

INTRODUCTION

I was 14 years old when I first realized that there was something more to life than growing up and having the perfect family. A friend and I were bored and hungry for life to start, but we were in that awkward limbo—too old and not old enough. We had read somewhere about fasting and decided that sounded interesting, so we stopped eating. After 24 hours without food, we were feeling a little light-headed. We turned off the lights in her bedroom and looked out the window of her middle-class house in the suburbs. It was like seeing the stars for the first time.

Maybe the lack of food stopped my mind's normal functioning for a moment, who knows. But I let it all in, the infinite vastness of the universe. I fully felt the reality that each star was a sun, and each sun had its own planets and moons all spinning within a solar system, within a galaxy, with other galaxies, on and on until my mind just gave up trying to grasp infinity. This is it, I thought. This is the mystery and wonder which all the great religions point to. It was in that moment that the longing was born. I had no idea what I was longing for, but I was now aware of a sense of emptiness, a wanting and a waiting for fulfillment.

That longing sparked a lifelong search that pushed me from one spiritual path to another. And eventually lead to the abandonment of the search in favor of more attainable goals, like building a house and a good career. Years later, after the death of my husband and a lot of other dead-ends, I found myself searching again. I moved from the mountains of Colorado to Santa Fe, leaving behind my partner Chris, my work as a psychotherapist and all that I had created in my home of 20 years.

It was there at a *Power of Now* workshop with Karen McPhee that I was introduced to what I now call the *direct path*. I had read the *Power of Now*, but a book is no substitute for the actual experience of stillness itself. I was deeply touched so I asked someone if anyone local offered the same simple approach and was directed to a woman in the audience. I couldn't believe it. She looked so normal—flannel shirt, jeans, long blonde hair, in her mid-

40s. “Yes, that’s Pamela Wilson.”

I saw Pamela one evening the next week at a gathering called satsang. I’d never heard that word before. Satsang originates from Sanskrit and means “being together in truth.” I learned that satsang is a chance to rest from all seeking and longing and just appreciate the mystery of who we are. There is no hierarchy, no concepts or rituals; only the experience of your true nature in the here-and-now. This is the definition of the *direct path of awakening*.

At the beginning of Pamela’s satsang, there was a half hour of silence. Then Pamela opened her sparkly eyes, bowed and said with an impish grin, “Welcome to satsang.” People asked questions or explored issues as Pamela used a process of self-inquiry, “Who is having this problem? What is aware of this feeling?” Pamela’s invitation to look within often ended in a moment of silence, maybe a smile or a sigh, the recognition of something indescribable. It was obvious that there were no words that could answer the perennial question, “Who am I?”

Pamela didn’t explain much about all this. She did mention that she had been influenced by a Western teacher, Robert Adams. His death was a catalyst for her to get serious about her “recognition” which Pamela describes as the realization of one’s true nature. Pamela uses the word recognition instead of enlightenment so the mind doesn’t try to make a big deal out of it.

I had never heard of Robert Adams and went to the local bookstore to try and put the pieces together. I learned Robert Adams was a disciple of Ramana Maharshi, an Indian sage who used self-inquiry to point people toward the truth of their being. He brought to life the ancient Hindu teachings of “nonduality” known as Advaita. Simply put, “All is One.” Many Westerners went to study with Ramana at Arunachala in India from the 1930s until his death in 1950. In Lucknow, India H.W. L Poonja, better known as Papaji, was another disciple of Ramana.

I had heard the name Papaji before. But I hadn’t paid much attention because I thought the Eastern traditions had nothing to offer me. Years

before, I had studied Yogananda, attended Vipassna meditation retreats, dabbled in Buddhism. None of these pursuits ever gave me a sense of fulfillment, only frustration. There were no states of bliss or even stillness. For a long time, I dismissed any teaching that came from the East, and all the teachers whose names ended in “ji”.

But now I was ready to take a fresh look. I learned that Papaji influenced countless seekers, including Gangaji who was one of Papaji’s first students to return to the West and give satsang. While it was interesting to get familiar with the different players on this stage, it was of greater value to discover what they all had in common, the fundamental premise of the *direct path: you are that which you seek*. This is the same message that Eckhart Tolle shares—but with a Western style. I soon discovered that there were many ways of saying the same, simple truth.

I decided to deepen my understanding of this new path and attend Pamela’s week-long retreat in northern New Mexico. My friend Ulli joined me. Since the day we met nearly twenty years ago, Ulli and I have shared the same longing, a kind of passion for the “path.” I could always count on her to read a book I was excited about or attend a workshop with me. It was no surprise that Ulli made plans to join me without any hesitation when I told her she had to meet Pamela. I drove north from Santa Fe, Ulli drove south from Telluride, and we met just in time to set up our camp and make it to the morning satsang.

After the silence at the beginning, I opened my eyes, and Pamela was gazing right back. I melted, and tears spontaneously arose. There was this knowing without a doubt that I am the same loving presence I saw in Pamela’s eyes, a mirror reflecting back my true nature. What I have been looking for all these years is right here inside of me. It was both a relief and a joke. I laughed and cried at the same time.

What made this moment so profound was the realization that Pamela is like me. She’s about the same age, has a similar background, loves chocolate, and likes to hike. Pamela has a normal name. And she’s a woman. It wasn’t a big leap to realize that if Pamela can know her true

nature, why not me? Always before, it felt like this realization was out of reach, something for another lifetime, or for someone else more spiritual or evolved. But now here was an ordinary woman just like me that was awakened. As my mirror, she was reflecting back the very essence of my being. Call it consciousness, presence, awareness, the mystery, life, stillness. It doesn't matter. These are just words describing the indescribable truth of who we are.

So if this is who we are, it is obvious that there is no need to search for anything. That's what the *direct path* is all about. In fact, the very act of seeking keeps us from resting, and it is only when we are at rest that our true nature reveals itself. It's nothing fancy. It isn't what I imagined awakening or enlightenment to be. That was part of my problem. Once I imagined enlightenment was desirable, I thought it was something to have, something to possess, a goal to obtain. But that's impossible because there is no "me" to get enlightened. Quite the opposite, the separate "me" disappears when awakening occurs.

After I met Pamela, I wondered if there were others like her. I found that indeed, there are! I was particularly interested in women because it became apparent that there was something unique about the feminine approach.

In general, men tend to talk about the absolute, the transcendent, the formless. Realizing one's true nature as formlessness is the first step, the approach most of us are familiar with when we think of the old paradigm of enlightenment. But there's another half of the same coin: the world of form including relationships, emotions, love, and compassion. Bringing that into the world—living life fully—is the completion of the circle, sometimes called embodiment.

I see it as the union of the divine and the human, or the Masculine and Feminine, or the union of wisdom and love. Embodiment is the juicy, messy side of life. If we leave out our humanness, spirituality can become dry, intellectual, and boring. While there are now male teachers who offer this same perspective, it is women who seem to more fully embrace and integrate the nitty-gritty of daily life.

The women I spoke with live regular lives—with kids, husbands, dogs, meals to cook, and bills to pay. Yes, they literally radiate peace and presence, but they also experience the inevitable challenges of life—divorce, death, cancer, conflict. Though I call them “teachers” for lack of a better word, that’s not a term the women themselves use because it implies they know something we don’t. They take away the illusion of separation and call themselves “friends.”

In my conversations and research, I found that there are three “tributaries” that influenced most of the women I interviewed:

Advaita: the ancient Hindu philosophy of nonduality as expressed through Papaji and Ramana

Adyashanti: a well-known teacher and author from the Bay Area whose background is in the Zen Buddhist tradition

The Power of Now: a best-selling book by Eckhart Tolle that facilitates the practice of being fully present in each moment.

Each tributary has its own flavor and sometimes different vocabulary, but each says essentially the same thing: the love, the wisdom, the peace you are looking for is always available, right here, right now. It’s not found in a teacher or in a book, not even in the magic of the starry sky.

As you read the stories of these remarkable yet ordinary women, it is my sincere hope that they will be a mirror for you. And in their reflection, you will see the extraordinary truth of who you really are.