



RAY KREISEL

## No Turning Back

Seventeen years ago **Christine Skarda's** investigations into the nature of perception drew her out of the research laboratory and onto the meditation cushion. She left behind a career as a philosopher and scientific theorist for a life of Buddhist study and retreat. **Linda Heuman** brings us her story.



*Christine Skarda at her home in Berkeley before she was ordained.*

**W**hat do you do when you are trying to meditate and the neighbors upstairs are having a dance party? Or the Grateful Dead is playing a concert a stone's throw from your cushion? "You get strategic and flexible," says Ani Christine Skarda, who completed her first retreat in a shared house in California's Berkeley Hills in 1995. When Skarda first met her teacher, the Dalai Lama, in India in 1992, he instructed her to undertake a long retreat, but he didn't say where. Instead of looking around for the perfect retreat setup, Skarda went back to her own house. She quit her job, put a Do Not Disturb sign on her front door and a message about her extended absence on her answering machine, then arranged for a friend to deliver groceries, and closed herself in. That lasted three years.

Skarda's Berkeley retreat laid the foundation for a meditation career that is now entering its seventeenth year. When she shut the door of her Berkeley apartment, she left behind a career as a philosopher of mind and prestigious international positions at the Husserl Archive in Belgium and France's École Polytechnique. Her colleagues must have thought she was dropping out.

But that's not how she saw it. Skarda had always been an intellectual boundary crosser; when the limitations of a field or a methodology came between her and truth, she leapt. In the early 1980s, Skarda was recruited for a landmark project with MIT and the University of California Berkeley that brought together experts from previously isolated fields to study intelligence. The Sloan project initiated collaboration between philosophers, linguists, computer scientists, psychologists, engineers, physicists, and anthropologists and was an important milestone in the birth of what is now known as the cognitive science movement. A self-termed "bio-philosopher," Skarda pioneered the then-unpopular position that to understand minds, philosophers needed to consider bodies—in particular, brains. Eventually her quest to understand the nature of mind propelled her into the neuroscience lab, where she spent five years studying olfactory perception in rabbits. By the

time she hung the Do Not Disturb sign on her apartment door and went into retreat, Skarda had published over a half-dozen controversial papers, together with a University of California Berkeley neurophysiologist, that challenged key philosophical assumptions underlying modern brain research.

I MET SKARDA, who eventually became my teacher, in 1995 in Bodhgaya, India, a mile from the site of the Buddha's enlightenment. We were both attending a dharma teaching by an Indian disciple of the Dalai Lama, Shri Dharmakirti, a tantric meditator renowned not only for his analytic mind and elucidation of emptiness, but also for his fearsome persona. On the first day of the teaching, I was cowering in the second row when he interrupted his discourse to defer to a tall American nun sitting in the front about a matter of philosophical terminology. Dharmakirti is thoroughly Indian; he has the blood of Sikh warriors in his veins. I had never seen him defer to anyone, especially not to a Westerner and certainly not to a woman. Who was this woman who answered him without blinking? I cornered her that evening at dinner.

Skarda told me that, like Dharmakirti, she was a full-time meditator. She was introduced to Dharmakirti in India, prior to beginning her Berkeley retreat. He gave her advice on how to study and practice emptiness and how to conduct her retreat. Now two and a half years later, her Berkeley retreat nearly finished, she had returned to Dharmakirti to verify her understanding.

Skarda likely imagined that Dharmakirti would quiz her in debate, but instead he drove her around in a jeep. She clung to the back seat while they hurtled through the streets of Gaya—mangy dogs flying out on their path, beggars closing in whenever they slowed, trash and dead animals lining the roadside. "THIS IS ALL PERFECT!" he yelled at her over the

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LINDA HEUMAN is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Providence, Rhode Island. She has been a student of Christine Skarda's since 1995 and is the webmaster for Skarda's online seminar.

Skarda (left) teaching at the Maha Bodhi Stupa in Bodhgaya. (Writer Linda Heuman, center)



roar of the engine and the pounding of the wind. “WHY?” Another day he hauled her to the train station, crowded with India’s most destitute homeless. He paced up and down the platform, pointing to tracks stinking with human excrement and seething with rats. “Would you throw yourself in front of a train for your teacher?”

“I would,” she told me later that day.

Ever since Skarda can remember, she knew she was destined to be a philosopher. It was an odd choice of vocations for a girl growing up in Appleton, Wisconsin. She didn’t come from a community of the college bound. “It wasn’t a goal that anybody else had,” says Skarda. “There wasn’t any role model for it or a person around me who would inspire me in that way.”

Skarda persevered in her study of philosophy, completing first a BA, then two masters’ degrees and a PhD in the field. Her interest focused on the mind, but she always kept a wary eye on the body. “Wherever I found minds, I found bodies,” noted Skarda. “And wherever I found bodies, I found minds.” There had to be a connection. Maybe the mind *was* the brain, thought Skarda. Maybe materialism is right. There was only one way to find out. She decided to study physiology.

During her Sloan postdoctoral fellowship at the University of California Berkeley, she got her chance. Skarda heard about a brain researcher at the university who was studying perception in rabbits. She crossed the campus and knocked on his door.

“There was Walter Freeman,” Skarda says. “He had his feet on his desk with two different colored socks on and an iguana on the desk hissing at me. He was smoking a cigar. And there was a skeleton hanging behind him with a hat on.” Skarda introduced herself and said, “I want to know how the brain works.” Freeman laughed. “So do I! Sit down,” he said.

Today it seems like a natural alliance—a philosopher of mind teaming up with a brain scientist—but in the early eighties it was an unheard of collaboration. According to Skarda, there were no brain scientists working in cognitive science yet. “It was radical,” she says. “The brain was considered *irrelevant* to cognition.” The interdisciplinary nature of the Sloan fellowship gave her flexibility to explore traditionally separate fields, and she brought her neuroscience findings back

to her weekly cognitive science meetings. When Skarda’s Sloan funding ended, Freeman created a postdoctoral fellowship for her in his lab and managed to convince Berkeley’s dean of the science department to allow him to fund a philosopher on his grant. “It was a feat unheard of,” Skarda laughs.

Freeman’s lab was engaged in what was and continues to be a central project of neuroscience—understanding how the brain and the perceptual system create our experience. An entire world appears to us: trees and flowers, the taste of chocolate, the sound of children laughing. Trees, flowers, and the rest seem to be “out there,” independent of us. How then do they get into our experience?

Skarda was examining the perceptual model that was dominant at the time in neuroscience. According to this model, scientists generally assume that the brain delivers our conscious experiences via representations. That is, the perceptual system is in the assembly business. It takes in discrete sensory stimuli (like colors or edges) and bundles that information into neural wholes that correspond to external objects. The trees and flowers we experience subjectively are neurological stand-ins for—representations of—the objective ones. This representational model still dominates in neuroscience today, although several decades of scientific research has failed to find these neural representations in the brain—either as single nerve firings, or as patterns of activities of groups, networks, or global masses of nerve cells. In fact, this “binding problem” is one of the fundamental problems of contemporary neuroscience.

In February, 1991, Skarda was working at home when she looked up from her computer and something remarkable happened. She rested her eyes on a flowering camellia outside the window and in an instant, she recalls, “everything turned inside out, and I saw that I had everything backwards.” The problem she had been working for years to understand—how brains got into relationship with fundamentally independent external objects—was not a true picture of what actually took place; it was not the problem at all. Brains *weren’t* internalizing objects. “I saw this embeddedness,” Skarda says. “There were no breaks.”

Suddenly Skarda understood perception in a whole new way. She realized her perceptual system was fooling her. “It shatters a state of relatedness into an illusion of independence,”

After three years in retreat, she couldn't go back to science, to philosophy, or to living an ordinary life. She returned to India to once again consult with the Dalai Lama. "He was so pleased. He just kept saying, 'She's done it! She really did what I told her!'"

she explains. She and her fellow neuroscientists had been asking the wrong question all along. The real question wasn't, "How does the subject get into relationship with independent objects that it then represents internally in its perceptual system?" Everything was *already* in relationship; there *were* no separate things. The real question was, "How do we get the experience of separate subjects and objects at all when in reality there are no breaks? No breaks between objects and also no breaks between the subject and the object."

Walter Freeman, now a professor emeritus of neurobiology at the University of California Berkeley, says, "I've learned from Christine that [the model of representation] is not only unnecessary—it is confusing, obfuscatory, and a cloak for ignorance. There are no representations in brains." He adds, "This became a very important shift in paradigm. Christine is a real visionary."

Skarda explained her insight in a paper published many years later in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.<sup>1</sup> Her former colleague Eleanor Rosch, a professor of psychology and cognitive science at the University of California Berkeley, has included Skarda's paper in the course reader for her cognitive psychology class. Rosch calls Skarda's approach to perception "very radical." Traditionally, sensory physiology and psychology have approached perception as a bottom-up process, she explains. The body builds up and assembles the disparate information provided by the senses into conscious experiences. "Skarda's view is that the sense organs take in wholes and our neurons *break them down*. That is so different from the way it is viewed in any field," she said. "There are other people who are trying to bring meditative insights in some form into psychological theory and research, other people who are challenging that the external and the internal worlds are as separate as they may seem and are trying to reframe that insight in terms of our science. But this specific view (that the sense organs take in wholes) and the way Skarda interweaves physiology and philosophy, that is not happening [elsewhere]."

Skarda was beginning to push up against the limitations of scientific methodology. Science by definition only concerns itself with hypotheses that can be tested against objectively measurable facts. The seamless state of affairs that Skarda had

experienced, the state from which both subjective and objective realities emerge, was neither objectively findable nor measurable. Freeman explains, "The assumption that there is something unified out there is a hypothesis that [scientists] can't ultimately verify." Skarda was up against a wall with a whole new set of questions. "I didn't have any tools left," she says.

Soon after her insight, Skarda was visiting the house of a new friend. Browsing his bookshelf, she came across books on Buddhism. On a whim, she asked if she could borrow one. Her eye had been drawn to one text in particular, a translation of Chandrakirti's commentary on Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way*. She brought it home and read it from beginning to end in a single sitting. "I knew that that view had something to do with what had just happened to me," she says, and she began to read more about Buddhism.

Later that year Sakya Trizin Rinpoche, the head of the Sakya tradition, came to town, and a Buddhist friend who knew of Skarda's developing interest in dharma invited her to come to a Manjushri initiation. Skarda went along, and after the initiation her friend told her to offer a *kata*, the traditional ceremonial scarf. Skarda dutifully filed in line with the crowd of Buddhists, who one by one made their offering, received a nod of Rinpoche's head in blessing, and moved on. When it was Skarda's turn, Sakya Trizin interrupted the procession and reached out and grabbed her arm. "I know you!" he declared. "No. I'm sure you don't know me, Rinpoche," replied Skarda indignantly. "We've never met." She broke away and rushed out the door. "Slimy lama," she thought.

The following night, Sakya Trizin offered another initiation. Skarda's friend encouraged her to come along, but Skarda had had enough. "I don't know what's going on anyway," she declined. That night, she got in her car to go to a class. She drove and instead of arriving at the class, she somehow ended up at the site of the initiation. "What am I doing here?" she asked herself. "I might as well go inside."

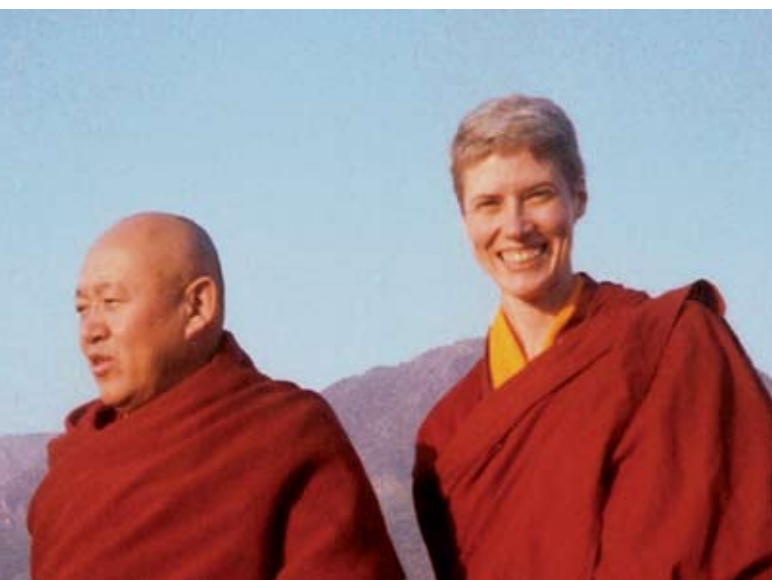
Once again, she took an initiation. Once again, she filed into line to offer a *kata* to the lama. And once again, Sakya Trizin looked up when she came by. "It's you again! I'm sure

1 *The Perceptual Form of Life* by Christine A. Skarda, in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 11-12 (1999), 79-93.

I know you. What do you do?” As before, Skarda explained: “You do not know me. We’ve never met. You wouldn’t know what I do.” She turned to flee. But this time he sent a messenger to catch her before she got to the door. “Sakya Trizin Rinpoche wants to see you,” the messenger said. “Can you come by tomorrow?”

“What could I do?” says Skarda, shrugging. She met with Sakya Trizin, and during the meeting she explained her intellectual work and the insight it had led her to. At the end of the meeting, he said, “Now I know why I know you.” And then he told her to go to India to meet the Dalai Lama, the one person who could advise her.

So following Sakya Trizin’s advice, in early 1992 Skarda flew to India. After trying for three months to get an appointment with the Dalai Lama, she was finally able to meet him



Skarda with Chetsang Rinpoche in Dehra Dun, India, 1996

privately. She relayed the story of the events that had led her to Dharamsala. He listened carefully and then gave her a formidable challenge: Go into retreat and study the entire Buddhist path—and in particular, study and practice the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. “Focus on wisdom—you have really strong karma for this,” he told her. During their entire meeting, the Dalai Lama stood gazing out the window. “He wouldn’t look at me,” Skarda recalls. “He kept turning his back.” Skarda left in tears. “Here was Mister Lovey-Huggy and I got Mister Cold-Shoulder. I really didn’t understand that at all.”

On the plane ride home to Berkeley from Dharamsala, Skarda set her resolve. “This is it,” she told herself. “I have no idea how, but I am going to do it.” That May she hung the Do Not Disturb sign on her door.

Skarda recalls her first years in retreat as the most intense work she has ever done. “My mind hurt at night,” she says. “I was sore from thinking and unthinking and rethinking through things. I was taking apart *everything*.”

Two years into her Berkeley retreat, Skarda wanted to ordain. Her friend who had been delivering groceries mentioned that her own teacher, Chetsang Rinpoche, head of the Drikung Kagyu order, was visiting and she suggested that Skarda contact him. In September, 1994, Skarda took novice vows from Chetsang Rinpoche.

After three years in retreat, there was no turning back for Skarda. She couldn’t go back to science. She couldn’t go back to philosophy. And she couldn’t go back to living an ordinary life. By that point she knew, “There wasn’t any answer behind me. The answer was in front.” She returned to India in the summer of 1995 to once again consult with the Dalai Lama.

This time, His Holiness looked her in the eye, took her face in his hands, and patted her cheeks. “He was so pleased,” says Skarda. “He just kept saying, ‘She’s done it! She really did what I told her!’” Skarda told him that Chetsang Rinpoche had invited her to practice at a new retreat compound up the road from his monastery, Drikung Kagyud Institute, in Dehra Dun, India. “That’s good,” the Dalai Lama said, “because you need to sit and that is a tradition that sits. They *do* it, they don’t just think about it.” He encouraged her to go there.

Skarda returned to Berkeley and packed up her apartment. She found homes for her four much-loved pet birds who had kept her company during retreat. Then once again she boarded a plane to India.

Her new hut in Dehra Dun was tiny and basic: one long, narrow room—just big enough for a bed and a board she used for prostration practice—attached to a small low-ceilinged hallway and bath. She cooked in the hall crouching over a single-burner stove. As monsoon neared, the daytime temperatures climbed into the hundred and twenties. Skarda’s unshaded cabin baked.

The compound consisted of several retreat huts, adjoined in pairs. Up to ten retreatants came and went. Some were doing a three-year retreat, so their only contact with the outside world was a hole in the wall where food was delivered. Skarda was the only Westerner in residence and the first woman. “That was awkward,” says Skarda. “There was a lot of resentment.” For example, whenever Chetsang Rinpoche left town, her food deliveries slowed down, became intermittent, then stopped. When food did come, the vegetables were rotten. One summer, no food came for three months. With no other choice but to break the boundaries of her retreat, she took a bus to town and did her own shopping.

Skarda did what needed to be done, and she still does. She’s not one to care about what others might think. The nun’s shirt she wears today is a cast-off from a monk who lives in Dharamsala. He couldn’t wear it in public, because it wasn’t the proper shade of yellow. The other Western sangha members were giving him a hard time. “Give it to me, I’ll wear it,” she said. “I don’t see anybody.”

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# The Most Important Work You Can Do

Christine Skarda's advice for a successful retreat



**FIRST, let go of the idea of a perfect retreat place.** There is no such place! After all, this is samsara, not nirvana.

When we think about doing a retreat, we tend to recall famous practitioners and want our retreat to be like theirs: done in perfect isolation, with no distractions, no interruptions, and filled with spiritual accomplishments. Sounds good, but this ideal comes from a selective reading of their actual retreat circumstances.

We remember the yogi Milarepa spending years alone in his cave but forget that he was often visited by robbers, hunters, demons, and—last but not least—his well-meaning sister, who wanted to reform him into a respectable lama! And Lama Tsongkhapa was pursued by the Chinese emperor, who wanted a court lama.

In our own retreat, we may not deal with emperors or demons, but our sister or brother may check on us, despite our protestations. Thus our first task is to make peace with reality. The real retreat is not created by circumstances but by the mind.

**How do we create a retreat mind?** Dedicate yourself completely. No wobbly intentions! *Before* actually starting, generate as strongly as possible the conviction that this is the best way to spend your time in this life. You will renew and strengthen this conviction during retreat. However, you must have it in place when you begin, or you will soon be doing something else. To generate conviction, study the life stories of great meditators and take inspiration from your own teachers, as they share their experiences.

Doing retreat is not a spur-of-the-moment decision, say after attending a teaching on a great practitioner and deciding we must do the same. After a few days in retreat, this “teaching high” abates and we lose our way. The problem is not that we are inadequate, only that we did not prepare by doing our homework.

**A retreat mind has a sense of renunciation.** It’s important to understand the benefits of retreat and to view the ordinary way of living in the world as basically meaningless. This insight requires study and may take years to develop. The starting point is Buddha’s most basic teaching: the four noble truths. If we do not understand the nature of suffering and its pervasiveness, there will come a time when the well-meaning sibling will

visit and convince us that we are wasting our time.

Milarepa was not swayed by his sister because he was a genuine renunciate. He knew that what his sister was holding out to him as a worthy goal was actually unsatisfactory. His songs are the songs of a person who deeply understood the four noble truths. No one could shake his renunciation because he knew there was nothing else worthy of his effort. We, too, must study and contemplate the Buddha's teachings before rushing off to retreat. Milarepa did not study them *after* Marpa walled him in. Milarepa developed renunciation and *then* did retreat. There is a profound lesson for us here.

**Generate humility.** Although we look to the great practitioners for motivation and inspiration, when we model our lives on theirs, there is a danger that we might begin to view ourselves as their equal. Imagining ourselves to be modern-day Milarepas could be fatal for us and our retreat. Remember at all times, we are ordinary—albeit ordinary people trying to do something extraordinary. It is the activity that is extraordinary, not us. And don't let anyone convince you otherwise.

Without this accurate vision of ourselves, we might skip practices we consider "too basic." As a result, we would lack the required foundation for later practice and reach a dead end. Then it is easy to get discouraged, believing meditation is not the solution to suffering that we thought it was. We fault the practice, when in fact the real problem is how we are practicing. It's a bit like trying to graduate from college before learning how to read, then blaming the college for our failure.

A lack of humility can also lead to severe mental and physical illness. Meditative retreat is perilous. A set of practices that can transform ordinary mind and body into the mind and body of a Buddha is a powerful thing. Practitioners who have enormous egos but little preparation and experience often end up

mentally destabilized and/or physically ill. I have seen practitioners develop problems ranging from severe wind diseases to actual psychoses. You might have severe bodily pains, you might not sleep well or at all, or you might lack focus or feel distraught, angry, or miserable. It can become difficult for you to be around other people. Once ill in this way, it takes a long time to recover. Not only does retreat then become impossible, but even ordinary living becomes a burden. No wonder we are urged to remain close to our teachers, who never seem to tire of reminding us how ordinary we are!

**Get advice and instruction from a qualified teacher.** We need the advice of teachers who have actually done long retreat, not those who have simply read about the process from texts. We can read the texts ourselves, but we can't read between the lines: what it is like to do the practice; how we should feel or not feel; how to know when we are pushing too hard or not enough; when to move on to the next step. This information is not in the text. It has always been passed directly from teacher to student. The texts are generalized instructions; our teacher personalizes the instructions for us. We really do need a teacher.

**Start modestly.** Begin with short retreats. A weekend is a "long retreat" if you have not done one. You have to get used to being alone—forty-eight hours can be a long time. For beginners, it might be helpful to start with a couple of other people to help motivate and pace one another. Take frequent breaks and get enough sleep.

**OK, I'm in retreat. Now what?** If it's noisy outside, do you wear earplugs or grit your teeth and press on? If you become too tense, too tired, or distracted, don't force yourself to sit and do focused meditation. It won't work. Get up and read or take a walk or do your laundry. Or maybe try another meditation instead: repeating mantras or generating compas-

sion. The important thing is not to try to do the activity that you found impossible. It's a matter of common sense: if it's not working, don't do it.

### **Compassion, compassion, compassion!**

The stronger your sense of compassion, the better your retreat will be. For this reason, I find having a pet around very helpful. A pet forces us to think of its needs, and this is very helpful when we are only thinking of ourselves and our retreat.

If you want to remain in retreat for a long time, you need to develop an enormous sense of compassion. Staying in retreat for years is impossible if you are doing it only for yourself. After some time, you'll leave, convinced you are needed "out there" and that remaining in retreat is selfish. This feeling that you are being selfish happens if you don't incorporate all other beings into your retreat from the start.

If you are doing retreat only for yourself, you'll run out of steam after a few years. It's hard work, day in and day out, with no vacations. It becomes too demanding and too lonely. But if you are doing this work for all others who presently cannot do it for themselves, others who need you so they can stop suffering, you gather courage to go on. Compassion is the key that keeps the retreat door locked until the goal is achieved.

### **Always focus on the basics, no matter how advanced your practice.**

Dedicate and accumulate merit. Review fundamentals so they become ingrained and continue to until your automatic reactions become dharmic ones. Take refuge inside your retreat hut to strip away habits that trap you in samsara and replace them with responses befitting a Buddha. The walls protect you in your nakedness while you develop that buddha body, that buddha mind. You are not escaping the world; you are getting ready to fully embrace it. This is the most important thing you have ever done, the most important work you can possibly do. Don't ever give up.

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A handful of students found their way to Skarda, and after six years at Chetsang Rinpoche's center, she moved to Darjeeling with one of her students. They rented neighboring huts on an old British estate where they shared a kitchen and worked out a system to avoid seeing each other for months at a time. Her ten-by-twelve-foot cabin had a magnificent view of Mount Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world, but was so drafty that the wind through the walls blew

us. "It's always something. If it isn't the water pipes breaking, it's the electricity going out. If it isn't the electricity, it's getting sick. Or I get snowed in and can't get to town. Or I'm meditating and think I've finally got this wonderful quiet place when a helicopter buzzes by and nearly hits the roof of my house."

Skarda's ex-colleagues invite her to speak; her students request her to teach. She lectured twice last spring: at a conference on the nature of objects at the Getty Research Institute, and at a conference on religion and cognitive



*Skarda in front of her retreat hut in Darjeeling, India, 2004*

out candles on her altar. In the winter, they didn't need a refrigerator; the food froze on the table. According to Skarda, her student-neighbor used to joke that their huts were so basic "the spiders, slugs, and scorpions who crawled through didn't even know they were inside."

After seven years in Darjeeling, Skarda realized India was taking a toll on her health, and she returned to the United States. Today she lives in Northern California in a primitive cabin on a remote hilltop. She grows her own vegetables and rattles her Honda Civic down a dirt road into town when she needs groceries. With just a cat named Ms. Kitty, a kitchen full of mice, and the occasional snake or scorpion for company, she streamlines and simplifies her life to free up time and energy for thinking and practice. Has she found the perfect retreat setup? "There's no such thing," she reminds

science co-sponsored by the University of California Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union (during which she also participated in a panel discussion with Rosch and Freeman). She has also taught public dharma courses in both India and the United States.

Skarda is reluctant to disrupt her practice routine for even these activities. Nonetheless, last year she acquiesced to persistent requests to experiment with online teaching. Last March she launched a yearlong web seminar. Without leaving her cabin, each month she delivers a dharma talk via her cell phone. A course moderator records the calls digitally and then posts the talks to an online forum, where students download, transcribe, and discuss them. (Skarda herself doesn't have Internet access.) Over three dozen practitioners participate, spanning continents from Australia to Europe to America.



Still, Skarda insists, “My teaching is how I exist more than what I say, that I live in a certain way and make certain choices—to not be that comfortable, to take on the rigors of daily practice in a full-time way. Doing my sessions, studying the texts, reflecting on different topics—there is almost no time in my day that is not absorbed with that.” Skarda has no intention of combining a life devoted to the Buddhist path with living an ordinary life—a project she likens (quoting Patrul Rinpoche) to riding two horses in opposite directions. Rather, she has eschewed ordinary life completely. “There are a lot of people who have studied and practiced Buddhism who go out and talk about it. But there aren’t that many who just do it. Talking about meditation isn’t meditating. Talking about emptiness isn’t meditating on it. Talking about compassion isn’t a transformation of your mind into a compassionate entity. Talking about the path isn’t pursuing it, isn’t doing it.” Her ultimate teaching, she says, “Is that you can do it.”

Skarda never considered herself a “career philosopher.” She says she didn’t much care about success or renown. She also didn’t argue for the sake of argument. For her, philosophy is and always has been a way of life—living a life that is true, in the old, Socratic sense of the profession. For her, she says, “Ultimately, everything in life hung on truth—getting the truth about how this all is. And that still drives my life, the notion that there *is* something that matters that you get right. And it’s the thing that unlocks everything, undoes all the traps, and makes you free. And that is what I found in Buddhism.”

Both the Dalai Lama and Chetsang Rinpoche have encouraged her to stay in retreat. Skarda says Chetsang Rinpoche advised her to continue retreat until she died. He told her, “That’s the greatest gift you can give to me, and that’s the greatest gift you can give to yourself, and that is the greatest gift that you’ll give to anyone else.”

“That really *is* the greatest gift,” declares Skarda. “That you take the teachings and make them work.” **BD**