



# moving into the stream

AN INTERVIEW WITH DHARMA TEACHER  
ACHARIYA DOUG DUNCAN



# moving into the stream

Exploring, Transcending, Surrendering & Awakening

In 1970, the 19-year-old Saskatchewan Doug Duncan knew he had to travel. Cutting short his final year of college in Ottawa, he went overseas for a year, to Europe, India and Nepal, and then returned home through northern Africa. Back in Canada, he moved to Vancouver Island (“as a hippie”), encountered Ram Dass’ book, *Be Here Now*, and made a mystical connection with the Canadian-born dharma teacher George Dawson, later known as Namgyal Rinpoche. In 1974 Duncan finally met Rinpoche and commenced his spiritual training under him.

Namgyal Rinpoche was the first Westerner to be publicly acknowledged as a rinpoche. The 16th Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, proclaimed him one in 1969 in Rumtek, Sikkim (now part of India). In Dawson the Karmapa saw an incarnation of Sakya Namgyal, the first in a revered line of teachers known for bringing the the dharma to new places.

Following decades of study with the Canadian rinpoche who freely melded Tibetan and Western traditions with Sufi, Taoist and Zen principles, Duncan was given permission to teach, and today travels each year to dharma centers throughout the world, accompanied by co-teacher Catherine Pawasarat [[planetdharma.com](http://planetdharma.com)]. Their main retreat center, **Clear Sky**, is in Canada, but groups of followers are active in three locations in Japan: Tokyo, Kyoto and Ashiya (Hyogo).



## An interview with Dharma teacher Doug Duncan

Photographs courtesy of  
Clear Sky Meditation & Study Foundation

**BRENDAN JOSEPH RIES** enjoys gathering stories from his travels. He has taught in South Africa, Turkey, and Japan. He is a writer, Aikidoist, singer/musician and student of Vajrayana Buddhism with Doug Duncan and Catherine Pawasarat.

In 1998, he had become resident teacher at the Dharma center just north of Toronto while Rinpoche was in residence. Two people who lived in Japan, Paul Jaffe, who's now in New York and John Monroe in Tokyo, had come to that course. John was a student of Rinpoche's and knew Doug Sensei from the past. They invited Doug Sensei to move to Japan and teach. After receiving Namgyal's approval, he arrived and established **Dharma Japan** [dharma-japan.org/], which consists of a dynamic group of individuals based in Kyoto, Tokyo, and Zofokuji Temple who are dedicated to the path of awakening.



## TRANSCENDING STREAMS

*According to Buddhism, what exactly is consciousness?*

Consciousness in Buddhism isn't really much different than consciousness in science and may be tentatively defined as the relationship between mind and body. Consciousness is the mind-body field, an arena in which perception and recognition occurs.

It's easier to say what awareness is, when your mind goes to an object. If my mind turns to the glass I have the ability to acknowledge that I'm looking at a glass, which would be awareness. The field in which it occurs, the mental space or the mental physical space in which it occurs is consciousness. So, you can have consciousness without awareness. I don't think you can have awareness without consciousness.

For instance, you're conscious that you're talking to me but you may not be aware of my meaning. In Pali and Sanskrit they have a lot of different words for it—*chitta*, *cheta*, *chitta pada*, *nama*, *mana*, *vinyana*—all words for consciousness/awareness, depending on the context. There are nice dialogues going on between the Dalai Lama's lineage, the Gelugpa, and scientists on this subject as well as within Western science itself.

*How would you characterize a healthy Buddhist practice?*

Number one: I'd take out the word Buddhist.

Number two: A practice which makes you more aware, more conscious, more compassionate, calmer, clearer, brighter, more awake, more blissful, that's a good practice.

Some of it can be busier like yoga, some quieter like meditation; some of it can be serving an organization, as one does when performing karma yoga. Some of it can be economic like making money. A good practice is mindfulness in everything you do always. Busy mindfulness in exploring, or quiet mindfulness in terms of calm. That would be a good practice.

*Could you give some wisdom to people who like to practice but are having difficulties doing that because of a really busy life?*

People have busy lives because they're afraid of being not busy. We want to go to every movie, see every show, meet every friend. Social media, which I have a lot of respect for is a great example. I have 2,000 friends—keeping up with 2,000 people, what does that mean? Why would you want to? There are other aspects but at what point are you just online cruising around because you don't have anything better to do. There's a tendency to need more and more information. We eat more and more food that makes us obese and in our mental diet that makes us stupid. If you look at a business like IBM they try to filter in only the information that is useful. How do you cut through all the irrelevant stuff in order to get down to what you need to get done?

That's a problem with the Aquarian age, people want to go there, want to be here, want to do that and not miss anything, and they don't get to it. So, what's your priority and values? Regardless of how much you do and how much you know you're still going to die in the end. If you want to attain wisdom, or get wiser, you need to let go into the unknown. Most of what people are pursuing is what they want to "know." You can't get wisdom from knowing more; you can only get wisdom from learning more



“Blissful clarity is your birthright as a human being.”

Doug Sensei and co-teacher Catherine Pawasarat

and then surrendering to the unknown to integrate it. Letting go into the unknown is what's hard for people, because it seems like defeat.



## SURRENDERING TO STREAMS

*What were your biggest obstacles as a beginning student of Namgyal Rinpoche?*

Well number one of course is resistance. He never really told you what to do so much as he just demonstrated more where you were blocked or where your persona was getting in the way of your dharma. Where your drama was defeating your dharma.

As ego entities, our illusions of being single, independent and permanent, everything is self-referenced. The obstacles are the suffering that results from that position, and in a sense they are the same for everybody.

Trust in the urge to surrender. The ego can't surrender easily. The ego's fear of surrendering comes from the idea of losing, being defeated, or being subsumed or disappearing.

*How long did it take you to surrender?*

I'm still doing it.

I used to wonder if trust was awakening and Namgyal said, "Complete trust is complete awakening," so you have got to figure out what to trust. Do you trust your government and religion? Do you trust your politics, money, prejudices and biases? What do you trust? It takes time to trust the awakening and use the Guru as an example of that. Namgyal said it's not so much definitive marks but a gradual polishing of the stone. It gets shinier and shinier.

*What do you feel your biggest obstacles are now, as a teacher?*

Competing with consumerism. Competing with what they are calling a D-I-Y Dharma, which is "do it yourself." I understand their motivation and where they are coming from but the nature of the ego is that it's blind to its own identity. You can go from teacher to teacher, or practice in the manner of "Oh I'll get awakened like I learn how to ride my bicycle." It's become a bit superficial like "feel good be happy," more than "wake up, be wise and compassionate."

On the other hand I find young people very keen and interested in community. I don't think awakening is at the top of their list but a better way of living is, and that's a kind of awakening. I think they are jaded because of the guru thing of the 60's, and many think it's just one more con. These are things we run into.

When I started there was one teacher around; now there is a teacher everywhere. It was a narrower window. If you were into it, you were really into it. Now you can be into and out of it and into it again and into it over here and into it over there. It's hard to get energy moving into the stream to make the breakthrough that way. One of the largest problems, the commitment and dedication to do something deeply and fully is weaker. The commitment and aspiration is more eclectic, more widespread, so it's harder to get the energies focused.

*Your greatest opportunities as a teacher?*

The availability and interest in new ways of learning and growing. I think old religion will go. Even the Dalai Lama said recently it may be the end time of religion. The word religion means to re-link. Re-ligious like ligament, to link back. So that principle will remain, we still need to link back to our original natures which are awakened.

The idea that you have to follow one religion to get to heaven, that kind of Piscean hierarchical kind of thinking, it's time for that to go. I think it will be much more like a circle or module

where pieces fit and slot together better. That's happening; a lot of young people don't want to be slotted into a religion. They want to fit into a whole experience from how they earn their money, to their family, friends, life, work and to the spiritual aspect. Up until now, it's been spiritual over here and economic life over there. This is a huge new opportunity that is dawning, the inquisitive, inquiring, and desiring mind. People want to live and work for themselves or in groups that are local and cooperative. Dharma has always been about this.

I think the emergence of the co-teacher, is huge. Catherine Pawasarat and I co-teach. The idea that people can teach in partnership. The idea that two people can teach together at the same time with equal billing. Typically, women teach and their husbands do the supporting, or men teach and their wives do the supporting. One gets attention and the other doesn't. Now we are getting to a place where two people, lesbian, gay, straight whatever—can teach at the same time. This phenomenon will eventually lead us into group guru.

*How can you characterize a healthy relationship between teacher and student?*

The teacher has to realize they aren't teachers but trainers. The students must learn that if they are promoted, it's not from being a student to being a teacher; they have just learned the training. The salutation to the Buddha calls him a trainer of gods and men, not a teacher.

If you're going to be a student you've got to listen, and many students don't want to listen; they just want to be affirmed in their current knowledge, which is no way to learn. The teacher has to have enough intention not just to be praised as a teacher, but also to challenge students on their unwillingness to listen. Mentoring has both a peaceful and an energetic side to it, both of which are necessary to see through blind spots. The teacher has to be willing to teach using both sides, and the student must be willing to meet both sides.

## Dharma if you Dare

**In November, 2013, Duncan's first book, *Dharma if you Dare*, was released. Written in an entertaining style, it provides practical tools and humorous anecdotes to help us speedily reconnect with our real purpose for being here—enlightenment. Some quotes:**

"You can't avoid the decay of the body or the struggles of life, but you can always have access to luminosity and bliss."

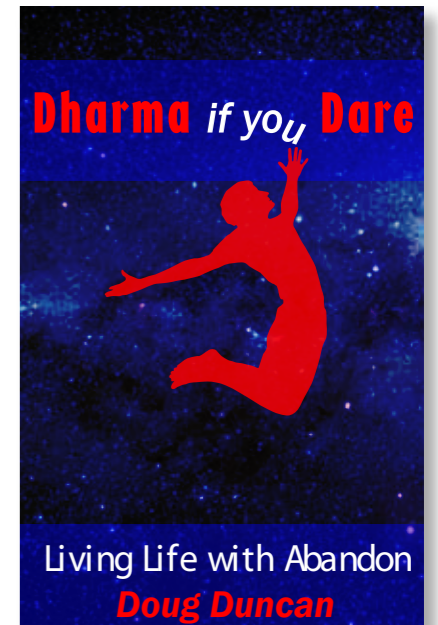
"When you understand that the universe is doing nothing but having a huge party—including suffering, decay and death—and that only your conditioning makes life painful, then liberation is close at hand."

"Growth and liberation comes in two ways: either by doing what you wanted to do but were afraid to, or by doing what you thought you ought to do but found reasons not do."

"On his deathbed, the Buddha said, 'Pay attention to detail.' Where freedom actually lies for you is in the details, and the liberation moment occurs when you fall in the gap between two details."

"This path is not for the faint of heart; it's a warrior's path. The often daunting task of facing our shadow selves inspired the title. It takes courage and humility, leavened with critical intelligence and a healthy sense of humor, to acknowledge the source of all the nuttiness in our lives and return to sanity."

—John Munroe on **Dharma if you Dare**





## AWAKENING TO STREAMS

*Are there particular Truths that you live by?*

Loving kindness, compassion and the seeking of understanding and wisdom. Wisdom isn't a done deal. You don't just get wise and you're done. Wisdom ripens throughout one's life experience.

*What are some goals you'd like to accomplish in this lifetime?*

Get wiser and more compassionate, for sure. More skillful with helping beings and mentoring, continuing to guide and support. Lead beings to have clearer states at the least and awakening at the best. Continue to build centers with Catherine and others, to be places where people can practice, study and grow.

Women are still ignored in some strange way and I think that

the empowerment of females and women to be readily seen as teachers and seen as teachers, is one of my big goals. I think women are usually seen as teachers if they're independent, but not particularly if they're in a partner relationship. I think the next step is for the co-teachers—the lama and the laman to teach together where the woman isn't ignored. That's really hard to get across not only to men, but curiously enough, to women too.

*What are some of the processes that help you find wisdom?*

The number one way to get wiser is falling flat on your face and looking like an idiot. There's no better way to get wiser than to fail. Obviously I'm not encouraging failing, but if you're not stepping over the boundary of standard knowledge or experience, you're not getting any wiser. In order to get wiser you need to go like Star Trek, where no being has been before. Make a lot of mistakes out there. If you're not willing to make mistakes you won't get wiser. If you're not willing to take risks you won't get wiser. In what venue or mode that is done can vary, but for me it's in Dharma and teaching. My teacher said, "The thing about tripping is you always fall forward." You kind of trip your way into wisdom.

*What is awakening? Is "enlightenment" the same phenomenon?*

Awakening and enlightenment for all intents and purposes are the same thing. I would use them as verbs. Again, the Western approach is that it's a noun, a fixed thing, but I choose to see awakening as a verb. What is awakening? From the point of view of the East, wakening is any realization or insight or knowledge that one didn't have before.

In Dharma terms it usually refers to the first stage of the path, when three or four particular hindrances that fall away from the human consciousness. The clinging to "skeptical doubt," "belief in a permanent self-identity," and "rite and ritual."

Skeptical doubt is when you don't believe that there is another

state that is similar to your normal one, but different. Are you feeling brainwashed by the teacher? Maybe it's just a big con? That's "skeptical doubt."

The biggest hindrance is "belief in a permanent self identity." Trying to tell "unawakened beings" what "awakening" is and not having the identity of being a particular, independent, permanent kind of ME is huge.

The third one, "belief in right or ritual" speaks to formulistic thinking. For example, if I do A, I get B right? If I do enough mantras I'll get awakened, or, if I do this I'll get awakened.

*If you could explain simply and briefly "how" one awakens — how would you describe it?*

The "how" of awakening is the willingness to find out what it is? If you don't have the aspiration or the motivation you can't find it. You have to want it and you have to trust that it's there.

Imagine me asking you to jump off of a cliff into the void and I tell you that you're going to land in another situation that's going to be greater. One, you're going to have to believe that it's possible and two, you're going to have to want to do it. It's like swinging on a rope over a river, are you going to let go? Swinging out and back and out and back. Eventually you let go into the river of awakening because you can't hang onto the rope anymore. Hanging onto the rope is too tiring. Hanging onto the belief in a "permanent self-identity" is exhausting and this promise of another place where you're free of that helps you eventually let go because you're exhausted. You wouldn't be there if you didn't have the aspiration and motivation. It's a three-fold thing. You have to have the aspiration, you have to be willing to swing out onto the rope, and you have to, at some time, be willing to let go.



Clear Sky