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Spiritual pioneer Jill Satterfield

'Deep inside I knew: there is always hope'

Her chronic pain was incurable, American Jill Sattersfield was told by doctors. But Jill's intuition said something different, which led her onto the path of yoga and meditation. Now she travels the world to share her self-healing techniques. Geertje Couwenbergh interviewed her idol.

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The morning is still young when I meet 56-year-old Jill Sattersfield. Her cheerful face, framed by a white mane of hair, radiates a kind of wild wisdom. Jill has something I've seen in many people who meditate: a kind of naughty youthfulness, wrapped in an experienced body. The hope to grow old in the way she has, is motivating me to meditate.

I have studied under Jill for a few years now. She helped me to trust my intuition and to integrate my yoga and meditation exercises. This is because I have had one foot in the world of yoga and the other in the world of Buddhism, and quite a few times they have slipped apart like Bambi's legs on the ice. The yogis, with their mala chains and stories about bliss, love and light did not seem to me to be representatives of a Proper Spiritual Path. My Buddhist meditation tradition did, but it would often drive me spare with its emphasis on sitting, sitting and more sitting.

Enter Jill. I got hooked during her first workshop, when she talked about the difference between being in a yoga position and being the yoga position. When during yoga we also did my favourite Buddhist guided meditation (about loving kindness), I was officially ecstatic. Because although yoga and meditation are often spoken of in the same breath, they tend to be done separately. First you move for a bit, then you sit, or the other way around. And Jill said there is no need for that.

What is the biggest misconception about meditation?

'That you have to stop your thoughts when you're meditating. You don't. You may have fewer thoughts, and you may allow the thoughts you have to move, rather than freeze them or hold on to them. Another big misconception about meditation is that you can only do it in a formal sitting position. Formal meditation of that kind is very important to train your mind. But we can be mindful in many different positions, and that is indeed how you translate it into yoga. With intention and attention, you can approach a yoga position as a different form in which you can be aware.'

I often hear people say that they feel sitting down during meditation is unnecessary, because they can also meditate when they are cycling or doing the washing-up. 'Although I feel it's laudable and I'm all for it, I think that what you are doing then probably isn't meditation, unless you are very well trained (laughs). You train your mind in a formal sitting position because it is harder to be present and silent when you are moving, even in walking meditation. Once you are more experienced, you can build up some movement in which you continue that silence. It takes a bit of time to get to that level. After all, you don't go to secondary school right out of playgroup.'

Do you feel that many modern types of yoga in fact detract from a meditative consciousness?

'What I like so much about yoga, is that it is one of the most versatile types of exercise. You can do it as fitness, you can do yoga as flow, and you can zoom in, deep into the individual positions. That's all fine. The intention you do it with, determines your yoga practice. If you do mindless yoga, you will not change fundamentally. If you do anything at all in a mindful way, it will cause an inherent, brilliant

change. It all depends on how you work with your mind. How can you explore yoga positions in a mindful way? That is what interests me.'

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Jill is rooted in both the hatha yoga and the Buddhist theravada traditions. Her initial motivation for her spiritual quest, she tells me, was despair. She fell ill when she was twenty. She suffered chronic pain almost all day round for thirteen years before doctors found out what was wrong. A large part of her large intestine had come loose and had penetrated her diaphragm. The intestine was replaced and attached to the abdominal wall, but the pain remained. Worse, her bowels had lost peristalsis.

Jill: 'I've seen every doctor in the land. Eventually I ended up in a pain clinic, where I was told that the only thing they could do to stop the pain was to paralyse my nerves. I hit a wall. I had just a couple of options: either turn into a junkie, get deeply depressed, or try to help myself. After being utterly desperate, I decided that I wouldn't go down the path of depression and drugs. I put a proverbial finger up to the world and said: Fine, if you can't help me, I'll help myself.' And that's what I did. It took more than seven years, but against all the medical odds Jill cured herself.

Inspired by stories of old yogis who could transform body and mind, she launched into a strict regimen of yoga and meditation. 'I started with the intention to totally rearrange my cells.' She went on countless meditation retreats, meditated for 45 minutes twice a day, and did yoga for at least two hours every day. Her own brand of yoga, because the positions she was taught were not always right for her specific needs. It took you seven years to cure something that doctors said couldn't be cured. Was there a time in all those years that you became sure that what you were doing was working?

'Yoga opened up my body and gave my mind access to the specific parts that hurt. The turning point came when, with my full attention, I found the centre point of the main, which turned out to be far smaller than I had thought! It was a small spot, as small as the tip of a needle, which radiated pain out to a wider area. That realisation dismantled the fear. I no longer felt I was at the mercy of the pain. My mind remained separate from it, that was maybe the greatest discovery I made. Another high point was when I could finally feel sympathy for my body. Because in the beginning I was incredibly critical about myself, I hated my body and wondered why this had to happen to me. When the fear of the pain lost its hold on me, I felt much freer. And then things started to change.'

Jill says that because of her illness, she explored the interaction between mind and body 'as an alchemist'. Using that experience, she started to give yoga lessons at meditation retreats, which was unique at the time. In these lessons, she tried to build on the theme Ajahn Amaro, her Buddhist teacher, had spoken about earlier that day.

'My approach, and I've done a lot of work on this, was to ensure that my yoga lessons did not interrupt the meditation retreat. Imagine that on those retreats you meditate, walk and sit for about ten hours in complete silence. You don't even look at the others. When there's a yoga lesson, everybody goes: 'Yay! Give me a break! Give me something to do!' But I was determined that my lesson wasn't going to be entertainment.'

How did you do that?

'I profoundly felt that I wanted to offer people something that I hoped would benefit them in some way. I got a lot of positive feedback and they kept asking me back. This reinforced my confidence in this method, and that fed back into itself. But at the end of the day it was a real experiment, because there was no one to tell me what to do or how to do it. Which incidentally is a recurring theme in my life; I like that. In fact, I thrive on it.'

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Jill is undeniably self-willed. After the Happinez Festival last year, where she gave workshops, we had a meal together, and I got to know a very different side to her. Casually, she told me where she'd met her ex-husband: at an illegal street race. I was in hysterics. She asked: 'Do you know what "playing chicken" is?'

Her eyes twinkle behind her mineral water with lemon, and she explains it's a game in which you challenge the driver of the car next to you to a race. The first one to get scared and pull out is the proverbial chicken, and loses. I forgot to ask who won that race, but in any case it led to a wedding. This is Jill's other side.

'People tend to be shocked to find that I do more than meditate in silence,' she laughs when I meet her this time. When she was young, she worked as a visual artist in New York City. 'That was the punk era, the late 70s, early 80s. It was a pretty dangerous place, with a lot of drugs and crime. But there was still a kind of Wild West feel about the place; it was an incredible time to be an artist there.'

It was the first spot where Jill really felt at home, at the art academy. 'I had finally found my tribe.' It was a world away from her childhood in North Connecticut, where she'd been raised as a 'proper girl', but always felt she was the black sheep of the family. 'I had other interests than the other schoolchildren. I was always breaking the rules: smoking, skipping school. I was even expelled for that.' She quickly adds that there were plenty of others, but that she was the only one who didn't try to hide it.

So you were always a maverick?

'I guess so. When I was five or six, I visited my grandparents in Ohio, and I went along to Sunday school, where we sang church songs. I used to change the words of the songs (laughs). I had never met Jesus and we hadn't been introduced, and I didn't believe that he loved me. So I sang: 'I don't love Jesus and he doesn't love me.' I kept getting into trouble. Later, as a teenager, I avoided having to go to church with my parents by teaching little children in Sunday school. I would tell them to draw God.

They were puzzled, and asked me what God looked like: was he a man with a long white beard? And I would tell them: 'No, he can look any way you want.' We made beautiful drawings with lots of colours and abstract shapes, and then I'd say: 'Yes! That is exactly how God looks for you.'

How does your Wild West side manifest itself these days? 'Well, it has pros and cons. I don't like people telling me what to do. Or what to think. That was reinforced by the medical system, because in the beginning I was constantly being told that the pain was all inside my head. It works as fuel to the fire for my radical part, the cowgirl who wants to go where no girl has gone before.

I think that ultimately, every tradition starts this way; someone has to discover something...'

You mean like the Buddha wasn't a Buddhist, as people say. 'Exactly. What did the Buddha do? He explored various techniques. Some he found too extreme, others worked. He used what worked, found enlightenment and taught others. I don't consider myself as a Buddha, but I always keep at the back of my mind that something isn't necessarily true just because somebody says so. I can now say that I mostly trust my intuition. I've developed it mainly through the experience of not trusting my first instinct, and then often finding I was right all along. Especially when I was ill, I came to a point that I just couldn't blindly trust other people's advice any more, because they said there was no more hope. And I knew, deep inside, that there is always hope. That's when I started to follow my own radically different sense of direction.'

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In 2004 you founded the School for Compassionate Action, which offers yoga lessons for people with chronic pain and all kinds of psychological problems, traumas and addictions. What did that originate from?

'From the experience of healing my own body. And also that I saw that at the time yoga was only available for people who could afford it, not for people who had cancer or who couldn't get out of bed or had serious psychological issues. I felt a great need to take these techniques out of the studio and into the community. I was immediately struck by how hungry people were after something they could do themselves, because they had been so disenfranchised by the medical system - just as I had been. So I offered them things they could do at home. And they did them. These were mainly attention techniques, because doing yoga was hard for people in hospital or who were overweight. Also, it's a very sensitive matter for people with emotional or physical traumas to work with their bodies. So I had to be careful. But I was surprised how quickly these people took to my techniques. And they really did help. So I stopped teaching yoga in studios for thirteen years in order to this work.'

She's now teaching again, with lots of street cred. The respected American Shambhala Sun magazine even called her one of the four best meditation teachers in the country. However, she never attained yogi star status, as some of her colleagues did, her good friend Sarah Powers among them. Jill: 'I'm such an anti-guru that it's hard to market myself in a particular way. I want to be invisible to the student so that he can find his own way, not my way.'

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Woman on a mission

Jill Sattersfield shows how healing yoga and meditation can be. She was one of the first people to combine Buddhist meditation techniques in yoga. Another one of her innovations was giving yoga lessons during Buddhist meditation retreats. With her company Vajra Yoga + Meditation in Berkeley, California, she tries to give people 'clear insight, self-compassion and direct experiences that lead to our deepest wisdom and health'.

Jill is the founder and director of the non-profit School for Compassionate Action: Meditation, Yoga and Educational Support for Communities in Need (SCA in short). At this school, teachers, psychologists and healthcare workers learn how to integrate body & mind techniques into their work. SCA also offers lessons to people suffering from chronic pain, illness, post-traumatic stress disorder and to young people at risk. Jill's method is being used throughout America and Europe.

www.vajrayoga.com and www.schoolforcompassionateaction.com

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Exercises designed by Jill:

Checking in

INTERVIEW

Pause, feel your body, your breathing, wherever you are. Take ten minutes to become aware of the sounds in your surroundings, take stock of how your body feels, how your heart feels, how your mind feels. Walk quietly and slowly, feeling how the soles of your feet touch the ground and the sun warms your face, listen to the birds and the wind in the trees.

Slow yourself down for ten minutes every day and you will make your inner guide more sensitive, so that you can lead yourself as a compass with wisdom and kindness. By listening, you learn to trust this inner compass and your life will be truly yours, and you will be truly happy.

On soundcloud.com/jillsatterfield you can listen to another exercise: 'Body as a house', a guided meditation in which you guide your attention throughout your body and discover which experiences you have stored where.

Jill has released two CDs with guided meditations, which you can get on iTunes.

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