that I was practicing mindfulness and, you know, hanging out with wonderful people for many years. It was useful for that time, but it did fall away. The practice of mindfulness fell away, and the beliefs fell away. Now it has evolved over those years. Essentially, they have unhooked the mindfulness practice from a lot of the beliefs. But in the days I was studying with them, that was all part and parcel. It was all a package. You were also hearing the cosmology beliefs along with the very precise mindfulness training.

MM: Right.

CI: But it did fall away. All of that fell away. And I'm grateful for it at the time.

MM: And it was after that you came to Poonjaji. How many years after that experience?

CI: I had met Poonjaji in about 1991.

MM: Okay. So it was a few years later.

CI: Well it was about nine years later. So yeah. It wasn't that I stopped Buddhist practice in 1982. I still was practicing mindfulness practice until about 1991.

MM: Today do you feel that you belong to any tradition? Do you see yourself as part of any kind of a lineage?

CI: No. Not at all. I don't really adhere to Poonjaji as some guru teacher in my life. He was an incredible influence. But I've been realizing since the death of my friend, Leonard Cohen, he was an equally incredible influence. And I'm wondering even as time goes if it's not more than influence because he was so much more my own culture. And so, what I see in his now-absence is just how powerful a teaching he has been in my life and how it freed me in lots of ways to really think out of the box, to really look at things both with a kind of twinkle in one eye and a tear in the other. You know.

MM: Mmm. Mmm. That's beautifully said. So, Catherine, you were just talking about global disaster. It's hard to think about anything else these days. What is the link between the kind of spiritual delusion and magical thinking that we have been discussing and fundamentalism, the basic fundamentalist impulse?

CI: Yeah. Good question. So, you know, as I said earlier in this conversation, magical thinking comes in all forms. And one of the other big indoctrinations I would say of magical thinking is that people seem to think that we live on a planet of infinite resource. Right? And we don't. It's regenerative, but you can denude into, you know, a desert, a living forest, or a living ecosystem. And that is now what we're doing. We're turning a lot of what was green into a desert. It's like Derek Jensen said, "Capitalism is the process by which we turn the living into the dead."

MM: Mmm.

CI: And that is what we are doing. And we're doing it incredibly effectively, and it's based on a certain agreed kind of magical thinking or just incredible indoctrination of a certain assumption, that people don't even question. I mean here in Australia I just heard a couple of weeks ago on the radio the Defense Minister was on the radio, national radio, in this big rah-rah about how we should start a weapons industry here in Australia. There's no reason why Australia can't make fabulous, you know, incredible weapons. He's going on, and on, and on about the profit and about the number of jobs. And I'm waiting for the interviewer to say something like, "Well are you not making the connection that weapons are for killing each other and killing other people?" In this case they're talking about weapons of real mass destruction that he's talking about, big, you know, weapons that compete with U.S. weapons. And the interviewer is not asking that. The interviewer is really asking questions that have to do with the economy around it. So, it's like the assumption is growing an economy, constant economic growth, is just assumed by the masses to be a good thing.

MM: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

CI: It's never questioned. And you can't have constant, infinite economic growth on a planet of finite resources. So that's what's happening. We're basically denuding the earth with all these crazy belief systems. And then you add in the fundamentalist religious nut cases who are happy to kill massive swaths of people, including themselves, because they think they'll go to paradise, and it just is a prescription for extinction really.

MM: So, if fundamentalism is obviously the kiss of death, what is the purpose of another kind of spirituality in this age of so much catastrophe? What does a real spirituality look like up against these kind of real disasters and dangers and results of magical thinking?

CI: Well, of course as one pays attention to it all, you find a reservoir of compassion for ignorance. You find a reservoir of capacity to let go as needed. And those are the kinds of things that one has to become very, very adept at, basically understanding ignorance and feeling some sort of, at least, quiet in the heart as you face it. And that of course includes one's own madness, but also a letting go. I notice in my life that, "Boy, letting go seems to be the order of business of the day." You know. It's just a lot of letting go. You know. I'm at an age where a lot of my friends have died recently and are ill. And one's own body is changing and I think this applies, you know, in small and large ways. That's the dharmic perspective is this quieting of the heart.

It's like I had an interview with Ram Dass many, many, many years ago, in the early eighties probably. And at the time we were in the cold war. And so that looks like a walk in the park from this vantage point. But in those days we were all kind of, you know, aflutter about the possibility of nuclear war. And I said to him, "Do you think we're headed into Armageddon or do you think we're headed into a world awakening, a great new age?" And his answer was brilliant then and still holds true today, which was, "If we're headed into Armageddon, the best way to enter Armageddon is to quiet the mind and open the heart. And if we're headed into a world awakening, the best way to enter into that is to quiet the mind and open the heart."

MM: Mm-hm.

CI: So, it turns out our work is always the same. It's always the same thing, which is that you find some sort of place of peace inside. And there are certain reflections I find that help with that. I've talked and written about a lot, you know, what kind of reflections can we engender in our self to get through this, not to necessarily prevail – you know, cheat death, but just to rather, just to, on the way there – I really recommend being in love with your life, with each of the days you have and with all of the little, tiny things. Like right now, as we've been talking, there's this wild, amazing bush turkey, it's huge, that lives in the forest next to my property. There's a whole group, a whole family. But this one in particular has become my little buddy. And whenever he hears me talking on the phone, he runs from the forest because he knows he will get some bread, which I'll give to him after we hang up. But he came running over. And almost every day it kind of makes me chuckle inside because it's just so adorable to see him. Here I am on the phone, and he comes running out of the forest. You know. And to really just all those little things of the day, of the moment, your conversations with your friends, you know, the sharing a meal, going for a

walk, all the little – everything – you know, just really drink it in. So being in love with one’s life is, from my point of view, a really high dharma because it fills your own well.

MM: Hm.

CI: And once your own well is filled, it can spill over. You know. It can be of help. It can be of service. It’s really a practical offering.

MM: Beautiful.

CI: And also I reflect a lot on just seeing this from an evolutionary point of view. Species come and go, and beings come and go. I mean each of us face our own extinction. And I sort of go into that, you know, to widen the lens out into a more historical vantage point, and many other reflections I have that I use for calming techniques.

MM: And Catherine, where would people find those reflections if they want to look into your work?

CI: I wrote a piece for the *Huffington Post* years ago. I mean it’s a bit old now, but it still has my reflections that I have on there. It’s called *Getting Through the Night at the End of Days*. And that’s on *Huffington Post*. I think it was published in 2009 maybe, or 2010. But if you Google my name and that phrase, *Getting Through the Night at the End of Days*, it will come up.

I’m really focused on now, Mark, is what I’m calling inner resilience, but it’s inner and outer resilience. I’m really emphasizing turning to community. And I just founded two organizations, two very simple networks – one here in the Byron Bay area and one in Melbourne – called “Women Helping Women.” And it’s just a free network where you’re on an email list and people can say, “I need a ride to the airport,” or, “Does anyone know a good plumber?” and things like that on the list.

And also I’m really very much focused on community and building community for resilience and also for just a sense of belonging and for wellbeing. That’s a part of my last many, many months since I moved here.

MM: Mmm. That’s wonderful. And it leads me to my last question about what you’re working on these days. You’re not writing as much. You’re teaching Dharma Dialogues in Byron Bay. And could you just talk a little about where people can find you now?

CI: Oh thank you. Well yes, and I’m also doing podcasts. I do regular podcasts that are all found on my website, catherineingram.com. So, I’m teaching in Byron. I’m teaching in Melbourne. I’m going to be doing a retreat in Italy next year. And I’m doing regular podcasts, and I also do private sessions by Skype or in person if you’re in Australia. It’s all on catherineingram.com.

MM: Wonderful. Oh good. And I do recommend to everyone listening to this: Catherine’s podcast *In the Deep* is terrific. And she interviews a wide variety of folks, not just spiritual folks, a lot of scientists, a lot of people who are activists in the world. So I highly recommend the

podcast, which I will post a link to on The Seekers Forum page. So, Catherine, I don't want to keep you anymore. But this is great to talk to you. You always make me think.

CI: And you always make me think. That's what we've been doing together for 20-some years now.

MM: Right.

CI: All right, sweetheart.

MM: Thank you, my dear. Go feed your turkey.

CI: I'm going to do that.

MM: All right, dear.

CI: So I'll talk to you later.

MM: Thanks. Bye.