

LAYOGA

AYURVEDA AND HEALTH

By Felicia M. Tomasko, RN

My first introduction to mindfulness expert, psychotherapist and teacher Dr. Ron Alexander was at a meditation workshop he co-facilitated with Judith Orloff, MD held at Exhale Sacred Movement in Venice. His engaging and thoughtful presence is the very embodiment of mindfulness. The practice he teaches and advocates is important beyond the meditation cushion as a way to cultivate an open mind throughout all the activities of our lives. This is particularly relevant in times of change, crisis and transition in our individual lives, when shifting circumstances demand that we come up with new solutions. This may be even more relevant in our collective situation, at a time when the rules seem to be changing around us. These are times we need to look at the world with a fresh perspective.

Dr. Alexander posits that cultivating mindfulness not only helps us to feel calm and peaceful and experience a greater sense of well-being. Mindfulness also offers a means of enhancing creativity. And it is through creativity that we find new perspectives, new ways of being in the world, new opportunities to communicate with each other and innovative expressions of community offering hope and serving as an antidote to despair. This is the teaching within Dr. Alexander's new book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss and Change*, and the topic explored in the following conversation.

Felicia M. Tomasko, RN: You've worked with many creative people and give suggestions for creative processes. People sometimes think they're either a creative person or they're not. Does everyone have the potential to be creative and how does accessing creativity help us in times of transformation and change?

Ron Alexander, PhD: It is essential to use creativity. In order to get through crisis and change you have to really dig deep into the core of your creative resource, which I believe that everyone has.

Of course there are variations of this. I think there is a spectrum of the 'creative gift' like a *mitzvah*, in the Jewish tradition. There are people who have extraordinary, exceptional, expressive and connected abilities of creativity. For example, Mozart would hear every single piece in his head simultaneously, and then he would write it down while the whole thing is going on so you can imagine what he was tapped into. My sense is that not only was he connected into his own personal creative conscious mind, but the Universal collective as well.

If you take somebody like Dylan in the Martin Scorsese film *No Direction Home*, there's a point where the camera focuses on him and Scorsese says, "You know you wrote like 336 of the most extraordinary songs all before you were age thirty—where did it come from?" Deadpan, Dylan looks into the camera and says, "I'm an alien. It came from inside. It came from that other place."

There's a conversation in my new book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind* when I had an opportunity to socially interact with the lead guitarist The Edge from U2, after they had just made *Achtung Baby* and *Zooropa*. He said he was hearing music in his dreams, unusual sounds, and was curious what I thought about it and where it came from. My response was that I believe there's an extraordinary gift from an open mind, where you literally open your mind to your core creativity.

As a therapist, I work intuitively and artistically in the way that I used to play music as an adolescent. Anytime I sit with somebody, it's almost like I'm looking for a different sound or chord progression.

When musicians are inventing, after they complete something, they don't try to do it again. If you take the Beatles' *White Album*, *St. Pepper* or *Rubber Soul*—there's nothing like it. *The White Album* is so out there, that for me, as someone who has studied the skills of both meditation and creativity, it shows a vast open mind. As Deepak Chopra says, that's the field of infinite pure possibility.

If people don't have a particular creative gift they can express musically, artistically or with writing, they need to cultivate it in what they do. When it comes to developing one's creativity, whatever it is that you are doing, it's a craft. You are creative as long as you have an open mind to listen and look, to see things fresh, and to hear things with the third ear instead of just hearing what people are saying, but listen to the subtlety, like how they say it.

FMT: The importance of tapping into that speaks to both personal and societal transformation: seeing things with a new or third eye or ear or looking for new solutions. Your book talks about using these techniques in times of transformation. Do you feel that times of change make creativity even more important?

RA: I think it's essential; these times are so unstable. People's security, like their 401Ks, pension funds, life savings, equity and homes have been completely devastated and gutted. Then there are those who have been working for over thirty years at places like the *LA Times*, IBM or Enron who have lost their jobs. I don't know who it was that said 'these are the times that try men's souls,' someone on the great philosophy food chain.

In my book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind* I outline three steps to help in these incredibly volatile times. First, we need to be creative. This can bring us great solace and comfort as it doesn't depend on the outside; it's something that starts with in us. We can be creative in a small way, such as cultivating a craft or an art

form or we can totally re-engineer our entire life by moving from one kind of business into another.

The second thing is meditation. My book focuses on mindfulness meditation, but I'm a devotee of all types. During turbulent and intensive transformation having some kind of spiritual practice—whether it's Christian contemplative prayer or the non-dual practice where you just sit and rest. My friend Catherine Ingram from Dharma Dialogues teaches no method, she meditates by just sitting. She doesn't even say close your eyes. There's as much brilliance to that method as there is to Zen or Tibetan practices with the prostrations and visualizations. They will all take you to a state of consciousness that shifts you out of your ordinary waking state and into what I call the core state of no-self and the space between the thoughts.

The third aspect of utilizing the creative transformation in these times is by being with a strong community, which is the *sangha*. In Buddhism there's the Buddha, the *dharma* and the *sangha*. Now when I say the Buddha, I don't mean the man, Gautama Buddha. We don't really worship him but instead his teachings. The *dharma* is the way, and all of the different specific techniques that he disseminated. Initially the *sangha* was much stronger in Asian cultures but now it's starting to grow, there are a lot more *sanghas*. If you go to Yoga class, there's a *sangha*.

The *sangha* provides an essential component of feeling that we are all going through this together. For me that brings down a lot of anxiety and increases my feeling of safety and being supported. And even though everybody is anxious, when we get together, we worship, we do Yoga, we chant. Through this we can open our heart and connect and let go of the fear and anxiety.

About six months ago I was invited to Govindas' and Radha's house. They are the directors of the Bhakti Yoga Shala for Govindas' birthday party. My book was in the editing stage with two different editors. It was very stressful with a lot of fear and anxiety. His birthday party started with musicians coming in one at a time and singing and chanting. About half an hour later everybody was doing kirtan and all of the stress about writing my book washed away. This is a common experience I think many of us share when we experience taking a yoga flow class with Shiva Rea, Saul David Raye or Seane Corn we walk in one state of mind and leave feeling as if our entire mind-body energy field has become realigned. So I think community and connection with people is so important in times of stress.

FMT: In the book you talk quite a bit about not just community in general, but specific aspects of creating support systems and the types of people to call upon.

RA: There's a chapter called 'Building a Counsel of Support' and it comes from an incident that happened to me. I was out one night with Catherine Ingram and Judith Orloff MD and a group of friends. We were talking with a war correspondent for *Time* magazine. He was sharing with us that before he submits a piece, after he's been in Kuwait or Iraq, he'll sit with three or four of his writer friends who are like mentors, and bounce the story off them. So I got this idea that one of the ways we can go from wherever we are to something greater is through a counsel of support. This counsel should be composed of key people such as a wise mentor, a therapist, dharma or Yoga teacher, a financial consultant or somebody who has special creative expertise.

When I was studying piano in my thirties, I had good fortune to learn from a woman named Shirley Howard who was the tutor for the LA Philharmonic. It wasn't that I developed my piano playing skills in those years I spent with her; it's that I developed who I was going to become as a creative teacher of mindfulness and mind-body healing therapies. She helped me to become more intuitive by playing with my eyes closed and using my intuition for feeling the white and black keys communicating to my core creativity.

She would talk about the importance of friendship and creativity and how to create: before your fingers touch the keys, to close your eyes and go into what I call 'a state of open mind.' She would send me off and say, "Go to Paris. Live in Paris for a month and then come back and that will give you another lesson. Drink fine wine, eat good food devourer life's experiences."

With the Counsel of Support, I had this idea similar to the old teacher-student, or the mentor-relationship. If you're a blacksmith or a scribe at a monastery you always would study with someone senior. In the Counsel of Support you need to bring people you respect around you, and who are not afraid to exercise what I call a strong dialogue with you in a way that a guru or teacher is not afraid to crush your ego. It is like creating a family of supporters who are willing to bring you along on your path, whether it's an idea or a project you are developing, and are willing to confront you when you're in your ego or your nonsensical stuff.

I have many friends, like Judith Orloff, Shiva Rea, Emma Farr Rawlings, PhD and Catherine Ingram, who helped me with the process of writing my book. With them I wasn't afraid to say, "Here read this, and don't tell me what you think I want to hear; take it apart, give me some reflection so that when I get up and leave, I feel like you really impacted me and the writing is going to have a different twist to it."

I think that a lot of creative transformation is being willing to take off your own rigid suit of the egoic mind of thinking that what you have to say is exclusively important. You can take in that others have a different kind of melody, they might change the middle part a little bit, and the song comes out better. That was one of the genius qualities of the friendship and musical collaboration of Lennon and McCartney, they were such good friends. They would go to each other and neither one of them was afraid to say, "I don't have the middle; can you come up with it?" Or, "Can you come up with the end?" There's that space of being in open mind, where you're open to have new, fresh, original things come towards you, both from the outside and also from the inside." They key is to be alive, open and present in order to receive what is unfolding

FMT: I liked how you used the metaphor in the book of mulching when it comes to shifting our emotional judgments and perceptions about ourselves.

Sometimes, we think everything is either black or white, we suppress or indulge in emotions and I think it can be challenging to skillfully negotiate a middle way. Creating mulch seems to do that.

RA: As I wrote in my book, the mulch includes hindrances, which are classically defined in most of the Buddhist sutras. There are a variety of hindrances in contemporary Western psychotherapy and somatic mind-body psychology. We talk about hindrances and resistances when we're working with creative people, such as when they are creatively blocked. It is often difficult for people who have had extraordinary success, maybe they won an Emmy, a Grammy or an Oscar;

because the hindrances can creep in, often in the form of self-attack or self-devaluation.

And even though a person can evolve to an extraordinarily, brilliant, creative level of expression, there's often the old little voice still present, always kicking the person down and pushing them around.

There's an ancient Buddhist story of two farmers living next to each other. One farmer takes all of his horse manure and keeps throwing it over the fence into the other farmer's yard. About six months later, he notices the other farmer's tomatoes are gigantic, his pumpkins are huge, his corn is green and his front yard is filled with tall grass.

Instead of trying to get rid of emotions and get to a place where we are really free, where we don't have any sorrow or pain or self-doubt or self-judgment, I write about the importance of just trying to work with mulching it.

What always mystified me from my many trips to India was their white lotus flower. It is one of the most beautiful flowers yet it grows in a mud pot, in the mulch. I think creatively we grow best if we mulch down that which has to do with our own afflictions. There's a wonderful book that had a positive influence in my writing called *Touched with Fire*. In it the author Kay Redfield Jamison Ph.D. found through her study of two hundred famous poets and authors, that they were often tortured individuals. If these artists are willing to sit with their torture, affliction, pain, suffering and dark moods, as we say in mindfulness meditation, and really drop in and mulch them, so they can cultivate and fertilize their creativity, the soul can transfer them into clarity.

FMT: We can think about that collectively now, as these being times that try our souls. We could collectively use what seems like mud at the moment. Would you say that creativity, meditation or all these practices that you describe, could be a way to do this?

RA: It's highly unlikely, but imagine if Barak Obama started every cabinet meeting with a mindfulness meditation and sitting in silence?

I was brought into a record company in the 1980s, and I counted seventy-six no's in the course of a twenty-minute meeting and like eleven yes's. I gave them that feedback and I taught them about mindfulness. Over time there were more and more yes's and less and less no's.

One week I arrived late, so I thought I should focus on doing the structured process with them, which was focusing on conflict resolution, conflict management, creativity and communication. More than half of the room said, "Wait, we want to do that silent, close the eye thing and get mindful before we continue."

And I realized that what I was teaching was a technique that had already transcended their normal waking consciousness. They got that the Buddhist technique of mindfulness was so creative and productive they didn't want to skip it.

It was a great realization for me, because here I was, teaching the method and believing it, but I even lost it in that moment thinking, "Well, I'm late so let's get on to the 'real stuff' that they want." It taught me this *is* the real stuff—the silence.

Just resting in that place and continuing to open to what arises, what exists, what falls away and seeing the place of creative spaciousness and open possibility that will birth from an open mind.

Over time, the conflicts that they wanted me to wrangle, the anger, rage and devaluation that you see from upper management down to those on a lower level, started to deescalate and fall away and there was more compassion. People were listening to each other more, and supporting each other with an open mind rather being envious or jealous.

FMT: In terms of transformation and tapping into this creativity—what do you see as the role of service and how does that fit in?

RA: Service, or *seva*, as we say in Sanskrit, is essential. At every step of the way you need to be giving it away in some shape or form, whether it's to somebody who can't afford to see you or someone whose child has died. I think it's important to see that we are all in this together, it's not about acquiring more stuff or taking care of what I have, but it's about actively, in a social, political, spiritual way, contributing to the whole thing.

Think globally but act locally; act locally but then go and contribute globally. *Seva* helps to create meditation and compassion in action. It's not enough to just sit on your cushion. In some paths it's Okay to just spend your life at a monastery meditating for your own awakening because that will have a positive impact on the entire awakening of the world.

But in the *Mahayana*, the middle path, we sit and attempt to become enlightened or develop awakened intelligence, not just for ourselves but for the good of all, so that every conversation you have—the guy at the car wash, the person at the dry cleaners'—those are all opportunities to be a *bodhisattva*.

Today, I was waiting for this parking space and a guy pulled up right behind me, even though my blinker was on, and took the spot. I backed up and rolled down my window. The Bostonian in me wanted to rumble and mouth off at him, but I just smiled and didn't say anything. What I thought was, "he must need it more than me." Then he looked back at me, and said, "Thank you." When we are in wise mind, we see in advance what is really needed.

Seva is taking things up to the next step. For example, in the 1970s and 80s Ram Dass along with Larry Brilliant, Danny Goleman and Wavy Gravy and a whole host of other guys and gals started the Seva Foundation with the goal of curing blindness and eradicating smallpox, which they did! For \$5 or \$10 they were able to offer cataract operations and give people the capacity to see who never saw correctly.

Now you have a lot of people, such as Julia Butterfly Hill, who started out sitting in a tree to save one tree and now is working to save the planet. Then you have Shiva Rea and her Global Mala Project that has spread worldwide or Seane Corn, Hala Khouri and Suzanne Sterling whose program, Off the Mat and into the World; raises money to create schools and better children's healthcare and educational care in Asia and Africa, as well as train Yoga teachers to be leaders. My project is a website called the Open Mind Resource Center (www.openmindresourcecenter.com) that with the help of other innovative leaders is a place where people can come to get the support and tools they need to help them through a crisis.

It is also what I see in my “Wise Mind” and “Art of the Leadership” Workshops — the focus is on teaching businessmen and women to be more mindful. Not only can they make more money and have successful companies, but over time it becomes about awakening their consciousness so they can use the business game in the way that Bill and Melinda Gates did. After he made his \$36 billion, I think he gave \$33 billion of it to his foundation. They start to see that the game is not just about the acquisition of money, but what they can contribute to creatively changing the world. Google recently hired Larry Brilliant MD who was one of the founders of Seva foundation to give away money to non-profits; they created a department and made him the czar of charity. That’s where seva comes in.

FMT: It’s not just about going out and doing something, it’s about how we interact with all the people in our lives; even people we don’t necessarily realize are in our lives like that person who cuts us off for the parking space.

RA: Right and then how you react to everyone. In the book, I talk about *mindstrength* and the capacity to master your thoughts, feelings and moods. Mindstrength builds capacity to master your behavior. In that moment, you have a choice between going into reactivity or what I did—to just smile at him.