

This month we are launching over 300 new Q&As on the Ask Larry webpage!

The Ask Larry Project is a consolidated database of Larry Rosenberg's Q&As throughout his 40-year teaching life at CIMC, IMS, and elsewhere. It is rich with his direct, down-to-earth, playful dialogue with others. The Q&As offer insight into how Larry has engaged various topics, including relationship, death, war, grief and loss, practice, and love. We invite you to explore the site, utilizing the keyword search if there are particular subjects of interest to you. Feel free to share any comments and/or suggestions by emailing Sara Hidalgo at office@cambridgeinsight.org.

In anticipation of writing this piece about the Ask Larry Project, I kept thinking about Thich Nhat Hanh's message about interdependence or interbeing: "'To be' is to interbe. You cannot just be yourself alone. You have to interbe with every other thing."

The Ask Larry Project is a beautiful emanation of the forces of interbeing. From inception to actualization, the project has come alive through the intermingling of many people's wit and care—some recognized below and many more beyond those named here.

Primary among these is Nitin Patel, a long-time member of CIMC and the originator of the project. Acting on a commitment to wisdom and inquisitiveness fostered by his parents and by his childhood in Mumbai, Nitin has devoted part of his life to making dharmic material more accessible to the public. It is because of his remarkable vision and generosity that the Ask Larry Project exists.

Deeply connected to Larry's teaching for years, Nitin was especially moved after watching Marty Ostrow's biographical film "Larry Rosenberg: Long Path Home." The film led Nitin to the website Dharma Seed, then run by Eric Mcord and Eric Woudenburg. Dharma Seed is a free, online archive of dharmic recordings from over 300 teachers. Nitin discovered that much of Larry's extensive teaching – from 1983 to 2017 – could be found within this database. The remaining teachings, from 2018 onward, were already stored at CIMC. With the aid of Éowyn Ahlstrom, a healing arts practitioner well known to CIMC, Nitin was granted permission, from both Larry and Dharma Seed, to utilize all the material. But could there be a way to parse out the valuable Q&A's, often the last twenty minutes of a dharma talk, from this enormous 40-year body of work?

As if a magical facilitator of interbeing began to draw invisible strings, those in the wider community began connecting to the project.

Finale Doshi-Velez was introduced to Nitin by CIMC teacher Zeenat Potia. Finale is the head professor at Harvard's Data to Actionable Knowledge group, and she agreed to help oversee the first step in the project, which involved using artificial intelligence to transcribe all of Larry's audio dharma talks and Q&As. Allison Harris, co-president of the Sloan Leadership and Mindfulness Club at MIT and another contact of Nitin's, helped recruit Leandra Tejedor, then a

master's fellow at MIT in Integrated Design and Management – and a total tech whiz. Leandra's role, among other things, was to create the platform on which these transcribed bits would live; the site that she created is what you see today.

Of course, the early-generation AI transcriptions were notoriously and sometimes comically faulty – rendering “vipassana,” for example, as “pasta.” It was at this stage that I joined the project, to help edit the Q&A transcripts. As an interfaith minister and chaplain with a Buddhist background, I have supported Nitin's various missions throughout the years, and we were both thrilled that this particular one began to gain traction.

When I started a full-time hospital chaplain job, Jen Zehler, a CIMC employee and dharma teacher for kids, took over the majority of the editing work. To give a sense of the enormity of the project, they helped edit and format about 1,200 single-spaced pages of a Word document – there were about 1,700 pages of Q&As total.

These Q&A sound bites then had to be uploaded via a third website server, requiring yet another team. Yogesh Gajjar, a colleague of Nitin's, volunteered his time to write code so that each Q&A and its correlating sound bite could be transferred to the third-party server. A college student named Dhruv Engineer helped with this process. We also collaborated closely with Sky Dog technologies, the company in charge of updating CIMC's website and managing the content capacity.

The Ask Larry Project was overseen throughout by CIMC's then-Executive Director, Lynn Whittmore, and Director of Operations, Clare Donohue. Lynn played a critical management role, especially as an advocate for housing the project at CIMC. Clare was our operational guru, setting up meetings and ensuring that everything ran as scheduled. We are grateful for the new Executive Director, Cindy Krum, and the new Director of Operations, Sara Hidalgo, who have continued CIMC's support of the project.

The Ask Larry webpage currently has about 400 individually numbered Q&As. On the site, you'll notice that each Q&A derives from a specific dharma talk, which is listed by name and date in the Q&A box, e.g., “Lecture: Self Knowing and Terrorist Crisis Q&A, Wednesday, September 19, 2001.” Each Q&A is comprised of both an audio clip and a transcription. Most of the longer dharma talks from which the Q&As were extracted can be found on Dharma Seed. Because many of the Q&A exchanges involved students in the larger CIMC/IMS community, we have left no identifying information to honor the presumption of confidentiality in which they were shared.

An extraordinary blossoming from this project is a forthcoming book – essentially Larry's greatest hits – which have been expertly organized and edited by Madeline Drexler, a journalist, long-time practitioner, and friend of Larry. *The World Exists to Set us Free: Straight-Up Dharma for Living a Life of Awareness* will be published by Shambhala Publications next summer.

It has been a gift to steep in Larry's wisdom via this project for so many moons. Larry has a kind of plainspoken cowboy wisdom that can get straight to the point or that can mosey along a vibrant spiritual landscape. His stories are real, at times funny, at other times tender—and always instructive. Larry's passages about his parents' deaths have moved me to tears. And the questions that people have asked throughout the years grip me with their vulnerability, earnestness, and timelessness. I have also loved how Larry's teachings are a unique synthesis of his lived experiences and wisdom plus the offerings of his many brilliant teachers, from J. Krishnamurti to Seung Sahn Sunim. If I was cranky or low on any particular day, reading (and editing) Larry's exchanges with his students would untie knots in my being and lift my spirits. And I often come back to these two pith instructions of his: The path is about being present, moment to moment, breath by breath – now – *and* meditation practice is blue collar work!

To give you a tiny taste, I'll leave you with one of my favorite quotes. It's from a Q&A session in 1996, where the questioner is asking Larry about the mechanics of breathing. Larry offers some guidance and then shares:

“Finally, meditation is a flowering of love. But it's not cultivated love. It's not a love that you kind of train yourself into. It's intrinsic. It just flows from you, and all of us have it. So you don't need a special technique. Just keep doing what you're doing. Relax into it. Don't be bothered by all the different stirrings that are surrounding the breath. Let the breath take all kinds of different forms. That's fine. Just be with the particular one that's there, and the rest will take care of itself.”

Thank you to those who played a role in the creation of the Ask Larry webpage. Thank you to those receiving its content. Thank you, Larry, for your special cowboy Buddhism. May this treasure trove of your crystalized wisdom and love bring light and nurturement into the world.