

Tashi Choling Sangha News February 2020

Sangha Spotlight: Leslie Levy



Leslie Levy and Sprocket

I would like to start this off with the chocolate chip cookie dough but it's just too soon for that. Please be patient. There will at least be a mention of chocolate chip cookie dough and also ice cream coming up soon. Because this is a story about Leslie Levy, who has been heard to say, "I am very serious about food."

Instead of chocolate chip cookie dough, let's start with childhood and family. Leslie grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts. Her father won a Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his book *Origins of the Fifth Amendment*. Leslie describes her father as "an atheist Jew who taught constitutional law at Brandeis University. He didn't understand people, just ideas." Leslie herself is a rather brainy woman whose spiritual life has included both an appreciation of the intellect and a recognition of its limitations. "Ideas only go so far," as she noted. Leslie's grandparents lived in New York City near the Russian Tea Room. They were convinced that there was no good Jewish food available anywhere in Lexington, so when they visited, they always brought big bags of groceries from the city.

Leslie was very close to her mother, a woman with a "huge inner life" who loved Krishnamurti's teachings. Years of severe pain from a misdiagnosed slow-growing brain tumor led Leslie's mother to investigate and utilize the relaxation response, which entered public awareness at the time. Then, she began to study and practice insight meditation, following the work of Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and others. She was rather private about her practice, but Leslie noticed what a positive place meditation and Buddhist study held in her mother's life.

Coincidences happen, along with delicious chocolate chip cookie dough, which is so tasty it never makes it to the oven. In the early 80s, Leslie and her then-husband were

living at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard, where her spouse was engaged in graduate studies. Tulku Thondup, recently arrived in the West, was their next door neighbor. "He was happy all the time. He loved hanging out and playing volleyball, and he loved my chocolate chip cookie dough. He was a very sweet person," Leslie recalled. If we were describing way stations on a spiritual journey, this could be one.

Leslie has lived in Ashland for the past 30 years. "Something magnetic was happening, telling us to get off 1-5 and stop in Ashland," she said. After arriving, Leslie changed careers. She stopped doing social work and spent twelve years working as a teaching assistant in the Ashland Middle School, work she really loved. Leslie has raised three children--a biological son and daughter, and a son adopted from India. All of them are grown, living in various parts of Oregon. When the kids were young, Leslie met Ani Yeshe (who was not yet a nun) because their children were in the same classes. The two mothers got to know each other through class activities and field trips.

In 2008, Leslie's mother died, and she was feeling sad at losing her. In addition, Leslie's life was impacted by chronic pain from fibromyalgia, and depression. When Leslie spoke with Ani Yeshe one day about how she was feeling, Ani Yeshe replied, "I know someone that I think you should meet." An ice cream social was scheduled at Dechen Ling to introduce people to Lama Bruce Newman and the classes he offered there. Leslie agreed to attend, noting,

"I'll do anything for ice cream." When she met Lama Bruce, Leslie felt an immediate connection. "He reminded me of family. I felt very comfortable with him." It was as if the pieces of a puzzle started to fall into place.



Still Life, Pierre Bonnard

Without hesitation, Leslie began attending Lama Bruce's Wednesday night classes. "The first book I studied there was *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*. I was immediately enthralled. Perfect book for my mind." Soon, Leslie also joined Marig Munsel, Lama Bruce's four-year program. "At the beginning, I felt it was way more than I could do." That didn't stop her. She is a determined woman who doesn't allow obstacles to hold her back. Her confidence in Lama Bruce as a teacher also drew her forward. For the next 12 years, she attended both Wednesday night classes and Marig Munsel. She has completed Marig Munsel twice and is now halfway through her third cycle. About Marig Munsel Leslie said, "I'm devoted to this course of study. As you grow in your practice, you hear things differently. You could do the

second year, which focuses on compassion, every year of your life and it would never grow old.” She continued, “It has changed me a lot. I’m less critical of myself and others. There’s less chaos in my head, and I work on finding joy. When you’re very depressed, it’s hard to find joy, but I am working on it. I have less clinging, to things and to money. My meditation practice has changed over the years, and keeps changing.”

Leslie continued, “Bruce has a brilliant mind. He has changed a lot over the years, too. He is much less academic. He is compassionate and loving; he really cares how his students are doing. He is so present for his students. I just did a 5-day retreat that he led at Dechen Ling. It was a lot for me, but I loved it. It was all about emotions: looking at them, slowing down to experience them, learning how to turn negative emotions into positive energy to use in your meditation practice.”

Leslie has been hosting Lama Bruce’s Wednesday night classes and the Marig Munsel program at her home for over five years. “Being in touch with people through Bruce’s classes makes me feel good. The coffee is always on at my house,” she grinned. “I’m an introvert, but I love people.” She provides a warm welcome when dharma students appear in her comfortable, book-filled abode.

As Ani Yeshe noted, “Leslie has an amazing amount of intelligence and engagement. She just wades in. She has a lot of acceptance both of herself and others. And her sense of humor-

--she laughs at things and at herself like a child, without worrying whether it’s okay to laugh.”

I have tried my best to convey at least some of Leslie Levy’s life and qualities, and there is still much to learn and experience about her. If you haven’t already met her, I hope you will have the opportunity to get to know her someday soon.

--Gaea Yudron

**Losar is on
Monday, February 24th**



Sangha News
Gaea Yudron, Editor

The next issue will appear in April.

Please contact
gaea.laughing@gmail.com with any
articles, cartoons, poetry, etc. by
March 15th.