

A GREAT FORCE OF *energy*

An interview with Atula Shah

Tricycle introduced its Community site in February 2009, and the response took everyone by surprise. No one expected the membership to grow so large so quickly. Less immediately obvious but no less significant in defying expectations was the demographic range of those joining up. All sorts of people were coming from all sorts of places: a college student from Ecuador, an engineer from Ghana, a school-teacher from Iran. It turns out Buddhism in the West is more diverse and far-flung than many assume. Indeed, there is a lot of “Buddhism in the West” that is not in the West at all.

Since the beginning, Atula Shah has been a stalwart member of the Community, one for whom spiritual support is something to be given and received freely and openly. Atula lives in Nairobi, Kenya, where she works in her family business, attends regular Vipassana retreats, and sits at her local temple—the only permanent Buddhist temple in Kenya. I wanted to find out more about this woman whose background is so different from North American Buddhists like me yet who has been able to reach out from her part of the world and connect so deeply with those in other places.

—Linda Heuman

Your emails always evoke the natural world. You’ve mentioned the frogs and the heat, rain, and fog. I imagine you living in a jungle. It is a jungle in a sense. We just moved into a new house on one acre. It is surrounded by trees and a lot of different kinds of shrubs and flowers and plants. We have a four-story terraced garden, with a gazebo. And there is a pond with beautiful waterfalls, so the frogs are in there. If they stop croaking, we know something is wrong.

We grow our own fruits and vegetables. We brought some of our banana plants and sugarcane plants from our old house, so we’ve already started planting those. I am in one of the fastest-growing suburbs of Nairobi. It’s a very urban area. It’s difficult now to get a good plot in Nairobi to be able to grow your own food, because Nairobi is growing at such a fast pace. So we’re lucky.



What is the Buddhist community in Nairobi like? There is a Buddhist temple here, built by a Sri Lankan family about ten years ago. At that time, there was a huge Sri Lankan community in Nairobi. There were a lot of garment factories that exported to America. Gradually that business went down, and so the population also started dwindling. Now the community has become smaller. But the temple was always meant for any Buddhist follower of any tradition. We have got Thai people coming in; we’ve got Japanese; we’ve got some Chinese. Non-Buddhists, too. And the temple is very beautiful.

It’s not a big sangha, because we don’t have regularly scheduled meetings. People come in and meet with the resident monk or do praying and chanting on their own, in their own languages. Twice a year, a teacher named Bhante Wimala comes from the States and gives dharma lectures, and then we chant and meditate together. At that time the sangha can be quite big. But usually it’s five, ten, fifteen people.

How did you become Buddhist? My dad was born in Gujarat, India, and my mother, though she was born in Nairobi, is also



of Indian origin. I come from a Jain family, though we are not very religious.

I read about Buddhism in a book, and there was something different about it. It attracted me. It is very simple, very straightforward. At first my focus was on Tibetan Buddhism; I got some books from Shambhala Publications. And there was a small group that used to practice Tibetan Buddhism here—one Indian lady and a few white people. They used to meet regularly, but unfortunately she left the country. And then Bhante Wimala came into Kenya and gave a series of dharma talks, and my dad and I went. Bhante started coming to Nairobi regularly, and I would go and see him and talk to him. And it just started working out. It opened up the path.

Tell us about your participation in the Tricycle Community.

I get the Tricycle Daily Dharma, and one day I saw the announcement for the Big Sit 90-day retreat. I wanted to see what it was all about. I thought, *Let me make the commitment to sit as many days as I can.* This was in February 2009. It gave me a sense of belonging to something. Here I was doing it alone or maybe going to a weekly sit at my temple. But online, people are

there every day. It keeps you alert and alive every day to know people are sitting, that it's not you alone. When you are sitting, somebody else is also sitting somewhere. There's a great force of energies. I was actually the only member from this part of Africa.

You were holding down the whole of East Africa! I think so. But there were people from other countries and continents as well: from Australia, from the UK, from India. I think the best thing Tricycle did was to connect a lot of people from different places. I met some good friends.

You're active in several of the Tricycle Community groups. What's going on in the Haiku Corner or the art group (Body of Light)? I think Tricycle started out to do something with spiritual growth, but they also ended up opening people's awareness to their own talent. A lot of people bring out skills that are hidden in the cupboard. If you look at the haikus and the poetry, it's amazing. The Body of Light has some fantastic artists. It's all people who have good talent but could not bring it out. But here at least a few thousand people can see them, and that's quite good enough. You don't need to be a professional writer. Just do something, and it works out. If it's there, it's there; if it's not there, it's not there—fine. The Haiku group has a beautiful connectedness. There's a lady that I've not seen on the Community for some time and I think she must be sick, but she knows that everybody is remembering her.

You seem to have a lot of friends. Maybe they like my round face. The smile and the bald head might be the reason. They might be wondering why I shave my head. Actually, even though I like people, I would hardly talk to people before.

What changed? I did a Goenka Vipassana retreat. I had ten days for working on me, me, me. It showed me myself—what I had been, what I was, where I lost myself. I got back from the retreat, and I just started opening up. I've got a beautiful life, and I'm grateful for that. I think we all forget to be grateful. And there's no use going on complaining about this and that.

Do you have suggestions for how online communities could better serve remote members? We should be just content with what we have! I think that's something we learned as we're moving into a new home. We haven't yet bought any new furniture. We're just going with what we had before. And we are moving from a very small place to a very big house. I was just reading somewhere that you should leave as much open space as you can. Open space and fewer things will bring in less worries, and you will have more energies and happier energies everywhere. We decided to do that. Whatever furniture we have in the house will be just what we really require. You want to make a nice home, where people can feel cozy. We got rid of a lot of things that we didn't need. And it actually helps make life simpler and more enjoyable. We figured out whatever we had was quite okay, we could make do with it. Because having more doesn't really make your life enjoyable or fashionable. It makes it more complicated. ▼

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