

# Roger Walsh on Buddhist Geeks

BG 171: A Technology of Transcendence

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## Episode Description:

This week we speak with professor and teacher Roger Walsh. Roger shares his journey from being a hardcore neuroscientist and psychiatrist to becoming an avid meditator and mystic. Once Walsh discovered that at the core of all the religious traditions was “a technology of transcendence” he jumped head-long into vipassana meditation—bringing, as he put it, his personality into his practice. Following that he practiced Shikantaza in the Zen tradition, and then also spent many years practicing in the Vajrayana tradition, which he now teaches alongside Lama Surya Das.

Roger also explores with us a model of human needs and development, based on Carl Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. He points out that Maslow added a level of needs above self-actualization toward the end of his career, that was about the need to transcend the self. He builds on this by saying that with that need has been met, the culmination of spiritual practice is service, otherwise known as the bodhisattva aspiration.

## Transcript:

**Vince:** Hello Buddhist Geeks. This is Vince Horn, and I’m joined today over the telephone with Dr. Roger Walsh. Roger, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. I’m really excited about this conversation.

**Roger:** Well, thank you.

**Vince:** And I usually share a little bit of people’s backgrounds just so, as we jump right into the content, people have a sense sort of, of where you’re coming from. So I figured I’ll mention a few things, and then, hopefully, some other things will come out during the discussion.

Some of the things that seemed really relevant are that you’re a longtime spiritual practitioner of some 30 years, you’re also an academic researcher, and in the last 10 years you have been a teacher of meditation. I saw at one point you were teaching Dzogchen with Lama Surya Das, is that right?

**Roger:** That’s right; actually I just got out of teaching a retreat with him a couple of days ago.

**Vince:** Nice, and it’s funny I’ve run in to you on long retreats before at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center. So I know you have a very dedicated meditation practice as well.

**Roger:** Yes, we've practiced together; we just haven't talked to together. [laughs]

**Vince:** Yeah, yeah. It's funny I was sharing the same floor with you, and I kept wondering. I said, I think that's Roger Walsh, but I wasn't a hundred percent sure until about halfway into the retreat. And you're also a professor at the University of California at Irvine where you teach psychiatry, philosophy, anthropology; you're pretty busy over there it seems like.

**Roger:** Yes, I have a delightful job where I do get to range over a number of different topics. That's a lot of fun.

**Vince:** Yeah, that's great, and you also published some really interesting books. One of your earlier ones was called *Paths Beyond Ego*. And then, more recently, you've written one called "*Essential Spirituality*" which we'll get into some more, and also the most recent is called "*The World of Shamanism*". It sounds like you've had a very robust career in the past 30 years as a teacher, and as a professor, and as an academic. It seems you're holding so many different interesting roles.

**Roger:** Well, I've been very fortunate in being able to have tenure and being able to follow where my heart drew me, basically. Personally, of course, like you a lot of this is around the spiritual path and contemplative practices in Buddhist meditation. And professionally it's around the area of psychology, psychiatry, and philosophy. I've been very fortunate in being able to kind of marry those in my professional work, attempting to bring dharma and meditative practices into the academy. So I feel very fortunate.

**Vince:** And one thing I thought would be interesting to explore, because I understand you were an academic before you were a contemplative practitioner, and I thought it would be interesting to hear kind of how you got into contemplative practice, and maybe also, since this is *Buddhist Geeks*, how you got into Buddhist practice.

**Roger:** Ah, yes, well [laughs] that was a very surprising process for me. I came over to the U.S. in the '70s. I came to do my psychiatry training, and I came pretty much as a hardcore neuroscientist being very much in the scientific mold all my life. I had no knowledge or understanding of the inner world at all, but in doing psychiatry I found myself working with people who were having very strange experiences that I really didn't understand at all. And doing therapy with people even though I wasn't terribly convinced it was particularly effective, I figured I had a moral obligation to try psychotherapy for myself.

So I had the very good fortune of going into therapy with a man by the name of James Bugental who was a humanist existentialist; a very sensitive and mature man. So I went in for what I thought would just be a few interesting weeks and I came out two years later with my whole worldview just turned around. I was opened to the inner world, which I literally really had no appreciation of. I felt as though I'd spent my entire life living on the top six inches of a wave on top of an ocean that I didn't even really know existed. I really had, I mean so much in my head, I really didn't appreciate at all just the extraordinary depth and richness of the inner world and the potentials and also the gifts it can give us.

So psychotherapy really opened that up to me under the tutelage of this remarkable man, James Bugental. And I realized I'd been asleep, [laughs] that I'd literally been unconscious to a very deep part of myself, my psyche, my inner world. And as I looked around the world it seemed that, that was where most of our culture were. And I was very puzzled and in fact somewhat distressed for sometime because there just weren't many people who seemed to be appreciating what I had discovered, and most people seemed to be unaware of this.

But I kind of forged ahead and being in California had the opportunity of doing all sorts of [laughs] things. California is the melting pot of the world's spiritual traditions and workshops and investigations of one kind or another so I did a lot of those and gradually found myself moving towards meditative and spiritual practices even though at the time I was a very hardcore agnostic, and I couldn't understand why I was attracted to these contemplative practices. And even more so, I couldn't understand why they worked. At that stage I thought religion was the opiate of the masses. And then there was literally one moment, as I was walking towards dinner one evening, when there was this insight which really changed my mind, my life, and it was that at the contemplative core of the world's great religions, hidden behind the conventional institutions such as the church or the synagogue or the mosque, were contemplative practices which effectively constituted a technology of transcendence, a way of training the heart and mind so as to induce the states of consciousness and stages of development that the great religious founders and sages had discovered.

And these contemplative practices constitute this technology of transcendence, which could allow each of us to have some of the same insights, the same openings and develop and mature in similar ways. Also, along with that, each of the spiritual traditions or contemplative traditions, underlying the great religions, had a roadmap, a psychology, a philosophy which described the way the mind worked, the way the mind could be trained and the way the world and reality looked as you begin to develop and mature by doing these practices. And that was a mind-boggling recognition for me. It literally just turned my mind and life around. And I was pretty shocked, frankly. From that point on I dove into contemplative practices and I can say more about that, but if you want to bounce off that and respond?

**Vince:** Yeah, yeah, no. I mean, I know you've done a lot of practices in multiple different traditions and I know some of your earliest practice was with some of the insight meditation teachers. I thought, maybe, it would be interesting to hear kind of how you got into that and if that was one of the first Buddhist practices that you did?

**Roger:** It really was, yes. I had the very good fortune of hearing about vipassana meditation at a retreat I went to with Ram Dass. And on the day after my 30th birthday, I climbed, very bleary eyed and a little hung over, onto a plane and went off to Oregon to go to my first meditation retreat with Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, and I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I had a very hard time spending 10 days in silence and removed from society and stimulation. I had a very hyperactive mind. And it was very difficult. There were times I just thought, "Oh, my God, am I going crazy? What's going on here?"

But, it was also extraordinarily valuable. And I came out of there and actually said to a couple of people—I should add that I'd done this just after finishing my psychiatry training—and I actually said to a couple of people, "I think I learned as much in those 10 days about the mind as I learned in all my psychiatry training." You know, I

learned a lot about various aspects of the mind, and how to treat it in psychiatry but vipassana meditation just allowed me to see into the workings of the mind, into the depths of the mind that I hadn't glimpsed either in my formal psychiatry training or even in my in-depth psychotherapy.

So, really, it was a mind blower to see the power of these practices. And, of course, once I saw that, then I was drawn more deeply in. I signed up for another retreat a few months later and after a couple of years of this, really felt that this was such an extraordinary technology, such a remarkable practice, such an extraordinary way of being able to delve into the inner world—that we're in a universe—and to illuminate the mind and oneself and also the deepest questions of life. But, I felt I really had to devote myself to this more, and so the day after I got tenure, I put an application for two years leave of absence, and headed off to Asia, to Burma, to sit.

**Vince:** That's great. And then, did you get involved then in other Buddhist traditions? Because I know you're teaching Dzogchen now so you must have sort of transitioned from the Theravada tradition into some of these other traditions, too.

**Roger:** I did and I did it in a very curious way which should probably be instructive to talk about a little. I did it actually out of kind of necessity and out of my own—what should we call it—pathology. I first spent a life very much oriented towards achievement in doing things. And of course, I brought my personality into my practice, so I brought an enormous amount of striving and achievement desire into my practice and worked very hard, very hard indeed. And of course, there's certainly that ethos in the Theravada tradition, that one that strives mightily as hard as one possibly can for enlightenment, and that dovetailed with my particular personality or pathology, whatever you want to call it. And so I did work very hard, and of course, there were benefits to that, but there was also a downside. The downside was that after doing several long retreats over a period of a year, I'd burned out pretty badly. And I'd burned out to the stage that I was just very hard to work with the mind in any way and to make any kind of effort, to the point that I really just felt like what if I was going to sit, I just need to sit in a way that didn't involve manipulating the mind at all.

And so, Zen shikantaza drew me because, of course, the essence of shikantaza and Zen is not to manipulate the mind, not to try to achieve, not to try to attain, or even change in any way, but rather, to just sit. In fact, in some traditions, that's about the only instruction that you'd receive, just sit. So, I was drawn to that and that was valuable and also healing for me. I spent about seven years there, until I learned about Dzogchen and made this wonderful discovery that one could do a practice fairly similar to the shikantaza, but with much more emphasis on relaxation. Then I gradually shifted into the Dzogchen practice, had that initial interest, and it flowered in various ways from there.

**Vince:** Wow. You touched on all the major traditions.

**Roger:** Yeah, well, it took me awhile to get into Tibetan Buddhism. At first, I was really overwhelmed by the complexity and I went to a couple of retreats. One of which I actually left halfway through because there's just too much ritual and complication for me, I'm not a particularly ritually-oriented person. But eventually, I met Surya Das, and he—Lama Surya Das—has done a very nice job of introducing these Dzogchen practices, without a lot of the traditional and cultural trappings. So

he has done for the Dzogchen tradition and Vajrayana, in some ways, what people like Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg did for the Theravada, tradition, that is, make the core practices available without necessarily requiring a lot of cultural trimmings or cultural world views, etc. So that was very useful for me.

And that gradually led me more deeply into the Vajrayana. I spent several years just doing the Trekchö, which is the central or unique practice of the Dzogchen tradition, one of them anyway, which basically comprises a practice of resting in awareness. But as I was around this and the Vajrayana practices for a while, I was exposed to the Ngondro, which are the foundational practices involving a lot of visualization and energetic work, etc. I initially swore there's no way I was going to do this because I'd done enough spiritual boot camps. But, eventually, I tried them and found, as I did, of course, I began to appreciate just how remarkably profound and powerful they are. I eventually made the commitment to go through the complete Ngondro and I spent two years doing those practices—the prostrations, the bodhisattvic aspirations, the mandala offering, guru yoga, etc. And I have to say, I still regard those Ngondro practices as some of the most profound and valuable I've done. They're sometimes just called the preliminary practices, but I think that's a vast underestimation of their power and potency.

**Vince:** Interesting. I had no idea that you'd done the Ngondro practices. That's cool.

**Roger:** Yes. And I still value them, and as I said, there're really some of the most valuable and remarkable practices I've done anywhere.

**Vince:** One thing, because you'd mentioned your other main interest is really in the realm of psychiatry and psychology, and I was at a talk you were giving a few years ago in Boulder, and you were giving in this presentation a model based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And you mentioned something that I'd never heard before which was that, toward the end of his career, Maslow added a need level and it was something that was even beyond self-actualization, which is usually known as the highest level of his hierarchy. And I was wondering if you could share a little bit about that level that he added, and maybe say a little bit about how it relates also to the spiritual path?

**Roger:** Yeah, sure, Vince, because your implication is very correct, and it's very relevant to spiritual practice. Maslow was famous for many things; he was a very extraordinary and creative psychologist. But one of the things he's best known for is the so-called hierarchy of needs, as you mentioned, in which he suggests that the human needs operate in a hierarchy starting with basic survival needs and moving on to things like social belongingness and security needs, and beyond that, self-esteem. And then, originally, at the top of the pyramid, he puts self-actualization, saying that often one had, to some extent, to satisfy the prior needs, then there was automatic emergent motivation that arose for people to actualize, to develop their potentials, to become the fullest expression of who they could be.

But, as you've said, towards the end of his life, he added a further need, which is a really interesting one, and that is self-transcendence. And the implication of the self-transcendent motive is that, just developing one's personality, one's ego is not ultimately satisfying. But beyond that, there is a desire to transcend, not just to develop the ego, but to transcend the ego; not just to become a full expression of

one's personality and personhood, but to move to the transpersonal. That, of course, is very relevant to anyone who is a spiritual practitioner.

And of course, in some ways, we can even find intimations of that in the spiritual disciplines themselves. For example, you'll recognize the analogy to, for example, the yogic chakras, which is also a hierarchy of motives in one dimension, with self-transcendence as an expression of the seventh chakra. We can find analogies, for example, in the words of Jesus seeking first the kingdom of heaven and all else shall be given unto you. Good theology is also good psychology and that can certainly be seen as an analogy to what Maslow was pointing towards.

But, it's very interesting that, when you look around the world's spiritual traditions, the profound spiritual practices and traditions all point to the idea that, ultimately, we practice not just for ourselves alone but for everyone. Because we're not alone, we're not separate. And to practice for ourselves alone, in some ways, maintains the separation, builds up the bulwark between ourselves and others. Whereas, an orientation towards service and contribution can be done both as a spiritual practice but it's also a culmination of the practice. That is, we serve others as a way of doing our own spiritual practice, but also as an expression of our transpersonal nature.

What I suggest it is that the motivation towards service and, in the Buddhist tradition, the bodhisattvic aspiration, which is perhaps the most profound and encompassing motive and service motive that humankind has ever come up with, can be seen as a further culminating stage beyond even self-transcendence. And that seems to fit with what we know about spiritual practice and what we know about the way in which spiritual practitioners mature.

**Vince:** That's really beautiful, and it's interesting to see the bodhisattva path as being something, which you're saying, is really a further development of even transcending the personal realm. It's kind of like the integration, somehow, going back into the personal realm.

**Roger:** Yeah. Well said, very nicely said. The bodhisattvic aspiration, of course, is to awaken and develop oneself so as to be an optimal instrument for the awakening and help and healing of all. So, one of the interesting things about the hierarchy of needs is that higher order motives include lower order ones. So, the aspiration to serve and contribute in the bodhisattvic aspiration form of it, the aspiration to help and heal and awaken all beings necessitates that one develop and mature and heal oneself so as to be an optimal instrument of healing.