

Rehab Your Reality

Once a fixture on London's lesbian nightlife scene, author Valerie Mason-John shows us how to find inner peace. ★ By Malinda Lo

Valerie Mason-John is a woman who has been there and done that — and somehow found a way out to the other side. When she explains how her life has transformed from one of “champagne and cocaine” to one centered on mindfulness and helping others, it's clear that her transformation is no Hollywood-style quickie conversion marked by a red Kabbalah string bracelet; Mason-John's the real deal. Ordained into the Western Buddhist Order with the Buddhist name Vimalasara, Mason-John is gifting the rest of us with her hard-won wisdom in her most recent spiritual self-help book, *Detox Your Heart*.

“It's a guide, a spiritual guide,” she explains. “Basically, all I'm saying is we have to learn to love ourselves, really. That's been my journey, because I've had so much self-hatred. I've made a lot of progress, but I'll be working with it for the rest of my life.”

As a child in Britain, Mason-John grew up in orphanages and was physically and sexually abused. By the age of 14 she was living on the streets, and a year later she entered a juvenile detention center. Luckily, she later found her way to Leeds University in the late 1970s, where she became part of the lesbian separatist movement. “There was a very strong lesbian organization called Women Against Violence Against Women,” she recalls. “I was at the age — 18, 19 — when you're beginning to think about the world ... and that was, in a way, what gave me my political reference.”

After college, Mason-John became an international journalist, covering the Aboriginal land rights movement in Australia and the volatile situation in Northern Ireland. At the same time, she continued to be very involved in the lesbian community. “I've always been a dyke,” she says. “I've always had relationships with women, and the lesbian separatist movement shaped me and shaped how I thought, and what I ate and what I did.”

In 1991, she co-authored *Making Black Waves*, one of the first books about black and Asian lesbians in the United Kingdom. She later produced the hit show *Sin Dykes*; worked as a women's nightclub promoter; produced the politically charged Lesbian Beauty Contest; and was the artistic director of London's Mardi Gras Festival, where Mason-John recalls she lived “a very high-powered, fast life in that gay men's world” while working for Elton John's manager and Leonardo DiCaprio's agent.

“[I was] very much in that ... champagne, cocaine world. I can't blame it all on them 'cause I was into champagne and cocaine before this,” she admits with a grin. But she eventually found that high-powered lifestyle unfulfilling. “What happened was that I can remember just feeling dissatisfied. And I can remember ... waking up one morning and thinking, I want my brain back.”

At a transcendental meditation class, she found what would later change her life. “I went along to that first meditation ... and I had such a strong experience that I just knew that was it.” She began meditating with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, a Buddhist movement founded in London that has since grown into a worldwide spiritual community.

Through meditation, Mason-John says, “Two very profound things happened. I think the first thing was doing the metta bhavana and actually coming off of retreat and thinking, ‘Oh my God, the whole world is changing,’ and actually what was happening was I was changing.” Metta bhavana is a type of Buddhist meditation that cultivates feelings of loving kindness toward everyone, including those considered to be enemies.

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big political rift [and] people were never going to speak to each other again, and here I am — one day I'm walking along the road, bump into somebody I was never going to speak to again, and I smile. So it had a really huge effect on me.”

Meditation and Buddhism, which teaches that there is no fixed sense of self, also prompted her to begin letting go of labels, whether they be her identity as a lesbian or as a black woman. That has in turn pushed her to broaden her artistic and personal horizons. “I can't stop myself writing things,” she says. “I think what's changed is that I'm not just writing for a lesbian audience now.”

Her first novel, *Borrowed Body*, which was published in 2005 and nominated for the Young Minds Book Award, “is definitely for a general audience.” The novel is about the life of a young, black girl growing up in U.K. orphanages in the 1970s. “It became too restrictive ... to say that I'm a black writer or I'm a lesbian writer. And of course as black people, as lesbians, we live out in the world. ... I don't just have to write about black people, and I don't just have to write about lesbians.”

But, adds Mason-John, “I feel very grateful to my lesbian and gay audience, because they're the ones who have supported me and believed in my work in whatever I've done.” ■

For more information on Mason-John, visit valeriemason-john.co.uk.