

The Community Interview

An interview with John David made in 2006 about the Open Sky House Community

What's the idea of living in this community?

The beautiful thing about our Open Sky House Community is that it doesn't really have any particular idea. It has some point and that is to Awaken to Truth. The point of the community is to make a place, a space, which can be a fertile place for Awakening. Satsang occurring in formal meetings and in the day-to-day life forms the core of the community. We have a program of meditation everyday and through these meditation techniques people become grounded in their body. That is preparing the vehicle.

Preparation also happens through the daily work of the community. In traditional ashrams they do something called karma yoga. This is about work, because the way a community works is a bit different. We don't have any managers and at the same time there are certain jobs that have to be done everyday, so the work is divided up amongst the community members. This is always rotating. For example, taking care of our two babies is a full-time job. We divide it into work for nearly everybody in the community, meaning everybody is looking after the babies for a shorter time. It's lovely for the babies because they meet lots of different people and don't get so particularly conditioned.

All this work has another idea behind, which is to work on yourself. Through the work and working together we get a lot of mirrors. These mirrors are giving us a constant reminder about what's happening inside us. They can mirror our emptiness or they can mirror our busyness. It gives me a chance to see more deeply into each person.

Would you say that there were people who Awakened because they lived in this place or in this community, because they had this support?

I wouldn't say that because over the last three years there has been a number of people who have Awakened who lived in the community and also people who didn't live in the community. I would say it doesn't really depend on the community. However, once the Awakening has happened the community support is helpful, so that people can really ground this Awakening inside them. That is more successful with people who stayed living in the community. In fact, there have been a number of people who chose to live in the community after they had some opening.

Beside that interest to Awaken, what kind of people are living here? What do they do in their normal lives?

There's quite a range of people. We have some photographers and musicians, a language teacher. We even have a businessman who wears a tie and works in a regular office. We have some mothers who look after their own children. We have a whole range of typical kinds of occupations. Everybody works only half of the week outside to make their personal money and the other half of the week they spend in the community. When people are in the house we have lots of tasks to keep the house going for the community and people also offer time to help with the Satsang meetings and retreats.

When eighteen adults and six kids live together one can imagine that there are conflicts, love stories, people leaving, people coming, can you say something about that, how all that works together?

I think that is one of the most remarkable parts of our community story. From the very beginning people have come because they wanted to come and they have also left because they wanted to leave. I think there is always going to be this rotation of people because people come to a limit, the mirrors can be very intense. After sometime it is enough for some people. Funnily enough the intense love that's here can also be enough for some people. We have lots of stories going on in the community, but what is very beautiful in this community is that nobody is really interested in these stories, so nobody will give you support for your story.

That's very uncomfortable because in the normal life we are always trying to get our best friend to agree that our girlfriend has done something awful. But here people are not really interested in that. Although people do come into stories they have some ability to see their own story and in rarer cases where they don't see their story the community comes together with my support and shows them their story. It's a wonderful power of the whole group that the truth emerges out of the circle of people in the meeting. I think this is the key to the success of our community.

Our community has been running for three years and apparently most communities fail after two years. So we have gone through the two-year itch. When there is a strong personal story, in a normal community this could create some kind of egoistic position, and then some of the community support that position and some of the community are against that position, so then you get groups happening within the community. You get politics and power struggles happening. Here that doesn't happen because here we give no energy to the stories. There has never been a case, where we had this kind of egoistic position and politics happening around

that position.

The most difficult situation is when somebody in the community becomes very resistant and very often that resistance is personal towards me. As soon as we all sit together, the energy moves in the group and reveals what is needed to reveal. We can see what we need to see in that moment. Even though it may be painful to see something, there is a loving support from many people. It's like everybody feels constantly loved even when they're in pain.

What is the thing that is most painful for you and which is the most beautiful thing for you?

I think the most painful thing for me is that I get very frustrated at certain moments. For example, when the coordinator of the whole community doesn't answer her mobile phone for the third time in one morning or I go and close six doors in a matter of a few minutes or turn off three or four lights late at night. Sometimes that can build up quite strongly. If I stand back and look at the basic situation of the community I'm always touched. It's been like that for three years. I am always totally amazed that this thing that we call 'the community' has its own kind of beautiful flow.

I think one of the hardest moments happened about nine months ago. It was clear that we must leave the first place where we had the community. When we met to discuss the situation the first question was do we want to continue? That was very easy, just in a moment everybody wanted to continue. The next question was where we would like to move to? We all quickly agreed we'd like to be close to a big city. Then the question was which big city? Miraculously out of the flow of the meeting, it was clear that we all really felt that the countryside near Cologne was the right place.

Almost immediately possible houses started to find us, until after only three weeks we found this house where we are living now. When we first came here it was not believable. It's so beautiful to live next to the river Rhine. We live in a small village only a few minutes from the main motorway between Duesseldorf and Cologne, yet we look across the river into the open countryside. It was very nicely arranged that the only ferry in this area goes across just in front of the house. The house is huge, very well built in the seventeenth century. It's got a wonderful courtyard in the middle with a tree and it's got lots of extra spaces, which we can gradually develop into art studios or dance studios or whatever we like.

It just felt an immense gift when we first found it. Then the owner said, 'Actually I wouldn't like to rent my house to a group' and so it seemed like it was the end. We all liked it so much we came

to the owner, 'Please give us a chance'. Sure enough, it turned out in the next two weeks that he offered us the house, he even decided that ours was the nicest project. So we got this house very easily.

There was an incredible flow that came out of the community energy. Nobody decided, it just happened. Many things are like that in this community. They just happen because it is the right thing. Just to see that working is very beautiful because we can trust in what is happening.

It's a little bit sad when a close friend is leaving the community, but the community goes on. Many nice friends have left, but other people have come. I think it's okay like that because the ones who leave also got something. Maybe they didn't get everything they could get, but they got what they could manage in that moment.

Usually people would imagine that there are rules. How does this organisation work. What kind of rules exist? How do you make decisions within the community?

I think our only rule is that we don't have any rules. There is nothing that I can think of which is what you would call a rule. There is a meditation program and people are expected to attend. But in the end it is up to each individual to decide. We have a weekly meeting of the whole community. Sometimes there is something really hot happening, but a lot of the time it's about very simple things. It's more that we enjoy just being together.

Then we also have a smaller meeting of a third of the community. These coordinators change and they are the ones in charge of the childcare, the kitchen, the office, the Satsang tour, construction - different topics that we have to deal with in the house. Then we have one coordinator who coordinates all the coordinators. This smaller group meets when it's a bit more complicated things - maybe something to do with the landlord, something with some legal matter. These are things that maybe the whole community doesn't really need to talk about. Perhaps this smaller group makes a decision and then brings it to our weekly meeting.

The more personal things may be dealt with directly by me. Usually before I would make any decision I would always talk to some of the residents. Then I try to sense the combined decision, if you like, of that group of people who happen to be there at that time. In that case I am speaking with, in a sense, the common voice, but it is appearing out of John David's mouth. I can't imagine I would decide something against the wishes of everybody else.

I have a very nice picture of how you deal with rules. You once said the community are non-

alcoholics but drinking alcohol from time-to-time, are non-smokers who smoke from time-to-time and are vegetarians who eat meat from time-to-time.

We are vegetarians who are going to have two turkeys for Christmas. (laughing). We are not very dogmatic!

How do people live together? How do they sleep together? Are there separate rooms for families or separate rooms for couples or men and women separated or something like that?

One of the games of the community is that people get moved from room to room maybe every three months. A few people have had their own room. Most people share with another person and there are two bigger rooms where three share. We don't have any official families in the house. Most of the couples have been happy to live here separately.

Those kinds of traditional structures tend to break down here. There is some encouragement with the mothers and our father to loosen the bond, to let this 'my child' melt away and to allow for the community to take care of the children. This is now beginning to work very well. The children seem very happy together and there are many adults who like to take care of the children.

What age are the kids and what kind of life do they live. Do they interact with their parents and with the other people in the community? Do they go to school? Is there any special idea about how to raise children?

We have a nine-year old boy who had a very nice nine-year-old girlfriend in the community, but she left. Now he starts to have friends from his school. We have three little girls who are between four and five years old. They sleep one by the other, with an adult taking care, a different adult each night and the three of them appear to have a wonderful time together. They go to the kindergarten for most of the day. They arrive back about four o'clock with a big burst of energy in the house, like a little happy hurricane arrives.

For the rest of the day we have small tornados from the two babies. We have one little boy who is two years old and a little girl who is a few months younger. We have a double seat pram for them and they have really a very sweet time together. The little boy can walk very well and the little girl is just learning and they are very much friends. We have one adult taking care of them all the time and this adult is changing. As far as the parents go, they have the normal access like everybody else in the community, but naturally they also become more involved in things like

taking their child to the doctor.

Almost every child has two or three mummies and two or three daddies and they appreciate that. It's easy to see that in the last few months the natural bond that it has to be mommy or it has to be daddy is not so important anymore. They start to have a nice time with different adults. They choose their own favorites. I would say that the babies are much more self-contained than normal babies. They have more independence. They don't need constant attention. In that way they seem a little different from other children. But it is early days to really see what effect living in a community will have on these children. Now that we have some basic childcare organized, we start to be interested in different kinds of ideas about bringing up children, but this is a new development.

Would you like to add anything?

I would like to say something about creativity. This community started off as a Satsang community around the theme of wanting to know who we are, and as I explained, that is the main point of the community. In fact, what is beginning to develop since we lived in this house, this beautiful house, is that different kinds of creativity start to emerge. For example, on Monday evening we had the idea of a concert and this has started with our own musicians, but then they organised other friends to come and now already, over the last five months, we must have had between fifteen and twenty recitals. Very different, very wonderful and it creates a wonderful sense of musical creativity in the house. This was very much supported right from the beginning because the landlord has lent us his grand piano.

Then we have painters and photographers in the house and so we decided to open an art gallery. So in the public part of the house we have now quite a big art gallery. At the moment we have an exhibition with fifty paintings and fifteen photographs. We have sculptures from three different artists. We have ceramics from three different potters. We have antique Buddhas from China and Thailand. We are starting to develop a greeting card and art print office. The idea being as we have exhibitions we will make prints of the artist work available.

There are different kinds of creativity happening. For example, this week we have started Open Sky Press for publishing books and two weeks ago opened the Rhine River Guest House. We are gradually developing all kinds of businesses where we can work together. Because we have so much space here we also would like to invite other people to use this place for their own seminars. Gradually we would like to organise seminars and music concerts. When we get a bit stronger we would love to have our own arts festival here. This seems to be developing quite

naturally.

Do you think many people could live here? Are you inviting more people? Is there space for more people?

I think more people are invited. We don't really know how many are going to come, but luckily our landlord owns another apartment and another small house where more people could stay. We just have to watch how it is going to develop. What seems to be happening is we're getting a lot of volunteers coming to spend some time in the house and out of those volunteers some of the people will naturally become residents.

It's a very big decision to leave your work, to leave your family, to leave your place of living and to move to a community. We have seen that it brings up a lot of fear for people. We prefer people to come first as a volunteer and then naturally a decision comes to stay as a resident.

As we have only been going in this house for six months, it seems to be remarkably blessed. My own sense is that many people will come. Maybe some of the dance studios will have to be dormitories. Funnily enough our landlord likes visiting us because he likes what we are doing here. I remember one day he was saying, 'Oh! That's a very nice lunch'. I said, 'We have that everyday'. In that way people are enjoying to come here. It's not only what happens in the house, it's also very beautiful just outside the house. We have a little yacht harbor right in front of us and constantly these big ships are passing by on the Rhine. Just outside the house there is a beautiful park.

In the last month, for the second year running now, the whole community has been busy with Christmas markets. This has been actually quite profitable and has allowed half of the community to have the money to go to the Indian retreat. So we are not separate from the world. In this last month we have been very much out engaging people in these markets.

What is your part in the community as a Satsang teacher, as John David? How do you support the people?

We have a Satsang meeting every week. This creates a certain coming together of everybody. Then we have our retreats that happen at least once a month. In that way there are a lot of formal Satsang meetings. Anything that is there for anybody, there is always a meeting where you can share about it. As we are a community, we have Satsang twenty-four hours a day. It never stops and so in the daily workings of the community, there are many opportunities to have

some interaction with John David, but also with all the other people in the community. In that sense there is a continuous support from John David, but also from everybody.

I could say there is also a continuous reminder when you try to escape into 'my life', and so everybody who lives in the community is committing to a very intense life. For example many people have the idea, 'I must have my own room'. In the ordinary life maybe it's very important to have your own room, but funnily enough when you come to live in this community it's not very important anymore. In fact, people are positively enjoying to share space together. Maybe one person brushes their teeth and somebody else sits on the toilet. These kinds of things just happen naturally. It's just that the flow takes everybody into being much less in 'my', and so there is much more personal sharing happening here. The three little girls, they're always sharing their clothes.

These personal structures about a man and what a man wants, and how it has to be, all this stuff just gradually breaks down here naturally. In a way there is nowhere to hide and that sometimes feels uncomfortable. From outside it looks like it would be very uncomfortable, but it's not really because there is a lot of love here. This is a quality which you can't quite imagine when you read these words. This love is a kind of lubrication around everything that happens in the community.

Now this community is becoming rather international. When we started there were mainly Germans living in the community. Now we also have people from Australia, Belgium, France, Denmark and Russia. So we already have quite a few different nationalities. This is a rare experiment, it's not so easy to find such a community. In fact, I don't know even one other community like this.

What are the main differences between this community and other communities?

I think the main difference is that the focus is about spiritual Awakening. Everybody in the community wants to know who they are, where as almost nobody in the wider society wants to know who they are. To have a whole community of people wanting to know, that makes it remarkable. Everybody in the community has taken John David to be their spiritual master and John David has accepted that, so we are on a journey together.

That creates a totally unique situation, I really enjoy that. There is definitely sometimes frustration in the day-to-day life, but basically it's a very wonderful way to live and it's a wonderful way for a spiritual teacher to live. His whole dream is to find people who are really interested. Many teachers are constantly travelling looking for those people. I myself have been

doing it for nine years. After nine years I have found eighteen people. That's not so bad. Jesus only found twelve! So we are doing quite well here.

How can you be sure that all the people that are with you at the moment are really interested in Awakening?

It's because I see Awakening a little bit differently. I don't see that people are getting something, called Awakening. I see everybody already Awakened. I see Awakening as our True Nature and so what's happening in the community is to scrape away the old rubbish in order to reveal this Awakening. I think that everybody is interested in that.

There are times when people become resistant and not much progress happens. We've tried to be very patient about this situation, so some resistant people have lived in the community for a longer time. It's always a little bit difficult for everybody. Occasionally we have asked people to leave. When somebody was not able to really change their resistance and this caused some trouble in the community, they were asked to leave.

What do you mean by resistance and how does it express on the outside?

I think it appears in different ways. It can be some kind of sudden resistance or it could be something that gradually happens over a longer time. It is usually connected with some deeper fear. This fear seems to be too difficult. There is some kind of sense, 'Oh, this is too horrible, this is going to be too painful, this is something I just don't want to look at' and sometimes maybe the person can't really look. One of my roles is to facilitate some understanding about those painful structures.

They start saying no more than yes and you quite quickly feel the flow isn't with them so much. They tend to get in their own flow, which is not so flowing, they separate themselves. In the daily life of the community they become rocks and the flow passes them by. Occasionally John David gets his Zen stick out and hits them hard over the top of the head and that often works. It could be just an email, a bit of a chat or just even a glance. There are different degrees of resistance.

This resistance has a certain potentiality because as the energy gets dammed up; - the resistance is like a dam - often this is an opportunity. Things can change very fast. There was one lady who I sent out of two meetings. She didn't like that very much. Her response was to become very resistant and announce to everybody that she was going to leave because John David is a terrible person. In her case, nobody said anything and after three or four days this just

changed by itself. So everyone has a particular situation. These moments of deep resistance are an opportunity to see something and to flow on.

Are you provoking resistance?

Not exactly provoking resistance, but provoking. I am provoking structures to expose themselves, which may then cause resistance. So indirectly I am provoking resistance. But the real point is to expose things that people don't see. Actually it's very interesting because when we think of structures we nearly always think of something horrible. In fact, the structures that people don't see can be beautiful things. People have such a big inner judge about themselves being terrible that they don't see the structures which are really beautiful.

My job is not only to expose structures which you could call negative, but also what you could call positive structures. You can even be resistant to your own beauty. Some people are so attached to the idea that, 'I am not good enough'. It's very hard to come through that kind of belief.

In conclusion I would say that if anybody is reading this and would be interested to experience our community, just come. Don't think about it because you can't really imagine something like this community. However your ideas are they are going to be surprised in this place. Just come and spend a little time and see if you like it or not. Our community is very open and everybody is welcome.

Thank you for this very nice interview, John David. It is an honor for me to listen and to ask you some things.

Nobody would imagine that last week you needed a couple of strong hits over the head! Out of those meetings it's very much flowing now.

Yes, I have the same impression.