

Metta Hour Podcast Transcript
Episode 280
IMS 50th Anniversary with Dipa Ma

Lily Cushman:

Hello and welcome to the Meta Hour podcast with Sharon Salzberg. I'm Lily Cushman. I produce this podcast and we're back today with episode 280, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Insight Meditation Society. So I'm going to let Sharon tell you all about this episode and we do have a transcript of today's episode available in the show notes so you can take a look there if you are a reader as well as a listener. So here we go.

Sharon Salzberg:

Hello, this is Sharon and I'm recording this in February of 2026 on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Insight Meditation Society. We opened the doors those many years ago on Valentine's Day in 1976, and here we are all these many years later. I wanted to do something special to celebrate this milestone with all of you. I know many of you have been to IMS to sit, or maybe more recently took part in some online offerings. Many of you have a connection to the community that is IMS. Many of you have heard me tell the story over the years of how IMS came to exist in the late seventies when we were just young adults, if that having returned from Asia with a tremendous enthusiasm and love for the Dharma and I'm struck now, as I look back on those days, how much of a positive force was generated through our efforts and enthusiasm, especially when we didn't really know what we were doing. I remember those early board of directors meetings when somebody would say something like, you didn't budget for depreciation, and one of us would say, what's depreciation? Or, it was an interesting time and a big learning curve.

Looking back into some of the archives of the early years of IMS, I wanted to share with you a little time capsule to give you a sense of the feeling back in those days and some of the moments that were deeply meaningful and formative for me. When we first started IMS, a big part of our model was to invite different teachers from different Theravadan lineages to come and teach. Many of those individuals were the very teachers we had spent time with in Asia, and then we meaning myself, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and other students would also lead retreats and give Dharma Talks. Across the years, we've hosted a really incredible array of teachers like Mahasi Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Pandita, Pa Auk Sayadaw and Sayadaw U Tejaniya from Burma, Ajahn Chah from Thailand, Dipa Ma and Anagarika Munindra from India, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Remarkably, there are a number of recordings that were made through the years, and so today we're sharing one of those here with you. This is from a wonderful audio archive that still exists today. It's called Dharma Seed and it houses most of the recordings from IMS through the years as a free resource. It pre-dates the world of podcasts by a long shot. It was originally created on cassette tapes that were eventually digitized into the form you can find today at www.dharmaseed.org.

I went back to those archives to look for an early recording to share with you all. It came across this recording of my teacher Dipa Ma, from a three month retreat in the fall of 1984. So this would've been one of the evening Dharma Talks that took place on that retreat. This particular recording is Dipa Ma telling her own life story of how she came to meditation, what her early practice looked like, as well as her teaching history. I chose this recording because I myself have been so affected by learning Dipa Ma's story. She was someone who suffered so much was her life, but the experience of her being with her feeling her was so full of love the way she had somehow transmuted her pain was just remarkable to me, transmuted it to compassion and it gave me such a sense of possibility in my own life.

Metta Hour Podcast Transcript
Episode 280
IMS 50th Anniversary with Dipa Ma

I do want to mention here a practical note about this recording. Many of the teachers from Asia did not speak English. They would often have to be a translator. So there's a certain kind of rhythm in listening to a teacher when you first hear them in a language you don't understand because you can understand certain aspects of their speaking, the emphasis, the energy, the emotions, et cetera. So there is a kind of transmission happening even though you don't understand the words. Then you hear the translation afterwards so you can get a feeling for how we receive teachings in Asia like this. It's like a meditative listening state. This recording begins with Dipa Ma singing some prayers, then telling her story. We're also providing a transcript of the talk in the show notes if that's useful to you. Towards the end of the talk, there are some questions from the audience and you'll recognize a very young Joseph Goldstein helping ask those questions.

So happy birthday IMS and I'm sending so much love and gratitude out to the many, many people over these 50 years that have made this community possible. Many volunteers, cooks, office workers, groundskeepers, housekeepers, board of directors, members, fundraisers, organizers, all staff people, the teachers, and especially the people who've come there to practice. I share with each of you the joy of celebrating 50 years of being together, living in the dharma together, and I thank you all for everything that you do.

Translator:

What she says, this is the blessings to you all that all beings be happy, all yogi progress in your meditation and slowly you get rid of sufferings. As mother blesses her side, she's also giving blessings to you all. Last time she told that, I will tell you how I came to this meditation line. Now she will tell how she came here, come to do meditation. Before that what she was doing and so that you'll get encouragement in this meditation. She says, those who are happy, they also do meditation and those who are suffering, they also do meditation. Lord Buddha was not so unhappy because he was a son of a king he could enjoy, but he also came to meditation. He also meditated so that the sufferings of himself as well as the world can be removed. So she's also said that I was also not much. Anyhow, my life was not so very unhappy. My life was going on as like others.

In her early life she was fond of going to temples and she was fond of serving the monks there and always performing the fire walks and after her marriage, she went to Burma with her husband. Before that I'm telling, she was in India, born in India, now at Bangladesh and she was married with her husband and her husband got a government job in Burma. At that time, Burma was under the British, so Indians also can live there. So she went with her husband to live in Burma.

There in Burma, she had mind to do meditation, but it was not possible for her because she was young and at that time, young girls, they do not go for meditation because if she goes alone, people may say something so she could not go. But still she was doing some other religious works there.

Dipa is her daughter. Before Dipa one daughter was born and up to three months she was alive. After that she died and after her death she got so much sorrow in mind for the lost child. She was attacked with some disease and with disease and the lamentation. She became very weak.

After the death of that child, after four years of death of the child, Dipa was born, then I got some consolation. After about two years, another son was born, but that also died. So she got again lot of sorrow in her mind for the lost child.

Metta Hour Podcast Transcript
Episode 280
IMS 50th Anniversary with Dipa Ma

After the loss of the third child, I was so depressed that I wanted to go away from the house and go for meditation, but my husband told me that at this age you cannot go. Then she told to husband that if you don't allow me to go one day, I will go away so that nobody knows it. And her husband and some other neighbors used to keep (indistinguishable) on her. And by that she says I was attacked with the serious disease of heart attack as well as blood pressure. And I suffered for about five years and my husband tried his best to cure me and show to many physicians, but still I was suffering.

She says after the death of the third child, say after about five years of death, a blow came from the blue. Then my husband all of a sudden died of heart attack. Then I had nothing. I don't find any way where to go and where to live and how to live. And at the same time, my disease also increased. Dipa was also too young. She says, I cannot think what to do and how to get rid of this sorrow, lamentation, all these things, but at the same time I feel if I die, what will go with me? So she was so much worried not only for the disease, not only for the loss of the husband and children, but also because from the beginning she was thinking of this meditation, but she could not go, she could not earn anything. So by that she became like a mad and always wondering in her mind what to do and she cannot find any way what to do and what not to do.

Then after that I was trying to go to center, to go to any meditation center and requested many people either to come with me or to keep my young daughter to their house. And afterwards one lady agreed to keep my daughter. So I went to a center. There I got admitted and doing the meditation. One day a dog caught hold of my leg, but I did not know because I was walking and walking. But when I want to move further, I cannot move. That time also, I did not know that a dog has bitten my leg or then I am trying to go forward.

She says. Then when I turned back, I found the dog and I shouted, and the people who were meditating also, they also came back and some monks also came back and delivered the dog and the monk told me that you either remain here and take injections and do meditation or if you like you can go back to your home and after the course of injection you can come back. But I thought if I go to home, my young daughter will not leave me again. So I thought of remaining in the course and take injection. Then I started taking injection.

Then she says, by this way, I took three injections. She has to take protein injections. Out of that, she took three injections. But what happened when she attends hospital, he's taken eight precepts every day. When she come back, she comes actually about sometime it's half past 12, sometime it's one or sometime half past one. She cannot take food because after 12 not to take food. So by this way, her health breakdown and she became very weak. Then the monk says, yes, you are becoming very weak, better you go home, take the remaining injection. Then again, you come back. Then she went back to home.

Then when I came home after taking injection, I could not go out because my young girl will not leave me because after eight days when I came, she'll not leave me. Even for a day I tried and now she'll not leave me and she'll not stay with any other woman than in the center. Also, I cannot take her. So my heartbroken, I became deserted, but still what I learned in the center, within this eight days, I was continuing the practice at my home as far as possible I'm continuing. And at that time Munindra was studying (indistinguishable) in a house. A gentleman was given shelter him. He was studying there. After his completion of the study, when he came out, we invited him and I brought him in my house.

Metta Hour Podcast Transcript
Episode 280
IMS 50th Anniversary with Dipa Ma

When Munindra came, he asked her why she's not attending any meditation center because before that, Munindra already attended a meditation center for three months and came back for the study and after completion of the study, she invited her—"him" and she told him that yes, I attended a meditation center is named (indistinguishable). Name of the place is Kamayut. He asked Why you left? And I told him that because due to dog bitten, I came back here. Then he says, why didn't you go again? Then I told him that I cannot leave my young daughter, I cannot go. He says, however, now you try to leave her with some other neighbor, other friends, and Munindra says that I am also going to (indistinguishable) for three months. Of course I will remain in silence for three months there and you also come and join there, you can do the meditation. Then she says, I encourage another lady to go to join with me to go to that meditation center. That lady agreed and Dipa also my neighbor, she's also from our Bengali of the same place and they got also children at that time Dipa says alright, if I go to school with them, I will stay with them. Then Dipa also agreed. So she and another lady went to the (indistinguishable) for meditation.

When I start, I went reported to Mahasi Sayadaw. He gave me eight precepts instructions. There are some other teachers also. They're all monks. They also giving me instructions how to do and what not to do. So I was following their instructions. She says, before this coming to meditation for five years I could not sleep properly due to sorrow, due to lamentation, due to weakness. As soon as I started meditation, giving full mind with mindfulness while I was sitting, I was feeling sleepy. Even when I'm walking also I feel sleepy. Then I reported the matter to the teachers, they say is a very good sign because last five years you are suffering so much that you could not sleep properly. So now due to meditation, you are getting this sleep and it is good sign. It's good sign. So go mindfully, do the meditation as per instruction and do with mindfulness. After knowing that she and another lady joined the center, some other ladies also—all Bengali ladies—also joined the center there. Then Mahasi Sayadaw called Munindra, she says, because they don't know much Burmese language, so it is difficult for them to follow our instructions fully. You know the Burmese language and it is better for you. You take instructions from us and teach them. Give the instructions in your own language because they'll understand. It'll be easy for them to progress.

And when I started doing this meditation, I was crying for always I'm crying because I want to follow the instructions with full, bigger and full energy, but I cannot do due to sleep. Even in standing, even in walking. Also, I cannot do properly due to sleep. So I was crying that before that five years I tried to sleep, I could not sleep. Now I am to do meditation. Now all that sleep is obstructing me of doing this meditation. So I was giving with full energy to drive away the sleeps, but still I cannot do. But one day all of a sudden I came to such a stage that my old sleep disappeared and there no sleep comes to me, even I sit for some hours.

This is the first time she attended for two months. After that, came home for two days, but she cannot remain at home. Though she comes for her daughter. But after one or two days, but she cannot stay home at all. So anyhow, after two days, she again went back to the center and joined there and again, say after one month he comes up for one day or two days again, she goes back. Like that, she was doing the meditation very correctly and mindfully and with full concentration and after some time all her lamentation, all her sorrow, even she felt that all my disease also gone. I am now perfect fully my disease and everything gone. When she got a full consolation of mind and she got back the peace of mind because there are some disease in her, but she says, this is not like before. Before it was too much for everything: disease, sorrow, lamentation, many things, but now nothing. She says, I'm completely enjoying the perfect

Metta Hour Podcast Transcript
Episode 280
IMS 50th Anniversary with Dipa Ma

life, peace of mind and calmness. Now nothing can attach her at that time when she came back from the center.

Then afterwards the teachers also told her, you bring your daughter here. She will study from here and she also can attend to meditation. Then Dipa was also taken to the center there. During that holidays she attended meditation and she goes to school from there and teachers told her, "you don't go from here, you remain here forever and your daughter also can remain here forever. And after growing up, after finishing her study, if she likes you can go for service or jobs, but you'll remain here." So from there, Dipa also attending meditation and as well as she, she's also going to school.

Whenever I met my friends and relatives, I encouraged them to come to the center because I told them, you have seen me how I was deserted and how I broke down due to my loss of my husband and loss of my children and due to my disease. But now how you're finding me, you are finding me fresh and there's nothing in my mind. There is no sorrow, no lamentation in my mind. I am quite happy. So you also come there and you also will be happy. And there is no magic. It's only follow the instructions, what the teachers are giving. So I also followed them and I got this happiness of mind. I got the peace of mind. You'll also come and join me. Join the center. I also will be there. I also will get peace of mind.

By my encouragement many came and joined there. They also, many of them that followed the instructions and got, they removed their sorrows and sufferings and diseases. So after that I came to India. There also, I tried to tell the people to do this meditation. And in India also many joined, but though, not all, many of them, one by one came to me and now also they're practicing. You also see that because I was suffered so much, even I could not work properly. But after meditation, all my disease gone though I got some disease now, but it is not a disease is due to old days. Otherwise I could not come so far from India to America because it is of the power I got from meditation. That power gave me encouragement to come here to see you all and to give my advices to you all.

So she's encouraging to you all to follow the instructions as far as possible. And after going from here, also you tell your friends what you earn. Tell your friends and relatives what you earn and those who have made meditation. If you're living nearer, have some discussions between yourselves so that you can keep the meditation alive and what you are, you can alive. Another thing is discussion will be benefited is that one thing you don't know? Other friend knows it, so he can tell that you do this one and what the other friend does not know, you know it. You can tell him. So you try to have some occasional discussions with the friends who have attended the meditation course and those who have not, try to enlighten them with the meditation, encourage them to bring to the not only the course, but you also can teach them how to start if they feel all right, if they feel better, they can do so. They also will do and afterwards they may try to join the center.

Joseph Goldstein:

Are there any questions you'd like to ask about your practice or about our practice?

Student:

I have a question about your practice. For lamentation and sorrow did it just drop away or did she come to some realization that she could articulate for us?

Joseph Goldstein:

Metta Hour Podcast Transcript
Episode 280
IMS 50th Anniversary with Dipa Ma

He wanted to know whether the sorrow and lamentation just slowly fell away to the practice or did it fall away because of some new insight? Was there some kind of insight that arose in the mind and then the sorrow went away or did it just seem to gradually leave?

Translator:

She says by doing this practice gradually she was feeling better. Gradual she was forgetting the sorrows, gradual. She was forgetting the lamentations and after sometimes some wisdom she acquired by which everything disappeared, but not all of a sudden. But doing the practice, very mindfulness knee with full concentration of mind for some days, for some time, not at once, gradually went away and gradually she could feel that she's going away. Then she was getting more encouragement and after that, when some wisdom she acquired, then whole thing disappeared.

Joseph Goldstein:

When she was sitting in meditation, many flies were buzzing around the head and at first she was just noticing, but then it got too disturbing and so she wants to know what to do when it's too disturbing,

Translator:

The flies, of course you know that flies is flying around your face and if it does not go, you just ignore it, try to ignore it. And if you can ignore it, you can reach in such a stage that if one piece of flesh is taken away or cut, you'll not know. So from the beginning at the first time for the beginning, you try to ignore it. And she says for the time being, if you want to put some clothes around your face, you can do also just to protect from the fly. She has nothing to do except to ignore it. Course you must know that fly is disturbing me, fly is disturbing me, fly is disturbing me (indistinguishable). Try to ignore it.

Student:

I'm wondering how many years (indistinguishable) has been teaching and has it been predominantly in Calcutta, India or other parts of the world?

Translator:

About 18 years. She's teaching because in India there was no meditation teacher. In Burma, there are a lot many. Not only Mahasi Sayadaw, he trained many teachers in Burma. But in India actually there is no meditation teacher Munindra came before him, but he was staying at Bodhgaya so other peoples could not get him. Anybody goes to Bodhgaya then they could take training from Munindra. But when Dipa Ma came at Calcutta, at that time we only heard about meditation. Actually we do not take any interest. We heard many people who was telling that one meditation teacher named Dipa Ma has come from Burma, tried to take advantage of taking training from her. Actually we do not pay much heed to it. Though we are Buddhist by birth and our forefathers were also Buddhist and we heard many things about this meditation, but we did not pay much interest.

Then slowly one or two slowly contacted her and they say that, oh, we are getting some good result. Then slowly people are attracted. By that one by one. There is no center in Calcutta, only in her house. Anybody takes interest to go to her house with very carefully she teach them. She never got annoyed, she never got tired for giving any instruction, any advice to anybody. So by that, slowly, slowly in Calcutta

Metta Hour Podcast Transcript
Episode 280
IMS 50th Anniversary with Dipa Ma

also now I think more than a hundred people got instruction from her, including myself also. I don't know how we also attracted and went to her once we met her and we could not forget her. So whenever we got time, sometime once a week, sometime twice a week, even at night, 10 o'clock also, we even ask her so many things, but she never got tired and she never got annoyed by that.

Now I think more than a hundred people now, she trained in Calcutta and of course now since 1978 in (indistinguishable) Society of India under her instructions and Munindra also we having continuous course every year for 10 days continuous course. And this year also we are going to start a 10 days continuous course sometime in January after going back from here. It is very hard encouragement and Munindra also gives in instruction in that 10 day course. So we think that it was Lord Buddha's blessings we got her there. And many people are also even not only from Calcutta, from outside Calcutta also they come, but difficulties for them, they cannot remain there because there are no place for any center like here. So they come and take instructions and go back to their home, which is sometimes more than a hundred miles or 200 miles or 300 miles away. They cannot remain, but they're practicing and by letter also they are keeping correspondence with her.

Joseph Goldstein:

Because Ma had so much sleepiness in her practice in the beginning he's asking if she has advice for people who now are experiencing sleepiness. If she has advice for the yogis now to deal with sleepiness,

Translator:

She says this sleeps by your effort after drive the sleep by your effort. If you do the meditation, if we follow the meditation mindfulness with full mindfulness and concentration, these sleeps will go away. From the beginning it'll be. You say that I am feeling sleepy, sleepy. What the instructions given like that. Sleepy again, go back to your object. Again you may feel sleepy. Again you go do that. Again go back to your object, say, after practicing some days or some time or some days, the sleep will go away. She says there are instances, there's so many years, as many of you know the name (Indistinguishable) who came here. He never slept for so many years when after, but he was always meditating. Then by request of the other people that you already are on your own thing, but unless you give us something, how can we learn? Then many people requested him to come out, then he came out, otherwise he never sleep. Even now also, he actually was not sleeping, was sleeping different, not like us. So before, follow the instructions if you do the practice, you also can overcome the sleepiness. Munindra was here last year.

Joseph Goldstein:

He said that often women go deeper in the practice more quickly than men.

Lily Cushman:

Hey folks, thanks so much for listening. If you're still here with us, you've reached the end of today's episode. So if you would like to learn more about the Insight Meditation Society, their many offerings. They have a full calendar of in-person retreats, events. There's also IMS online for those of you who can't travel there in-person and a whole nexus of learning. All that and more can be found on their website, which is www.dharma.org. And I also want to mention if you're a big fan of Dipa Ma, we've added a couple of videos in the episode show notes for today because there is a bit of footage that exists of her in

Metta Hour Podcast Transcript
Episode 280
IMS 50th Anniversary with Dipa Ma

the time that she spent at IMS, some of which is the very recording that you heard in today's episode, and also her giving blessings to Sharon, to Jack, to Joseph, and a number of other students. There's also a wonderful book about her life by Amy Schmidt that is called "*Dipa Ma, the Life and Legacy of a Buddhist Master.*" So, lots of ways you can keep exploring there. And for all things Sharon, including her various online offerings, courses, guided meditations, and of course books—including the latest "*Kind Karl*" which is now fully back in stock in all the places—you can visit www.sharonsalzberg.com.

This has been the Metta Hour Podcast, brought to you by The Be Here Now Network. May you be safe, may you be happy, may you be healthy and may you live with ease.