

Vipassana Yoga: it's Role in the Life of Freedom Fighter Freda Bedi

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Abstract: *Vipassana Yoga is a sort of exercise for the mind, Vipassana meditation trains the brain to focus on the present moment and accept thoughts without judgment. It is a way of self transformation through self observation. Freda Bedi; the British women who fought for India's freedom was a major force in bringing Tibetan Buddhism to the west She was an English Champion of Indian Nationalism. In India, she threw herself into political activism and arduously studied many spiritual paths, looking for her own. Finally, she found it in Burma, when, she took personal instruction from the eminent Vipassana master Sayadaw U Pandita. The result was what she called an "enlightening experience" that changed her life forever.*

Keywords: *Yoga, Vipassana, Buddhism, Patanjali Yoga, Freedom Fighter, Meditation, lama, Rinpochae.*

Methodology: *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Who is Freda Bedi?

Never heard of Freda Bedi? You're not alone. Though she's a heroine of sorts in India—known to generations of Tibetans as **sister Palmo**, "**Mummy-la**," to others as the tall, blue-eyed Englishwoman who fought for Indian independence and was jailed as a **Gandhi satyagrahi**—she is virtually unknown in the West. It's not clear why. From the time Bedi arrived in India in 1934 as the wife of a Sikh radical, she was a force to be reckoned with. She played a key role in resettling the Tibetan Buddhists streaming into India after the 1959 Chinese takeover, determined to help them preserve their culture and religion. **The first Westerner to ordain as a Tibetan Buddhist nun and the founder of the first Tibetan Buddhist nunnery outside Tibet**, she paved the way for a generation of influential Western teachers, including *Tenzin Palmo*, *Pema Chödrön*, and *Tsultrim Allione*. And as the 16th Karmapa's heart student and close advisor, she persuaded him to visit the West, the highest-ranking Tibetan Buddhist to do so at the time. No less than His Holiness the Dalai Lama has wondered why there's been no biography of her. He need wonder no longer: British journalist **Vicki Mackenzie** has rectified the omission with *The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi*.

Inclination towards the Buddhism and Vipassana Yoga

Bedi didn't start Buddhist practice until she was in her forties, but long before that her influence on Tibetan Buddhism in exile was wide. "Single-handedly, Freda had already set the scene for Buddhism to make the historic leap from East to West when she had the foresight to establish the **Young Lamas Home School**," Mackenzie writes. With the support of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Bedi set up the school to help the lamas, who had been sequestered in their monasteries back in Tibet, adjust to the realities of modern life. Her pupils included Lama Zopa, Tarthang Tulku, and Gelek Rimpoche. Gelek remembers Bedi as very strict but kind, insisting that the monks learn English in order to teach Westerners, who sorely needed the dharma. Two of the young rinpoches—Chögyam Trungpa and Akong—became like sons to Bedi. She arranged their admission to Oxford; later they founded the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the West, Samye Ling in Scotland.

None of this explains how Freda Houlston, a penniless provincial English schoolgirl born in 1911, got herself into Oxford, bucked racial prejudice to marry a Sikh, then moved to India, donned a sari, learned Hindi, and emerged as an influential political and social activist, an intimate of Nehru and his daughter, Indira (later Prime Minister Gandhi), only to throw it all over to become a Buddhist nun.

Bedi's great awakening came at 42 in Burma, on a trip for UNESCO. Seeing the monks outside the Golden Temple, "suddenly it was déjà vu," she recalled. "I knew. This is The Way, this is what I have been looking for." She studied **Vipassana** with Sayadaw U Pandita and had a profound realization walking down a street. "Her heart and her path now belonged to the Buddha," Mackenzie writes.

Vipassana Yoga and Patanjali Yoga

Vipassana, which means to see things as they really are, is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation. It was taught in India more than 2500 years ago as a universal remedy for universal ills, i.e., an Art of Living.

Whether we see Gita, Buddha or Patanjali's treatises we will find soul stress on attaining rtambhara prajna which means revelation of truth on the basis of one's own experience.

What a gross misuse of such a highly spiritual technique that it is used for curing diseases by exerting some pressure on a particular point or puncturing another point of body. It is a great devaluation of the importance of Vipassana. I personally feel that the same has happened with yoga also. ⁱⁱWe will have to take it out from its primary stages i.e. its more spiritual aspects are to be highlighted and it should not be allowed merely to remain as a system of health improvement or a therapy that preaches about asanas and pranayamas only.

What Does Yoga Mean?

Does Yoga have nothing more to provide to the mankind? It becomes more pathetic to note that all this is done in the name of a great sage like that of Patanjali. How the status of a great sage has been reduced to such an extent? It would have been accepted if it was done on the basis of Hathayogapradipika or Gherandasamhita. In that case these two books would have remained in prominence for the therapeutic aspect of yoga. But doing it in the name of Patanjali is quite objectionable as he has given a very meagre importance to asana and pranayama in his treatise named as **Patanjali Yoga Sutra**. One will hardly find not even five sentences on asanas and pranayamas in the whole treatise. The rest of about 200 sutras have been forgotten. No importance is being ascribed to these sutras.

ⁱⁱⁱPatanjali has defined asana just by one phrase i.e. **the posture in which one can sit for a long time, steadily and with ease**. Only this very statement of Patanjali about asana has been elaborated up to 84 types of tiresome postures and all of them are now preached in his name. Poor Patanjali has been reduced to the status of circus trainer and he, who preaches to become aware of the inhalation and exhalation of natural breath, the intermittent stage between the two its elongation and its contraction, has been wrongly associated with the attempted and rigorous breathing exercise of pranayama. Breathing exercise too is not bad. It has got its own advantages but the same should not be ascribed to the name of Patanjali. Likewise different yogic postures too have got very good healthy impact over our body, but the same should also not be said as prescribed by Patanjali in his famous treatise. A sage who bestowed our country with a highly spiritual knowledge of yoga should in no way be allowed to be depicted as a kindergarten P.T. teacher who teaches asana or pranayama. Thus we have lost our ancient treasure contained in Patanjali Yoga Sutra by treating it as a mere compendium of asanas and pranayama.

What else one will understand about Patanjali Yoga Sutra if we do are describing about it as a book on asana and pranayama. Unfortunately, Patanjali Yoga Sutra fell into the hands of such commentators who were ignorant about the real technique of yoga contained in it and they rendered arbitrary interpretations in the name of commentary. One may go on making tremendous efforts to interpret Patanjali Yoga Sutra but cannot become successful in reality unless he practices Vipassana. ***The practice of Vipassana will reveal the real meaning of each and every word of Patanjali Yoga Sutra to the practitioner.*** This is the only way to understand Patanjali. Yogasutra is not a subject of mental entertainment or sermons or debate or means to establish a particular philosophical doctrine. It is a way of personal experience and to realize the truth. It is a way to attain immaculate wisdom i.e. "rit".

We have now forgotten as to what does "rt" mean. We have lost the basic concept of religion. Rt means universal truth or omnipresent reality. If someone speaks the truth it is not universal. It is relative and individual truth expressed through one's speech

It has got no relationship with rt. Rt is an eternal reality always in existence without any limitations of time and space. It is law of nature that always exists. It has got no relationship with a Hindu or Jain or Buddhist or Christian religion etc. a law of nature which was prevailing say some 50 million years ago and even now do exist undeterred and shall exist after

50 million years too alike. For example fire is an element and to burn is its intrinsic nature. This is a natural law.

^{iv}It is universal, eternal and free from the boundaries of land. Patanjali never preached about a religion confined to a particular way of life or sect or philosophical doctrine. He prophesied a religion of wisdom (panna) of true knowledge based on one's own experience. He didn't talk about knowledge acquired through scriptures or sermons or through philosophical discussions or inferred through one's own imaginations. Such a knowledge will not confer real welfare. Only that knowledge will lead us to our real welfare which is based on our own experience. That will take us away from the bondage of suffering. When the law of nature will be proved on the basis of our experience it will lead us towards emancipation. If such and such happens such a result is bound to appear.

What is Vipassana?

^vThe technique of Vipassana is a simple, practical way to achieve real peace of mind and to lead a happy, useful life. Vipassana means "to see things as they really are". It is a logical process of mental purification through self-observation.

From time to time, we all experience agitation, frustration and disharmony. When we suffer, we do not keep our misery limited to ourselves; instead, we keep distributing it to others as well. Enlightened people have therefore advised 'Know thyself', which means not merely knowing yourself at the intellectual level, or accepting at the emotional or devotional level, but to experience the truth about yourself, within yourself, at the experiential level. To achieve this, a technique of Vipassana meditation was taught in India more than 2500 years ago as a universal remedy for universal problems.

Vipassana enables us to experience peace and harmony by purifying the mind, freeing it from suffering and the deep-seated causes of suffering. Step by step, the practice leads to the highest spiritual goal of full liberation from all mental defilements.

The entire path (Dhamma) is an Art of Living and has nothing to do with any organized religion or sectarianism. For this reason, it can be freely practiced by everyone, at any time, in any place, without conflict due to race, community or religion, and will prove equally beneficial to one and all.^{vi}The practice of Vipassana meditation involves following the principles of Dhamma, the universal law of nature. It involves walking on the noble eight fold path, which is broadly categorised into Sila (morality), Samadhi (concentration), and Panna (wisdom).

There are three steps to the training.

- **First**, students practice Sila (morality) - abstaining from actions which cause harm. They undertake five moral precepts, practising abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and the use of intoxicants. The observation of these precepts allows the mind to calm down sufficiently to proceed further with the task at hand.

- **Second**, for the first three and a half days, students practice Anapana meditation, focusing attention on the breath. This practice helps to develop samadhi (concentration) and gain control over the unruly mind. These first two steps of living a wholesome life and developing control of the mind are necessary and very beneficial, but they are incomplete unless the third step is taken: purifying the mind of underlying mental impurities.
- The **third** step undertaken for the last six and a half days, is the practice of Vipassana: one penetrates one's entire physical and mental structure with the clarity of panna (wisdom, insight).

Freda Bedi and Buddhism

Bedi's conversion to Buddhism wasn't entirely out of the blue. As a child she had spurned the Church of England in favor of Christian mysticism and direct experience of the divine, and her homegrown meditation had sustained her in prison. Years before she knew any Tibetans she had a prophetic dream in which a monk thrust a child at her, saying, "Take care of him." The Tibetan refugees introduced her to Mahayana teachings on kindness and compassion, and on a visit to Sikkim, she met her teacher, His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa: "He manifested himself to me as the Buddha. From then on, he was in my heart as the special one."

After her marriage to Baba Pyare Lal Bedi ended, Freda dedicated herself wholly to practice. She built a nunnery in Dalhousie for some Tibetan Buddhist nuns living there. It failed miserably, but undaunted, she tried again and succeeded. The second nunnery still stands, and the nuns regard "Mummy-la" as the embodiment of White Tara, the female Buddha of compassionate action.

Bedi was 55 when she was ordained by the Karmapa as Karma Tsultrim Kechog Palmo and became known thereafter as **Sister Palmo**.^{vii} She was the only woman at Rumtek Monastery, and as a Tibetan Buddhist she could be only a novice nun. So in 1972 the Karmapa sent her to Hong Kong to be ordained as a Chan bhikshuni, equal in status to the monks. After that, Bedi traveled widely, even giving initiations with the Karmapa's blessing. "It was unheard of for a Western woman to do so." "This was proof that the Karmapa held her in high spiritual regard."

Freda Bedi and Indian Independence Movement

Her home and working life established, Freda threw herself wholeheartedly into her mission to free India from imperialism and to bring justice and equality to the poor and downtrodden. She traveled all over the Punjab by foot, going from village to village, absorbing

the land and its people, raising their consciousness about the struggle for freedom. She stayed in their huts, ate their food, learned their songs, and heard their problems. Now, rather than being confined to merely looking in and talking as she had as an Oxford undergraduate, she was in a position to act.

This intimacy heightened her love of India and whetted her revolutionary zeal. “India is in a very bad way and constitutions, for all the fuss made over them, are not going to help at all. It will need something more radical. When you get into the homes of the peasants—unbelievable poverty! They live on three paise per day—one penny, at a liberal estimate—everything inclusive. They are just ground down by starvation and the moneylender,” she wrote to Olive. Later, she added, “India has harrowed me with her festering poverty, her dirt, and her despair, and I have become a unit of the ragged army that fights against it.”

Freda’s compassion and admiration for the peasants never wavered. In her eyes they were noble souls, living a truer existence, in harmony with the soil and the rhythms of the seasons, unsullied by materialism. “Modern people would probably put security at the top of the list of what makes them happy, but the peasant is humbler and simpler in the face of the inevitable insecurities of nature and of life. The villagers, the ‘illiterates’ of India, have got that genius of simple people; they judge not from words but from the heart, from feelings, from gestures, from instinct. It is we who have been blunted by words, not they who are dull.”

Again her affinity with women—especially mothers—was strong. “Many times I have been confronted with a village woman and her child and she has given one look at me and my little boy, and we have been friends from that minute. There is something in the understanding of a woman and a woman, of a mother and a mother, which is far beyond language or skin. It is a feeling often ‘too deep for tears,’ born of common hopes, and prayers, and sufferings.”

Her agenda was twofold: to urge “the warrior peasants of the Punjab” to agitate for land reform and fairer land revenues, and to demand their civil liberties, especially against the heartless Indian police officers, who regularly beat them. She would then bring this terrible treatment to the attention of the authorities.

The Oxford Scholar, Punjabi Bride, Indian Satyagrahi, Buddhist nun, this is what Freda Bedi was. “There are things deeper than labels and colour and prejudice, and love is one of them,” said Freda Bedi), an Oxford-educated English woman who married an Indian Sikh, adopted India as her home country, actively participated in her freedom struggle, converted to Buddhism and eventually became a fully-ordained Buddhist nun.

^{viii}Challenging labels of nationality, race and notions of how women presented themselves in society, Freda lived a life that very few of us can even fathom. A humanist in

the truest sense, her life is an exploration into what it meant to fully embrace freedom and empathy.

Born into a rather modest middle class household in England, Freda lost her father in 1918 during World War I, an event which had a significant bearing on her political leanings. Attending Oxford University for her Master's Degree in the 1930s opened Freda's eyes to the world around her.

As part of a generation who grew up through the Great Depression years, which saw mass unemployment, social discontentment and the rise of fascism, Freda embraced the spirit of rebellion against the establishment alongside her other women friends. Attending meetings of the Labour Club and the communist October Club, she had heard about the horrors of the British Empire in India and was deeply curious to learn more.

This curiosity drove her to attend the weekly meetings of the Oxford Majlis, a debating society founded in 1896 at the University by Indian students. At these meetings, the Indian students gathered there would advocate for India's freedom from the Empire. There she met fellow student Baba Pyare Lal Bedi, an Indian Sikh fondly known as 'BPL'.

A few weeks before her final exams, she married BPL at the Oxford registry office, a decision which shocked some within the University establishment and her mother, although the latter soon came around.^{ix} Her marriage was just the first among a long list of occasions on which she refused to be held back by notions of religion, race and nation.

From the moment she married, Freda regarded herself as Indian and often wore Indian-style clothes. A year later, husband and wife and their four-month old baby, Ranga, set off by boat from Trieste, Italy, on the two-week journey to the western Indian city of Bombay (now Mumbai)...The couple had already been marked out by the British authorities as revolutionaries and potential trouble makers because of their student activism. When they disembarked in Bombay, their bags and cases were inspected for seven hours to check for left-wing propaganda.

While Freda faced scorn by many back in the UK for the decision to marry an Indian Sikh, her mother-in-law accepted her with open arms. Eventually, Freda and her family decided to settle down in Lahore.

^xAs celebrated nationalists and figures of the Left, both Freda and BPL published a quarterly review called Contemporary India, while she also ran a regular column in The Tribune called 'From a Woman's Window'. However, their lives radically changed with the advent of World War II with BPL courting arrest for his role in preventing the recruitment of Indian soldiers for the British war effort.

Unwilling to sit on the sidelines, she took Mahatma Gandhi's blessings and became a fellow Satyagrahi. Daring to openly defy the colonial government's emergency wartime powers, she travelled to her husband's ancestral village of Dera Baba Nanak and announced her decision to "break the law by asking the people not to support the military effort until India became democratic".

Local authorities were perplexed at the sight of a Caucasian English woman staging protests against the British Empire. Unsure of what to do, the authorities called upon a English police inspector to arrest her.

At her trial, the judge asked her whether she wanted the same privilege granted to an Englishwoman. Her response left everyone in the courtroom stunned. "Treat me as an Indian woman and I shall be quite content," she told the magistrate. Freda was sentenced to six months in prison at Lahore Women's Jail and hard labour. There she spun the Chakra, organised fellow women prisoners and sang songs of freedom.

Following Partition, the Bedis had moved to Kashmir with their second child Kabir, who would later go onto become an acclaimed actor.

There she worked alongside firebrand Kashmiri mass leader Sheikh Abdullah, taught English at a newly established women's college in Srinagar. However, her life took a rather fascinating turn in the early 1950s during a visit to Myanmar as part of the United Nations Social Services Planning Commission to Burma.

Freda Bedi briefly served as a member of the United Nations Social Services Planning Commission to Burma, during which she was first exposed to Buddhism, which quickly became the defining aspect of her life. In Rangoon she learned Vipassana from Mahasi Sayadaw , and Sayadaw U Titthila.

In Delhi, she became a prominent Buddhist and in 1956, when the 14th Dalai Lama made his first visit to India, she showed him around Buddhist shrines in Delhi

^{xi}In 1959, when the Dalai Lama arrived in India after an arduous trek across the Himalayas followed by thousands of his Tibetan devotees, she was asked by India's prime minister Jawahar Lal Nehru to help them and spent time improving facilities for refugees at camps in Assam and West Bengal. She became an observant Tibetan Buddhist and she followed the guidance of the 16th Karmapa of the Kagyu School. She worked, with the support of the Dalai Lama, to establish the Young Lama's Home School Bedi initially set up the Young Lama's School in Delhi but after a short period it was moved to Dalhousie . The school trained young Tibetan lamas and monks in languages and social sciences as well as religion, to equip the coming generation of Tibetan spiritual leaders for life in exile. A number of Bedi's pupils became well-known teachers, including Chogyam Trungpa, Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, Akong

Rinpoche , Tulku Pema Tenzin, and Chokling of Tsikey. In 1963, with Lama Karma Thinley Rinpoche and under the guidance of the Karmapa, she founded the Karma Drubgyu Thargay Ling nunnery for Tibetan women, now located in Tilokpur, Kangra Valley.

^{xii}While running the Young Lamas Home School at Dalhousie in north India, Bedi also spent time at Rumtek in Sikkim, the seat of the Karmapa in exile. In 1966, she took sramaneri ordination by the Karmapa and was given the name Karma Kechog Palmo. She was one of the first Western women to take ordination in Tibetan Buddhism . In 1972, she took full Bhikshuni ordination in Hong Kong - the first western woman to do so, and according to the scholar Hanna Havnevik possibly the first woman in the Tibetan tradition ever to receive this higher ordination. She accompanied the Karmapa on his first visit to the West in 1974, a landmark five-month tour across North America and Europe. Although not fluent in Tibetan, she helped to translate prayers and religious texts into English. She is credited for bringing Tibetan Buddhism to the West.

In Myanmar, she was introduced to Buddhism and learnt meditation with Burmese masters. By 1959, however, when the Dalai Lama and scores of Tibetan refugees fled China to escape persecution, she requested the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to send her to Assam, where she could aid in relief efforts.

In 1961, Freda established the Young Lamas' Home School in Delhi and it was as she helped the Tibetans adapt to exile that she realised that she had found her spiritual home in Buddhism.

By 1966, she gave up a conventional life and became a Buddhist nun. Ordained by the 16th Karmapa Lama at Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim and given the name Gelongma Karma Kechog Palmo, she became “possibly the first woman ever to receive this higher level of initiation in the Tibetan tradition.”

Persuading the Karmapa to establish links with new devotees, she travelled with him in 1974 for his first trip to the West, which many argue sowed the seeds of Tibetan Buddhism there. Her life is a lesson in not just appreciating different cultures and traditions, but also embracing their best ideals.

Conclusion

Freda Bedi was born Freda Houston above a quaint watchmaker's shop in Derby, England, in 1911. Tall, blue-eyed, and with an imposing manner, she wore many hats: Oxford scholar, professor, social worker, champion of women's rights, wife and mother of four, Gandhian revolutionary (even imprisoned for his cause), and one of the first Westerners to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun.

Freda's destiny was sealed when she won three scholarships to Oxford, where she met and married Baba Pyare Lal Bedi, a direct descendent of Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism. She followed him to the Punjab, then still under British rule, and found herself at home there.

In India, she threw herself into political activism and arduously studied many spiritual paths, looking for her own. Finally, she found it in Burma, when, in 1953, she took personal instruction from the eminent Vipassana master **Sayadaw U Pandita**. The result was what she called an “**enlightening experience**” that changed her life forever.

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