

## David Whitaker

Interviewed by Nathan Bowman in Lawrence, KS

July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015

**Abstract:** Oral history interview with David Whitaker, member of the Kansas Zen Center in Lawrence, Kansas. This interview was conducted at Smith Hall on the University of Kansas campus in Lawrence, Kansas. This interview includes discussion of David's history with the Kansas Zen Center, his own story of discovering Zen, and his thoughts on meditation. 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: If you would, could give a brief description of your history with the Kansas Zen Center? When you started going, how long you've been going there, how active you are, etc?

David: I can't remember exactly the year. My experience stems partially from reading the writings of authors. Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, kind of introduced me to the idea of what it was all about, and *The Dharma Bums* novel years and years ago. When I got back to Lawrence, returning after being gone for 8-10 years, I had been using a lot of alcohol, and I quit drinking. So, once I started this new phase of my life, that's where I kind of opened up to the idea of meditation. I actually had a good friend of mine years ago tell me "you'd really benefit from *zazen*." That's the Japanese word for it. So, Stan, one of the teachers [of the Kansas Zen Center], Stan Lombardo, gave a class called introduction to Zen Buddhism. It was an hour one week at night, then an hour the next week, and then they had a one day retreat, a one day retreat. I remember walking and even just walking to the retreat I felt Zen. Since then, my experience has been that when you go into a situation like that you have all of these expectations. The normal world that we live in, we want to put a label on things. We want to know what to expect. We want to know whatever, you know? The Zen experience is something that I'm finding, that will lead you astray. That is the opposite of what you want to be doing, and Zen deals directly with cutting through opposites thinking and putting labels on things. It can go as deep as you want it to. I remember one day trying to see what I can expect and being told "this practice never ends. It will go on for the rest of your life." It's not like one day you just get everything you need and then you walk away from it. It's something that you come back to everyday. So, as far as my experience with it, I've come and gone. There are times when I go a lot more. There are times when I don't go. It's always in the back of my mind that I should be going more, but I think everybody does that. We always want to help ourselves more than we'll let ourselves at times. But it's always there, and that's something that I've been really happy about with having the Kansas Zen Center here in Lawrence. It's really a gift. It's right in my neighborhood. Right there, with active teachers, and it's an international school to have access to. So, that it in a nutshell: the Zen Center is there, and I can go whenever I want, and I don't go as much as I want to. Well, that's sort of like humanities response to life in general. We could be able to live our lives as free and able to go anywhere, but we end up learning to confine ourselves to ideas and patterns, and believing that we're something, or that's that, or this is a pen. Everything has a label, and we form our world around these ideas. Part of the practice is called kong-ans, interviews. When you do a retreat, and also on Sunday practice, the teacher, either Stan or Judy, will go into a separate room and call each person in

one at a time. You come in and sit face to face, and it's an interview situation. There's a lot more going on there that you know at first. They are basically examining your mind and seeing if they trip you up. Basically, seeing if they can make you think, and catch you doing it, and point it out to you. Why do you do that? Why is that that? That isn't that? No its not. I don't want to tell you too much because that's half the fun, just getting in there, especially when you have an experience of the teacher posing a question to you that you get a correct answer to, and then you see how way too much we overthink things, and assume. To me, that's the beauty of the Zen experience, especially having it there, and trying to get to it, and always getting distracted. That's the main problem.

Nathan: Do you find that in those interviews that afterwards you want to meditate on those questions, or you want to think about what they said, and are you supposed to be thinking about what they said? Or are you supposed to just leave it there and go back to your *zazen*?

David: I think it's a little of both. Certain traditions in Zen, you know, there are lots of different schools. Buddhism in general started in India. Buddha was in India. Then he gave transmission to a disciple, and then that disciple gave transmission to another disciple and on and on over the years. I think it was the 28<sup>th</sup> one, his name was Bodhidharma, and he traveled from India to China, and took Buddhism to China. He was the first one that I know of, or that I've studied, that really used meditation as a tool and also realized that the idea of self, or the idea of attaining anything, or getting something out of the experience, was the wrong idea. He was probably the first Zen patriarch. Now, after that happened, he gave transmission to his disciple, and I think it was a few more past him, that Huineng, who I think was the 6<sup>th</sup> Zen patriarch after Bodhidharma, really defined what the Zen school was about. But since then, there have been so many different masters and so many different schools that you could say "I'm going to this Kwan Um Korean school in Lawrence, and even though it came down the same line as all these other ones, if I went to a Japanese Zen temple, I would find a completely different way of doing things." One school might say "yes, go back and focus on that. Meditate on that. When you're meditating, breathe in and think about the question." But I've had Stan and Judy say "don't do that. Don't meditate on the question. Just breathe." So even within the Zen experience, there are lots of different ways and approaches. Mostly, when I walk out of the interview I'm frustrated and perplexed. You want to get something. You want to walk away with something, but you don't always get it. That's wants standing in the way, that pressure you feel. Say you and I, and I don't know how you are, but if we were to sit at this table and try not to talk to each other it would be very hard after a while. The silence would get overwhelming. We need to interact; we need to define where we are. I think what they are trying to teach, in this school anyway, is to not expect anything. The questions will come when they come. Stan tells me it's like there is a hole in the wall, and you know that the mouse is in there, and you're just waiting for the mouse to come out. You just have to sit there and watch the hole with all the energy you have and don't give. Keep on it. Keep sitting. You don't really know what to expect and that's hard to do. You don't have some assurance that anything is going to come through for you, and that's one of the more difficult things about the practice. We have sort of an unwritten rule in the school. There's a list of ten kong-ans that our master Seung Sahn from Korea calls the "ten gates." Each one tests your mind in a different way. We start off with the first gate, then the second, then the third, and you have to graduate through each kong-an before you can graduate to the next one. My first kong-an I worked on for probably two years before I realized the correct answer. Those sorts of things just come when they come, and there is no way to force it. I don't think we're use to that experience of not being in control of the outcome. To me, that's the allure of the experience. That's the thing that wears me out; constantly seeking and wanting. "What do I

want to do?" I'm a person who is capable of a lot of different things and has a lot of ideas and wants to do a lot of different things, but that makes your life way too busy and way too involved, maybe more so than you wanted it to be. So, Zen and Buddhist study in general is just sort of a refuge from all that, if you let yourself.

Nathan: You mentioned some books that you read very early on. When you were doing that early study, did you read into other forms of Buddhism?

David: Other than Zen you mean?

Nathan: Yes, other than Zen.

David: A little bit. You know there is Hinayana and Mahayana, and I'm pretty sure that Zen is Mahayana. One of them is like you chant and pray to be delivered to some sort of heaven, you know, that Western paradise, and by chanting to Amita Butsu (or Amita Bul) we say "namu Amita Bul" in our chants, is sort of chanting to Buddha and gaining something from it as a reward. So I have studied sort of the different forms. Indian Buddhism not so much. One great thing that they had done [at the Zen Center] when I first started going a few years ago was, there was a book called the *Zen Sourcebook* that Stan and Judy worked on. They rounded up all of the really rare Zen literature through most of its development history, through China, Korea, and Japan. They taught a class over the course of a year, once a month. We studied all of the different masters in Zen, but beyond that, no I haven't really in my own experience.

Nathan: So no practice outside of Zen?

David: Not really. No. That brings up a good question: in America especially, what other options are there? You don't have to answer that question, but to me it's like, I went out to Portland and found a Zen temple and wanted to go because it sounded so completely different than what we do here. Different forms. I would definitely say there are people at the Zen Center that have experience more of it than I have for sure, but that's all relative. I find myself, after practicing and meditating, that there is a way to be able to take that practice and have it blend in to your life so that you don't necessarily have to meditate to...see I don't even know what the word is for it. Whatever it is we're trying to do in the school, is possible outside of the school also, but it takes a lot of discipline to be able to keep the focus on what you're really trying to do. One of the things that really interests me about Zen, is that, on the one hand, you can take it really black and white and say "it's telling me to get rid of everything that I own, and detach, and not care what happens to me or anyone else, and not have any ambition, and do without doing, and exist in this weird space where I'm not really me." But that's black and white thinking. I think that the real skill is figuring out how to do that while existing in the society that we leave in, that's so bent on making something of yourself, and attaining, and getting things, and wanting, and that kind of stuff.

Nathan: You mentioned being out of the world, apart from mediation from the group, but in your own mediation in the group, or maybe your practice outside of the group if there is one, do you do anything that is unique, or to adapt what the group teaches to yourself because it feels better or works for you more?

David: Sure, we're free to do that kind of stuff. Really, we have our practice, and if you want me to tell you what we do there, you went to practice once, but practice usually revolves around bowing, chanting, and sitting mediation. If you do really long sitting mediation, there is also walking meditation, which is mostly to give your legs and hips a rest from sitting for so long. So, really all you have there is chanting, reading out of

book. You could memorize the chants, which eventually you do, but essentially you could be chanting anything. It's in Korean, so half the time I don't really know what I'm saying but we do it anyway. Bowing, you know, there is a certain way that we bow. We do have forms. If you bow this way you're suppose to hold your hands like this and cross your feet if you can, and different things for every bow. The practices I go to, we bow 108 times in the morning, and then we chant a morning bell chant, and then we sit for twenty minutes. When you're sitting, there is a way you can sit, but there is form for doing that unless you have some kind of injury that makes you want to sit differently, or even stand because your body can't handle it. But, how your body is is secondary to how your breathing is. What they point you to do is to quit focusing up here (the head) and focus down here, right below your belly button, which would be one of your chakras. We call it the *tanden* and it's an energy center that you can feel when you breathe with your belly. I try to get a posture where you can really feel that muscle, trying to get that focus down into your belly, and take your thinking off of your mind and more into your body, and into your breath. When we first start, they say count. Inhale to three, and then exhale seven. And so, I would do that rigidly. Then pretty soon Stan would say "When you breathe in think 'what am I?' or 'what is this?' and when you breathe out say 'don't know'" and don't know is a big thing in Zen too because you're you, I'm me, we all have our own ideas that we think we know. We've constructed these illusions about reality. You look at what is going on in the world. Some people say "this is our religion and we're willing to fight this other religion to the death and kill people, and torture, to make sure that we know this is it." So, "don't know" takes us down to this level where all of that is gone and our base reality that is below all of that. But, I found myself in one retreat getting tripped up by thinking "don't know" so I brought that up to Stan in an interview and he said "you're penetrating 'don't know' so now, don't say 'don't know' anymore, just be 'don't know'." So there are these levels, and there are forms, but what you find is no matter which way you do it, you start peeling away these layers and getting to deeper and deeper understandings. I don't think that ever really ends. I hope I answered your question. There are forms, but each person has to do it their own way. Some people will get it right away, and some people will take a whole life time to get there, and then get it right away. It can be a sudden realization or a gradual realization.

Nathan: You mentioned that chanting, and it being in Korean. Do you think there is any significance in the fact that it is in Korean and that there are portions of the service not translated into English?

David: Sure, I mean, for me speaking English all the time, it helps that you're not thinking about the words. We do chant one chant, the Heart Sutra, in English, which sounds really weird in English. When you chant it in Korean the rhythm is really nice, and then you try to do it in English, and I almost don't like it. We do it anyway. So it's in Korean because our teacher is Korean, but another teacher in our school, Dae Kwang, he lives in Malaysia I think. He was the abbot of our school for a while, and he told me that it doesn't matter if you understand Korean, because the Korean is just a translation of Chinese, so even the Korean people don't really know what they are chanting because they are chanting Chinese, Korean style. So there is all of that. The thing that I'm finding as I go along, is that, well, the effect of the bowing I kind of 'poo-pooed' at first. Why do we bow so many times? I looked at it as exercise. It's a great thing to do in the morning. I had an experience in the first long retreat I was in, where I had to get up and leave because I couldn't handle it anymore, sitting with myself. I was running into some real difficulty staying and sitting there with what was going on inside of me. Looking back on my life and the experiences I've had, and emotions and things like that. Bowing can do that to, I don't know how, but I found sometimes when I'm bowing, that you experience emotions. I don't know how it works. It's very strange to do that repetitive motion. So, I don't know, maybe

it's all perfectly designed to get you right there. They know what they are doing. When we walk in off the street and you take a look and what goes on in the room, it's really strange. It's so simple and so quiet. There is nothing in the room. We're not doing anything. We're chanting in some weird language, we're bowing innumerable times, and we're sitting staring at the floor. But, it's potentially the best therapy there is.

Nathan: In your experience, would you yourself identify as being a Buddhist?

David: No, not really, only because I'm really not sure. I would say that I aspire to be a Buddhist, but ultimately is something to be seen. You can't be something that you're not. I could say that I am, but then you're falling into the trap of words. So I tell you that I'm a Buddhist, but what happens when I walk out the door? I'm going to get pissed at something, I'm going to get mad, and I'm going to act like a human being. I'm going to want something. I'm going to turn around and completely stomp on that. I could keep trying to be that, and that's what practice is all about. You keep coming around to it. Buddhism is a way of realizing suffering. Buddha was a prince, and was going to be king. He didn't want it. He tried to give it all up and couldn't do that either, so he found a middle way and sat on it for a while. He ultimately came up with the reason why we're all bummed out is because we want too much. We don't understand what's really happening here. His first transmission to the second disciple, he twirled a flower and looked at this crowd of people. And his disciple smiled, and Buddha knew that he got it. Buddha was saying something to this crowd by twirling this flower around, and he could tell that this other person got what he was saying. It all boils down to that every practice we start there starts with the four vows, and they are...now I can't remember in this context. It says: 1) sentient beings are numberless, we vow to save them all; 2) delusions are endless, we vow to cut through them all; 3) the teachings are infinite; we vow to learn them all; 4) the Buddha way is inconceivable, we vow to obtain it. So each one is a paradox. You're saying that there are innumerable teachings, but we want to learn them all. That's your path. You know that even if you do it, you're not really doing it, because there is no way to really do it. That's because how you are thinking about it, and you can't see that at first. I think that's what that is, that it's unfolding. For me as a person, I would say no, I'm not a Buddhist because I'm like a fence sitter. I don't really like to jump to one side or the other, and maybe that makes me a good Buddhist. I don't know. I'm not that way all of the time, but when it's something like this, like you're trying to understand something that can't be understood, where does that leave you? A lot of our kong-ans say "if you open your mouth you are already dead." The teacher will say "if you answer I'll hit you and if you don't answer I'll hit you," meaning there is something here that you are not seeing yet, and I really can't point it out to you. You have to find it for yourself, and when you do I'll say "you got it." But until that point, the teachers aren't there to show you how it's done. They are there to give you a little nudge in the right direction or ask you a really well placed question. A good metaphor is that they stuck their hand in the stream of water and they know if it's cold or hot, and they want you to be able to put your hand in the water without telling you the water is cold. You put your own hand in there and say that the water is cold, so you both now see the same thing. It's very perplexing. It's very attractive too. I was just with my son and the Webelos camp. It's Boy Scouts. Faith based. A faith based organization. Day two, after breakfast, chapel service, and I'm ready to run out the door. I don't know why, I'm just adverse. "I don't want to sit in church! They didn't tell us we had to sit in church!" I wasn't trying to make a scene here, but if it's faith based, whose faith? Which one? There are so many. I guess my view of it is that Buddhism is great because it's not one of those, and I could be wrong. I'm sure there are people that feel differently than I do about it.