Mike Malcolm
Interviewed by Nathan Bowman in Wichita, KS
July 16th, 2015

Abstract: Oral history interview with Mike Malcolm, co-director of Wichita Karma Thegsum Chöling (KTC) in Wichita, Kansas. This interview was conducted at Malcolm’s home in Wichita, Kansas which is also the location of the Wichita KTC temple. This interview includes discussion of Malcolm’s history with Wichita KTC, his own story of becoming Buddhist, his thoughts on meditation, and his interaction in the interfaith 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: First I was wondering if you could give a brief description of how this specific center in Wichita started. What went behind starting it? Specifically, what went behind the location? Was it associated with the Karma Kagyu lineage from the beginning?

Mike: Yeah, it started with the Karma Kagyu lineage. Greg Smith was the guy who started the center. We actually started meeting at his house. I actually came in after the initial...He brought in Kathy Wesley back in 1996, either ‘95 or ‘96, and they met at Border’s book store over on Rock Road, and that’s where the core group formed. Then, shortly after that, he brought in Bardor Tulku Rinpoche from KTD [KARMA TRIYANA DHARMACHAKRA] and that’s where I started. I saw Bardor Tulku, in the spring of 1996 at Pine Valley Church, and we had probably 200 people that were there. It was an excellent teaching. I started meeting at Greg’s house and we would meet for three hours every Sunday. We would do an hour of sitting, an hour of Chenrezik, and an hour of book discussion. Greg has an encyclopedic knowledge of Buddhism, and I got an excellent foundation in Buddhism from Greg Smith. It was Karma Kagyu from the beginning. Lama Kathy is a lama from Columbus, Ohio. She had one of the first Kagyu centers, I understand, in the United States. She’s a student of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and that’s who Greg originally started sitting with. He went to a teaching of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche when he was a student, I believe at Ohio State University, a graduate student I want to say. I don’t know. He started studying with Lama Kathy, and he came after he graduated. He got a job at Newman University as a psychology professor and started the center here in Wichita with the blessings of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

Nathan: That’s great. Could you discuss a little more how you began practicing with the group? Did you have experiences with other Buddhist groups? Was there specifically about the Tibetan tradition and this lineage that spoke to you as opposed to other forms of Buddhism?

Mike: I don’t know. Whenever you get asked that question it becomes... it’s nice to talk about yourself, and then there’s a lot of detail. You could go back to when I was a kid and walking through the park and saw some guy mediating, and really it happened, and I just remember that having an impression on me. There was a Western show, is it David Kane was a blind Kung Fu master? So there was that kind of. And then there was all that that you kind of grew up with in the 70’s, so I think that kind of laid the foundation. You just get
hints of it. But anyway, I got to it fundamentally, I was in D.C., and my life kind of fell apart in DC. Bad relationship and I had found two books at a bookstore in DuPont circle. One was *Rain of Wisdom* and one was *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, both we talked about tonight. And they were phenomenal, but when I came back to Wichita, I wanted to study Zen Buddhism because it’s cleaner. It’s more analytical. Tibetan Buddhism didn’t appeal to me at the time because it’s just so busy. It’s not that it’s not necessarily as easily understood. It might be more easily understood than Zen Buddhism for all I know. But it’s what I call, what Greg Smith used to say “you just dance with the one that brung ya”, so when I saw Bardor Tulku Rinpoche and the way he was able to express himself in broken English and through a translator, and talking about everything that I had started to come to realize. When things were falling apart in D.C., I realized what I had been doing up until that point was being really selfish. Well, I don’t even think I understood that. I just realized what I wanted to do was try and help people. What can I do to help people, because right now everything I do is really, aggressively self-center. And I just let go. It’s one of those stories, for me, where the universe just opened up. It’s not like, you think there’s a happy ending, but there’s another story that goes on and just keeps going. But then I fell into Buddhism, and I was extremely grateful to Greg for doing it, and the emotion was really intense and it has driven my practice since. I don’t know, is that an answer?

Nathan: I know that the big monastery here in the States is in New York, and we spoke about it a little bit tonight, the one in Woodstock. Is there a relationship between this organization and a larger organization that is centered around that monastery. If there is, how does that affect practice here at the local level?

Mike: Yeah, absolutely. You’re expected, especially if you’re an officer at your local group, to keep it as kosher as possible. In Buddhism, there’s no “have-tos” necessarily. You’ve explained things and it needs to make sense, and if it doesn’t make sense, then if you’re honest with yourself you can put it aside and maybe study something else. So, like the Buddha said “if you’re given gold, you don’t assume what you’ve been given is gold. You test it to try to figure out that what you’ve really been given in gold.” So that’s how you operate on an individual level. You question your law. You question yourself. You question your reality. You sit and you mediate, and you study, and it needs to make sense. When you have a center for His Holiness, you’re expected to run it in a certain way, and offer certain practices. I mean, I don’t just say this is what we’re going to do. “We’re going to do meditation and Chenrezik because that’s what Mike wants to do.” That’s what the 16th Karmapa, when she saw him in 1980, that’s how he wanted his centers. In fact, he might have done that in 1974. So, it is very orthodox in one sense. When you come into a center, like we’ve had lamas that come in, and they look at it, and the shrine is expected to look a certain way, the house is expected to be kept in a certain order. You’re expected to offer mediation. Like, when you came in, I’m expected to offer you meditation. We don’t pick up the cushions when there are new people. There are certain ways that they want things done. And I understand. It’s not my center. It shouldn’t be about the individual. They’re trying to make it more uniform because the 17th Karmapa is coming of age, and he got his emissaries like Khenpo Tenkyong that was here, and we would like to bring him back, who were going around to the centers and seeing what is going on, and preparing for when he, the 17th Karmapa starts to teach.

Nathan: Could you give an example of something that you think distinguishes the Kagyu lineage from other lineages, or perhaps even Tibetan generally form other forms of Buddhism.

Mike: Oh wow, that’s a really loaded question. Its huge, so you’re saying, there are four lineage in Tibet, you’re familiar with that concept?
Nathan: Yeah.

Mike: And then with the New Kadampa you’ve got five or whatever

Nathan: Something that’s unique to the Kagyu Lineage

Mike: in context of the other four lineages?

Nathan: Sure, let’s do in context of the four

Mike: well you have the Karmapa who is the head of the Kagyu lineage. In each individual lineage you have certain specific practices that are unique to those individual lineages. And within the individual lineages, you have kind of a different structure of authority, but you also have different emphasis. For instance, the Gelugpa is the dominant ruling lineage in Tibet at this point. At one time it was the Kagyu, and at one time before that it was the Sakya, and prior to that it was the Nyingma. They never really ruled, it was just a bunch of practitioners so it’s more Baptist, the Nyingma is. The fundamental one of them, and I’m no expert, its huge, because it’s a 1500 year old lineage, both of them. They’re ancient. With the Gelugpa, its more practice oriented. So when you are a neophyte within the Gelugpa, you’re expected to study intensely. You’re expected to study prior to practice, and once you understand what you’re doing then you practice. With the Kagyu it’s completely different. They are in the practice lineage. Like doing ngondro. You could walk in, you, and see a lama and just fall in love with the lama and say “I want to do ngondro” which is heavy and they will say “Okay, you can do ngondro” So you are expected to do the practice, gain some experiential understanding, and then study. It’s not that there is not study, but study is less emphasized.

Nathan: Bouncing off of that, in the order of tonight, we sat, we meditated for 40min, and then we did a little bit of studying afterwards, and that was unique. In the other groups I sat with, there was never a study portion really. So I wonder, what is the relationship between studying after the meditation? Do they highlight each? And I should point out that I thought it was interesting that even the dedication of merit was after the discussion, so it’s like the discussion seems to me to be a part of it.

Mike: It is. Okay, so there’s a little tweak, and it may be kosher or not kosher. I asked the lama and they said “okay it’s good enough.” Something that I’ve had to get used to, and it’s taken me along time to understand why we do it, is a lot of the ceremony. For a new person, like for me, when I saw the shrine, I’m like “why? Why is there a shrine? If the Buddha is in everything, why can’t we just put a stick up there and save $500 on a Buddha statue? You know what I mean? And why do we pray? I mean, what’s prayer? It doesn’t make any sense. I was raised Christian and I didn’t understand it then. So, with the sitting meditation I always wanted it to be something a little bit less formal. If you come next week, very formal: lots of chanting in Tibetan, lots of prayers, lots of dedications of merit. So, at the end of mediation, I’ll put my own hands together and dedicate my own merit and let other people do whatever they do. But then after the sitting meditation we have the book discussion, and this is just me. I feel like, you can’t just “okay, shake hands. That’s it” because I think after you start to bond like that and you understand, and you kind of get to know one another, I think it’s extremely important because I think this is the foundation of why we do what we do in Buddhism, both for ourselves and for others. It’s important that your motivation is correct. You have to be good at the beginning, good at the middle, and good at the end, and your good in the beginning is your motivation, it has to be to benefit yourself and to benefit others. The good in the middle is that you have to do the best you can with the practice. It doesn’t mean you have to be perfect and you don’t gauge yourself, like tonight if
you were having a hard meditation, that’s fine. And then, whatever benefit that you get, you dedicate that merit so that others can benefit, and so that’s good at the end.

Nathan: Is there any interaction between this group and other local area Buddhist groups.

Mike: Yeah, Shambhala. Like, Mary is awesome. Holy cow. So we’ve got Shambhala. And Harold. You might have met Harold at Southwind. He’s our Zen guy and he comes over. And I don’t go anywhere because I’m lazy. I mean, this is enough for me to do once a week and not mess around, but on a Saturday, when I just want to ride my bike and take pictures...you know what I mean? I’m glad Mary doesn’t take offense, because she has invited me to the Shambhala, but I just don’t go. So there is, yeah. When Bardor Tulku came, he gave refuge. The numbers of Vietnamese were almost more than the white people, the Caucasians, and we always try to include the ethnic temples when we have lamas. And when I was here with Khenpo Tenkyong, what was funny, strange, and I think telling, is that I’m driving around and we’re just kind of killing time. I take him out to the temple out north of town, and it was after the Chinese new year, and it was beautiful. I just looked awesome. And he was like “you don’t even need a center here. You don’t need the Karma Kagyu, you don’t the KTC. You don’t need this. You’ve got this!” And he was pointing to the temple, and was like “why don’t you come here? Why do you even bother with it?” He wanted me to start going there. I haven’t, but we talked to this guy, and he’s giving me pamphlets and stuff, but Khenpo Tenkyong who is the Karmapa’s emissary, like direct emissary, sent by the Karmapa, here, is telling me “why don’t you just go study with these guys? They’ve got it going on!” which is weird to me. Anyway, I forgot the question.

Nathan: Has this group had any sort of interaction with non-Buddhist religious groups.

Mike: A little bit. I remember we used to have some interaction with the interfaith ministries. Oh yeah, and we used to meet over at, what’s the church at the corner of 21st and Oliver? It’s Unity. It’s not Unitarian. It’s Unity Church. And the minister loved us. He would come to the teaching, and he seemed to really appreciate what we were. The members at the church I don’t think did. Greg was a member of the church and I don’t think they were very welcoming of the Buddhists. So we met there, and we met over at, what was it an Anglican church? There used to be a church over on 29th street and we met there, and the minister that we met, when he was growing up he lived in a Buddhist monastery, and he was more open. At that time I was a real fundamentalist Buddhist, you can get in the phase where “my way is the right” and you don’t realize you’re being fundamentalist, and he kind of showed me another way, and he was so happy that we were there, and we had a shrine bigger than that one. We’ve been in a lot of churches.

Nathan: So last question. It’s just a simple open-ended and vague question, but it kind of encapsulates the theme of my project. What’s it like being a Buddhist in Kansas?

Mike: You know, initially, because I took refuge in 1996, which is starting to be a long time ago for me, and when I first took refuge it was really wonderful for me individually, but I didn’t want anybody to know about it. Eventually you can’t hide from it you know. Especially on Facebook when people are reposting me with my hands together next to a Buddhist monk, you know? It becomes pretty obvious that Mike’s a Buddhist, but people are really nice. I personally think when people find out you’re a Buddhist, they are intrigued more than anything. I’ve had no problems with it, and the only problem is in my own head thinking “that person is going to be mean to me” when they’re not. I don’t advertise it. I think it’s ridiculous to put a bumper sticker on your car, some people do, but I don’t. The only advertisement I wear is because I wear a protection chord you know? It rubs me the wrong way when people wear their deepest beliefs as a bumper sticker on their
car, because it’s going to change. If you’re open to your own experience, you’re going to change regardless if you’re a Buddhist or Christian, and if you get caught up in trying to believe one way then you ignore reality as its starting to slap you in the face and tries to beat you down I guess. Anyway, I’ve had no problem. I really haven’t. I think people are open, and sweet, and genuine. But I’ve never had to be the person, because we’ve been at four churches now (we move a lot) and I’ve never had to deal with the board of directors, or the pastor saying “hey, the board doesn’t like you guys anymore” “but what did we do wrong?” “Well, you’re a Buddhist.”