

Liz Lawlor and Don Riley

Interviewed by Nathan Bowman in Wichita, KS

June 20th, 2015

Abstract: Oral history interview with Liz Lawlor and Don Riley of Southwind Sangha, an affiliate of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, in Wichita, KS. This interview was conducted at Panera Bread near the group's primary location. The interview includes discussion of Southwind Sangha's formation and relationship to the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, each interviewee's own story of becoming Buddhist, their thoughts on meditation, and their role in the local community. This interview was conducted for the Religion in Kansas Project as part of a summer fieldwork internship funded by the Friends of the Department of Religious Studies.

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Nathan: To begin, could you discuss how long has this group been meeting, how did it start, has it always been associated with the Soto Zen School, etc?

Don: There preexisted a Buddhist group. They met on the West side of town. They didn't have a dedicated room like we did. I don't know when it was formed. I'm going to say probably the early 90's, and I know at one time they followed the Korean Zen tradition, which still relied a lot on sitting. That went on for a while, then Catherine had joined the group and she had a Soto Zen background of the same as we did, and that group didn't dissolve, it just kind of transformed into Soto Zen and started calling itself Southwind Sangha Soto Zen. I don't think they used the word "center" at that time. I think they just called it Southwind Sangha. Later on we incorporated. That was within the last 10-12 years so we're a 501-c organization now, non-profit under IRS. We've had several locations. We've been in a Unitarian church, an old one. We've been in a newer Unitarian church. They just built a new one and moved. Then we've been at our present location, which you sat in, the place near Hillside near the university. That's kind of the history. The group has always been pretty small. At retreats we've had attendance up to 15 or so. On the Saturday retreats it's frequently between five and eight. It does go up to ten or twelve sometimes. Then our regular services that aren't retreats are just an hour long services, typically have three to six people. So it's a small group. That's kind of the history. You asked about more than history.

Nathan: You're also an affiliate of the center in Atlanta. Is that correct?

Don: Yes

Nathan: Is there a whole lot of interaction between this organization and the larger one and does that affect any of the practices on the local level?

Don: I'll let Liz talk about the discussion group that she mentioned in her talk. We started out as an affiliate of Atlanta almost right away because Catherine, my wife, had been in Atlanta and had a

connection with the teacher there, Michael Elliston, whose Japanese dharma name is Zenkai Taiun. As an affiliate, we needed a transmitted teacher. He's a transmitted teacher, what some people call a Zen Master, although they are not necessarily always the same. He has training under a couple of different schools, plus the original Matsuoka Roshi, who was mentioned in the talk. There is also what is called a Silent-Thunder order which is made up roughly of representatives of the different sanghas. There varies between eight to nine or twelve to thirteen sanghas. They are all over the country and even in Canada. The Silent-Thunder order is a thing that was started three or four years ago, and it's also 501-c and so is Atlanta, as kind of a support organization. Sensei in Atlanta just got tired of making every decision, administrative, teaching, and everything else, so he wanted some priests and disciples to support his decision, especially administrative decisions rather than spiritual. Also, we have a tie that Liz can talk about, with this discussion group and some other things on the internet.

Liz: Well, the Silent-Thunder order tries, because it's not a place, I mean, it's kind of housed at the Atlanta Soto Zen center, but it's really the umbrella organization for all of these different sanghas and it's just more, I wouldn't say internet based, but we try to have activities like the discussion group. The discussion group is really from Silent-Thunder but anybody can participate. You don't have to be part of the group. And that would be something that the Silent-Thunder order does that provides support to individuals. Like, I'm in Ness City, KS and there's really not a lot going on. There are actually some people that would subscribe to Buddhism but the idea is just too foreign to all get together as a group, so everybody just meditates on their own. So for people that want to practice that don't have a real strong sangha close to them, then it gives them an opportunity to participate. So, I drive into Wichita just once a month, but weekly I have a connection with the Skype sessions. So the board meets through Skype, and I think on the board there are people from Nova Scotia, Montana, Kansas, Nashville, Florida, Massachusetts, and everybody has had a connection with Sensei in some form or another.

Don: You could get a lot of information, if you want even more detail. The Silent-Thunder order has a very active website. It's more involved than ours. It has audio of some of the discussions and a lot about our structure. Liz is very active in communication and the dharma discussions. She kind of helps plans what the topics are. She's a giant of the Silent-Thunder.

Liz: As the secretary you have a lot of stuff to do

Nathan: To take it a step down to individual practice, did either of you have experience in other forms of Buddhism? Did you just discover Zen and that was it? What spoke to you about Zen specifically?

Liz: For me, I was probably what would be considered a book Buddhist. I actually called the place in Garden City which may be the same place you went to, and they spoke Vietnamese.

Nathan: It was the same place.

Liz: And it was "call back, call back." So I did when an English speaking person was there, who told me about the life of Buddha then hung up, so I think that was all he could say in English. He didn't say anything else. So I was like, "there's no place to practice" so I just read. I tried several magazines, front to cover, books. Then I found out about the Wichita group in the Tricycle Magazine. I came, and didn't

really start then. Then I looked at all the groups. I looked at the one in Kansas City, and the one in Lawrence, and decided that Wichita would be the easiest to get to, and they were Soto Zen, so that's what I did. It turned out to be a very good match, but I didn't choose Zen, Zen chose me. So that's my story in a nutshell.

Don: In my childhood I was a Christian. I've been a Christian, and atheist, then just spiritual. I felt like I need something organized at the end of the 90's, early 2000's, and my daughter sent me a book on comparative religion. So I read through it and read about Judaism, and Hindus, Muslims, and various religions, and when I read Buddhism, boy, that really just rang a bell with me. So I immediately happened to find in the newspaper that they were going to give meditation lessons, the typical first Wednesday of the month instruction. So, I went to it and I thought it would be more teaching. Exactly what you went through this morning is what I went through and I thought that this was more like a Yoga class or something, and I didn't come back for about 6 months. I think, actually, Liz and I got participatory about the same time. I finally went back and heard a few talks, went to a few retreats, and realized that reading was encouraged, and there were discussions, they were just kind of below the radar unless you went for a bit. Then I started going to Atlanta for some longer term retreats. They have anywhere from 3-9 days, where you sit 9 hours a day for days at a time. It's kind of a marathon. But that's how I got into it.

Nathan: Something specific that I noticed this morning was that everybody, when they are meditating, faces the wall. I was wondering, why is that? What is the significance of that?

Liz: My understanding is that it's the withdrawal from sensory. Vision is a strong sense, so you sit where there is nothing to look at. There is nothing there. And so, you're even more incapable of focusing on anything, because if there is something there, you're going to focus on it. I think it is significant, though I wouldn't be able to explain why its significant other than to facilitate and put you more in that...Joseph Campbell, he has said that the function of the churches is to take you out of society and take you into a realm that is not the ordinary. I don't think that it is necessarily that way with Zen, out of the ordinary, because Zen is the ordinary, but it is a way of taking you to that center, to your center, and withdrawing as much as you can. So there is stillness and nothing to look at. You don't play music. You don't purposefully put anything there to hear as well. I have tried to sit not facing the wall, and it doesn't work very well. I mean, when I'm doing *ino* I'm sitting as best as I can, but there is stuff there, and you have to watch the clock anyway, so it's different than when I'm sitting and facing the wall. That would be the best way I can explain it.

Don: I would just add some footnotes. Rinzai Zen does face the center. They're more intellectual. Actually, when they are sitting, they do not non-engage in deliberate thought as much. Another thing is that Dogen has this very basic talk that he gave where he said "find a quite place, not too warm, not too cold, not too light, not too dark" which is kind of a middle way between everything. So, facing the wall is maybe, not a middle way, but I think it's a practice that more has to do with what Liz says. The less sensory experience you have, especially when you are just a beginner, I guess we're always beginners, but I found it a lot easier to have a very sterile atmosphere when I started. I can sit now and I can look at something that busy and not be affected by it that much. In fact, at first, I was sitting in Atlanta one

time in front of this curtain that had very few things, but it was woven, and Sensei grabbed me and moved me where I had nothing but a wall. He knew that probably wasn't going to work out.

Nathan: Are there any other things about Soto Zen specifically that you think are unique, specifically with the mediation practices, compared to other forms of Zen, or Buddhism in general?

Don: Tibetan has three or four forms of mediation. We just have one. They have a concentrated meditation, like where you look at a candle and focus on that. You remember Alison said there are even Zen groups that even emphasize the breath a lot more, and you follow the breath through the whole thing. I think the way we differ is just don't engage in deliberate thought and notice what your mind is. How you really don't have very much control over it. Can you think of anything else?

Liz: I think it's also the emphasis on not getting anywhere. We, a lot of times, will have a discussion on Monday night, with Catherine throwing some things in, and we always end in "well, we didn't get anywhere. There was not conclusion." Perfect conclusion.

Don: I loved your statement this morning about "I know the answer to this, but I don't know the question." That was very Zen.

Liz: I think the idea that you sit, but you really have to drop all reason for sitting, and if you have a goal, or a prize, then you're not sitting *zazen*. It's that *shikantaza*, doing just to be doing. I read a lot of Tibetan Buddhism, and I wanted to be Tibetan Buddhist, but I'm Tibetan, although I love their jewelry. I do wear a lot of the jewelry. But there seems to be more of a process or a goal. "This is how you do the meditation and this is what you do when you're meditating." In *zazen*, it's not so simple to explain exactly what to do. In fact, it's said you are not suppose to read anything. Just sit. Don't try to figure out what you're doing. Just do it.

Don: Before you move on, would you tell him about the sewing practice after he asks the next question? Go ahead.

Nathan: To bounce off of that, and bring up something that was discussed in your talk today, and it's kind of a big question. This idea of just sitting, and it being hard to explain, what is the relationship in your mind between *zazen*, just sitting, and being out in the world, and interacting with people?

Liz: I think for me, and I don't know if this is going to answer your question, but for me it is the idea, for instance, when I first started Zen one of my very first questions to Sensei during a *dokusan* [interview] was "what is the Zen way of getting people to do what you want them to do?" Can you tell me, what is the proper way to just mold people into what I need from them? So, it's a looking out "how do YOU need to change? How does my husband need to change? How do the people around me need to change?" Instead, what the "just sit" is, is just bringing it back to you. "What do I need to do?" So, like, when I walk into the classroom, when I get off of my cushion and walk into the classroom, I know that there are certain elements of effective instruction for kids in wheelchairs that don't talk and don't move very much. I know the effective instruction. The teacher doesn't have this knowledge. They don't. How do I get effective program for that student? Well, I can't walk in, which I have done at one time, I

mean, I've tried that, It doesn't work, saying "you do this..." and when you make it less about you and you open up to what are some other possibilities other than "that teacher doesn't care about them, because obviously that teacher doesn't care about them because when I walk in and tell them what the right thing to do is they would do it! They don't care! They just won't do it. Why am I the only one who cares?" Get out of that mode, and then you can go in and say "Okay, how do we solve this? What's this problem? What's this problem?" And you do more listening than you do talking, and you figure out how to make things work. There are those people out there, who are jerks, but there are not that many people, and sometimes they're a jerk for a reason. Sometimes there is a reason for what it is that they're doing, and you need compassion for that, and that's a very hard thing to do. I like Harold's statement too, that he found himself having compassion for the shooter. That means your Zen is working. It's not that you don't have compassion for the people that were shot; not at all. It's just that you can see the broader picture, and you still know, even though you have compassion for the shooter, that that's not something he should have done. So, it's being able to handle that whereas before, it was "you did something wrong, now scratch you off, you're a worthless piece of...you know." I don't know if that answers your question.

Don: With that question, Sensei often uses a metaphor. He says that there is a mountain and you start here [at the bottom] where Liz and I started and you climb that mountain. You read more, study more, sit a long time, and you get to the peak of the mountain. This is what Dogen says "rivers and streams aren't rivers and streams anymore. Like Liz talked about mountains walking. Your mind is so liberated that engaged in abstract thinking at this peak. Well that's not awakening. Then you begin to come back down the mountain, and being more and more applying *zazen* and the teachings to your everyday life. You begin to live it instead of study until you get down here [the other side of the mountain] and we call that the marketplace. You go out into the marketplace and no one would even know you're a Buddhist. You act a certain way, you're mindful. There are even some pictures, called the Oxford pictures, and the last picture is this guy just kind of looking, with his arms hanging, and he's just walking around. So, the real goal is awakening, which is not this great high spiritual state. It's being in reality. To be engaged in reality, without any colored glasses or prejudice eyes, predispositions. That's awakening. So that's what we go for. We don't really carry things that we've learned out into the marketplace life. We just live life. That's something that maybe points to what we do.

Nathan: What was the metaphor you were...

Don: The metaphor is the mountain.

Nathan: The one you asked her to discuss?

Don: Oh, sewing. That goes back to the original question about how we're different

Liz: Well, another thing that would be different is the sewing tradition. Dogen brought that to Japan and then it has been carried on here and it was almost lost. But, sewing your robe, and I didn't bring my vestment in, but I sewed the *rakusu* that I had on. When you become an ordained priest, you sew your robe and you sew your bowing mat, your *zafu*, and then transmitted is the same thing. So, we do that as part of this Soto Zen group, and I think a lot of Soto Zen groups do that. It's called sewing practice,

and I think it's the Minnesota site, I'll send you the link, because you sew the robe in a certain way, and you do it by hand. It's all by hand. It's kind of, I hate to use the word mindfulness, but it's kind of a motion in stillness. So, the sitting is still, but there's a lot going on too. I think one of my favorite things that I learned from zenku was Matsuoka's statement. Someone asked him "how do you know when you're doing *zazen*?" and he said "sitting is numb to the feeling" thinking that it's an active thing even though you're very still, so the motion of stillness, as well as the stillness of motion. So, for me the sewing practice is the stillness of motion. I do sewing when somebody needs somebody sewed. I volunteer to do that. I don't know who all is a certified sewing teacher, but we work with Karen, and woman from Wisconsin. So, that would be another thing that Soto Zen does.

Don: Now the robes that we sew are seven paneled robes, and I don't know how long it took Liz, but it took me Saturday afternoons for three hours, almost every Saturday afternoon for about a year because you have to go around them several times, and there is a certain stitch you use. It's not a real fancy stitch. In fact it's probably pretty simple. And actually, with each stitch you're supposed to say homage to Buddha. Of course, they're not that fast and usually you screw up and have to tear out a whole line of stitching. It's also a patience practice and well as mindfulness because you are going to screw up, and it's really frustrating because you maybe have an hour or two into this and all of a sudden it didn't work for some reason or another.

Nathan: I have a couple more questions, and they are about the local community. Is there any interaction between Southwind and other local Buddhist organizations?

Don: No.

Nathan: No?

Don: Well, I've gone to Sunflower which is a Thích Nhất Hạnh, I don't know whether you've heard of Thích Nhất Hạnh or not, that's kind of their focus is on his teachings. And I've gone to, there's a Phap Temple, it's Vietnamese. I've gone there several times for their services; also they brought the Jade Buddha, which is an 8ft tall Buddha made from jade brought in from some Southeast Asian country.

Liz: Vietnam.

Don: Vietnam. You know, I say "no" and that's really not true. There's a bunch of Thai monks. The Thai monks are a totally different Theravadan. We're Mahayana, and they're Theravadan. It couldn't be more different. They just have monks, and the lay people don't pay a whole lot of attention and you really can't get awakened unless you're a monk. You really don't sit or do anything unless you're a monk. But, there's a book called "What the Buddha Taught", and the leader wanted his young monks from Thailand to know how to speak English better. They knew how to read it and everything. So, Catherine read the whole book in English to them so that they could hear her speak the words and they could kind of practice. Then we had one of the young Thai monks come and sit with us. So, there's not a lot of interaction. There's not a big interfaith umbrella group in Wichita. Each group is pretty isolated other than those incidental contacts.

Nathan: What about non-Buddhist religious groups? Is there any contact there? Christian groups for instance? I know there is a church right across the street from you guys practice.

Don: Yeah, they own the building. Now I've gone to a couple of different churches and told them about *zazen* and a little bit about Buddhism. Some of the colleges are private Christian colleges that come and visit us. There's not a lot of interfaith. We did send a delegate, Adele, to the interfaith ministries and she went to some dinners and things like that, but I don't know what they did. I've had some interaction with a Hindu group too. I have some friends who are Hindus, which is a little bit similar to Buddhism. There are some similarities. They'd let me go and chant some of my chants, and then they'd sing beautifully. We don't have much of a musical tradition in Zen.

Liz: I think when we were at the Unitarian, Adele was a Unitarian so there would be a little connection there, but since we don't go there anymore, we don't practice there, that really isn't there anymore, but while we were there, there would be some activities, like when Sensei would come in, he'd give a public talk at the Unitarian Church and they would help advertise it and things like that. But we don't do that with the church we're at now that I'm aware of. That's about all I can think of.

Don: Their minister was Hindu at the Unitarian Church, and one time Sensei and he gave a joint talk when Sensei was in town for a retreat, kind of comparing their religions.

Nathan: Last question, kind of simple, vague, and open ended, but it gets to the theme of my project in general and gives you a chance to sound off: what's it like being a Buddhist in Kansas?

[laughter]

Don: Tell him about the concealed carry!

Liz: Well in my neck of the woods, lonely. I think that the people who know me and know I practice and am a practicing Buddhist are very accepting I would say. I did visit a couple of times with a minister from one of the local churches, but most of the churches are too conservative to allow any kind of a Buddhist thing. I tried to get a mediation thing going there, saying it won't be anything about Buddhism. We'd just go and meditate. The minister was open to it, but for some reason, I don't know why, it didn't seem to work. So, I would say that, for the most part, if you don't know me very well, I don't tell you that I'm a Buddhist. But anybody that's close enough that something may come up like "what are you doing this weekend?" "Oh, it's my retreat to Wichita." In fact, we have some good friends, who are Christian, and they know every third Saturday we're not around. Even a couple of weeks ago, the wife, who you may not think would not be all that open, at one time she probably would not have been, would say "now I know this weekend is your Buddhist thing so we can't meet then" so very open. So, I would say lonely, but maybe that's not it. It's a tough question, I wouldn't really know how to answer that other than it works, for me.

Nathan: Fair enough.

Liz: I probably get more grief from my mother than anyone else. She's not pleased by it.

Don: I have a lawyer that I office with. He's actually the landlord, and he is a fundamental Christian. I too don't tell people I'm a Buddhist. If they ask I'll answer honestly. If they ask "what's your religion" I'll answer honestly, but you have to be really close to me before I will volunteer it. I probably haven't volunteered it outside of this group to more than a half-dozen people, although a lot more know it. But, I'd say he wants to convert me. This was his statement "Don, when I go to heaven, I want to see you there to greet me." I'm a lot older than he is. So, it runs the gamut from wanting to convert me to Christianity to indifference to "That's interesting." Usually people don't want to know much about it they just say it's kind of interesting. A lot of times they'll ask some of the questions you did "how did you become Buddhist? You're Caucasian. You don't talk funny." Being Buddhist in Kansas, probably our political bend if way out of kilter with the politics of most Kansans. I think the tendency for at least the Buddhists I've been around, to be somewhat liberal, and, well you know Kansas so I won't have to tell you how that works.

Nathan: Indeed.

Don: So we don't fit in very well politically and maybe even culturally. Being a Buddhist in Kansas is probably pretty much staying under the radar as much as anything because it makes people, like in an interview, I would never say I am a Buddhist. Fortunately they can't ask you questions about religion because of federal acts. But I would imagine 75% of the employers wouldn't hire you because they'd think you're odd. That's probably true not just in Kansas, though the percentage would go up and down. If I were a Buddhist I don't think I'd go anywhere in the country except maybe San Francisco and say that I was a Buddhist to a potential employer.

Liz: Well, as you were talking, I thought on the one hand, being a Buddhist in a place where there aren't a lot, I really had to question "is that really what I want? Is that really the path I want to go on?" and because of the tension with my mother, not necessarily with my family members in general, but with my mother, I don't want to cause her grief, and it certainly does cause her grief, am I sure that this is the path I should be on? Am I sure, because I don't want to go on a path a cause grief for no reason, just to be my usually self with her. And then being in Ness City, its three hours by car to [Wichita], you really have to be committed to it. So it has deepened the practice, and I have to have a home practice because I only do [the retreat] once a month. I don't know if my practice would be where it is now if I were in a place with the availability or there was more support around me. I've had to seek it, and I've had to do it. Like the Skype sessions. That's one of the reasons I hardly ever miss a Skype session and that's one of the reasons because I don't have the opportunities there much so the opportunities that are there I make sure I do. So, that occurred to me as you were talking and I thought "well, you know, on the one hand, it's probably a good thing that I'm a Buddhist in Kansas because I don't know if my practice would be as deep as it is if it were more readily available"

Don: I didn't think of it from that standpoint. What is it from your standpoint, not the standpoint of others? I would say exactly the same thing. There is such a contrast it makes me think about it more often. If I were surrounded by Buddhists it would be like a fish in water. I wouldn't be aware of the water. But since we're flopping around on dry land, we're very aware of the water.