

Kelsang Namdrol

Interviewed by Nathan Bowman in Wichita, KS

June 16th, 2015

Abstract: Oral history interview with Kelsang Namdrol, an ordained nun in the New Kadampa Tradition and director of the Kalpa Bhadra Kadampa Buddhist Center in Wichita, Kansas. This interview was conducted at Kalpa Bhadra in Wichita, Kansas. This interview includes discussion of Namdrol's history with the New Kadampa Tradition, her own story of becoming Buddhist and ordination, her thoughts on meditation, and her 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: If you could briefly describe the history of the center here, when it started, what went behind starting it. Specifically, if you could discuss what went behind choosing the specific location, and has it always been associated with the New Kadampa Tradition.

Namdrol: Well I will start there. It has always been a Kadampa Buddhist center. It must have been in 2004 when the center was given an actual name by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. You have to request to become a center then it was approved, and Geshe gave the name "the Bhadra Mediation Center." Then that moved into Kalpa Bhadra Kadampa Buddhist Center years later. I was not the first teacher. There was somebody named Kelsang Daimo. One of the students of that time had gone to Albuquerque, New Mexico where there is a bigger Buddhist center. At the time it was called Shakyamuni Buddhist Center, and she really loved the teachings. She and her husband had moved there, but they are from Wichita. They are anesthesiologists I think. Anyway, they ended up after a year and half, deciding to come back. So, when she came back, she requested with teacher at Shakyamuni Buddhist Center teachings in Wichita. So, that's how it happened, through requested. Or she requested to NKT. Actually, I'm not exactly sure who she wrote, but they asked if she would like to set up a public talk, and she said sure. So, she set up a public talk, a Wichita free public talk, and the teacher from Texas (we have a temple in Texas which is six hours away) was supposed to come and give that talk. This doesn't really matter much, but he got sick, so a teacher from Albuquerque was asked to come, and she did, and they had a nice turn out. From there students just arose and people were interested, so they started getting together out of interest. They sent a teacher from Albuquerque who would come once a month. So, this little group started, and they built until they had a wish to become a center. Some of those details are probably not exact, so quoting those exact are probably not exactly right. I wasn't here so it's to the best of my knowledge, but that's the essence of how it arose, from Gingaman's talk. Usually, students will put out a piece of paper saying "are you interested in these teaching?" and I think they got a response from that. So that started meeting and there were enough people to warrant having a teacher. I think what happened was a student was asked to lead a discussion. So, they took the book, maybe *Transform Your Life*, and this group of people would meet somewhere. I don't know where their

meeting places were, and she would lead a discussion, and it was always one of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's books because it's always been Kadampa. So she read from *Transform Your Life* and then because they had enough people, they started to request a teacher. So they had a teacher once a month coming and they were able to afford flying them out. It's not typical, though I don't know how churches arise from one point of view, but it arises from people's wishes. There's no judgment, and there is no punishment in Buddha's teachings, so let's just say that they sent a teacher and after several months it just dwindles away. That's okay. You've planted seeds dharmically for the teachings to flourish, and you just keep a peaceful positive mind. And at many times in branches, you just go back again and try again, but Wichita stayed with enough interest. The first center they chose was on Hanley Street in the Delano district. We were there three years. Daimo was here close to a year, Kelsang Daimo. Then she was asked to go teach in New York. That was when I was asked to come, and that was in 2005 I believe.

Nathan: So you can't just start a mediation group and call it a Kadampa group? There is a process?

Namdrol: Yeah, there is a process to it. It's to keep it pure. But there are things like that. I know of a person who is also from Albuquerque. That's where I met the teachings, in Santa Fe. So my kind of homies, my home sangha is in Albuquerque, so that's why if I refer to it a lot, it's because where I grew up in Buddhism. Kelly, who came from Albuquerque, now lives in Ohio. Indianapolis has that area and so does Wisconsin. Between the two they take different parts of Ohio because there are centers in Madison and Indianapolis. But in the particular place where Kelly is, the teacher that comes there used to teach in Albuquerque, and this is probably way too confusing, but anyway, the long and short of it is that the teacher comes once a month, and there's a group of interested students, so, Kelly does the same thing. She leads and Gingaman, the teacher, guides her. I think they actually listen to recordings of the teaching. That's what it is. She leads the discussion but they listen to, like what you just heard in Thursday night class, I believe they record a similar teaching, whatever... is teaching. They record that, Kelly gets it, and everybody listens to it on Monday night, then Kelly leads a discussion about it. SO there are ways that we try to facilitate people that are in the boondocks. We have lots of correspondence students who you are foundation programs and on teacher training programs, general programs, because Geshe Kelsang Gyatso set up study programs, hopefully to meet the needs of everyone.

Nathan: Could you discuss, if you don't mind, how did you come to be a member of the organization early on? Have you always been Buddhist? If not, how did you come to discover it? Further, did you experiment with other forms of Buddhism, and if so, what spoke to you about this one?

Namdrol: So, I grew up in Wichita, Kansas and went to Pilgrim Congregational Church. So, I grew up with a Christian influence anyway. I certainly liked and really appreciated many aspects, but it just didn't answer things for me. So I went to Kansas State Teachers College, and there I was introduced to a lot of the Bhagavad Gita. Hindu was just very prevalent in those times in the early 1970's. So I was, introduced is a good word. I used influenced one time and that got taken wrong, like I was brainwashed. It was just introduced to Eastern thought, that's what I mean, which I liked. I thought "Reincarnation? That makes sense." And we would just say that's karma. But I didn't study it. I didn't go into any depth. I didn't research it. I dabbled. I was a dabbler. So, I kind of dabbled with things, and

I ended up going to school in Greeley, Colorado. I moved around quite a bit, to different places, and I ultimately ended up in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I really loved the religion of Native Americans, so I got into metaphysics. And all of those kinds of thought had something richer for me anyway. But again, I wasn't going to commit to anything. I wasn't going to be called anything. I was just my own thing, doing my own thing. It can be dangerous doing that. I lived in that zone. But then, what happened in Santa Fe was I turned on the radio one day, and it was a Saturday, and it was a program called women's focus. There was somebody named Genla Dekyong and she was Buddhist. I found that out. I was maybe into the interview some. The questions were really good. It was actually a student of Genla that asking the questions. But they were really good and all I really remembered was she answered reincarnation. That's all I can remember. I can't remember the specifics; this was like thirteen or fourteen years ago. All I can remember is that I had never heard anyone so clear. Karma was just ripening in my heart. It was totally resonating with me. I was literally praying that whoever this person was, with this funny name that I couldn't remember, was at least in New Mexico where I could get to. I got into the car, I just bought it from a friend, so I had wheels and I thought "where was this?" So, at the end of this fascinating interview, she was in Albuquerque, and I was in Santa Fe, so I was delighted. Monday night classes, like what we have Thursday nights (it was Monday nights there), and that's it. I started going down on Monday nights. It wasn't like "boom!" There certainly was an aspect where I went...It was just so good. I would drive back with all of these blessings. I had so much to think about. I was at a point in my life where I was so restless. I taught preschool, and I loved that. I was at a wonderful preschool in Santa Fe: lovely people, a well-run program, very progressive. It was just wonderful. But you know, that's how *samsara* is. There is no satisfying feeling. What did I want to do? I didn't really want to go back to school. Move again? I really liked Santa Fe. Then I met these teachings, but all of a sudden my thoughts had something else to do with it; this really nourishing wisdom to think about. My first class was how to solve our anger problems. I didn't even agree with everything, but like I said last night, you don't have to agree. Just keep an open mind, be logical based on analytical reasoning and your own personal experience. I would go every week, and they would have discussion at the end of class a lot of times. It would be like "yeah, but, but ,but" and it was always great, and people were always very kind in saying that Buddha said "that's where you're coming from, but you have to look; were you happy when you had anger thinking you were standing up for a cause? Anger is painful, were you really happy?" Then you start to think: no, I wasn't. It never helped me, and actually, whatever the cause was, it never cured it. We're so familiar in our thoughts with a way of thinking through our karma, and since beginningless time, it's so natural to think down certain grooves. That's when I started to wake up a little bit going "yeah, that doesn't make any sense." You have to start to see that anger is painful. So, one instruction was to go to bed at night with an intention to reduce your anger, and wake up with an intention to reduce your anger; very simple, practical advice. I just couldn't stop going, but I did have some skepticism. I was a skeptic. That's why I never joined anything. Somehow I was going to know better, a totally ridiculous thought; totally delusional. It was just my own fears of commitment, etc. I started going and then they went to summer festivals, and most of the center went but I didn't go that first summer. I still was thinking away from it and I was still thinking "oh, I'm not sure," so it took me a few weeks until they started the teachings back up in late August and early September. I couldn't stay away. I had never had anything that started to make you feel better just by listening to it and thinking about it. I didn't have to become anything. Just listen and think about developing peace. You don't

have to buy anything. I just have to come to a class and listen, and they are very reasonably priced. The last point, and I think all of these may be helpful, is that the people there (and this was a much bigger sangha) every time I was greeted, they knew I had driven from Santa Fe, but there was no feeling like I had to come, or pulling me in. There were no conditions. They were just friendly. I knew they were just like me. They had delusions. They weren't trying to walk around being perfect. They were just trying to practice Buddha's teachings, and I liked the idea of *sangha*. That's what I was looking for most. I wanted a community and I could never find the one I fit in. Buddha's compassion came through most to me by this group of people that started going to workshops, and they'd say "do you want to bring anything?" I'd say "yes, what can I bring?" There would be a signup sheet, so I'd make a salad, or this or that. Every time I went, I always felt the greeting was sincere. Even over that summer when I was gone for a few weeks, I never felt any pressure to come back and I like that. It spoke to me because I went on my own wish. I went because I needed to come back to get some more dharma, and I wanted to check this community out, and that was it.

Nathan: Is it proper to say that you are ordained?

Namdrol: Yes, I am an ordained Kadampa Buddhist nun. There is a process to that, but there are like six or seven nuns at the time. I had no idea you could be a Buddhist nun. I was green. I thought there was one Buddha. Everything I thought was wrong, so I was fascinated by it all. Within probably a year I was really thinking that maybe I should go that route. That maybe that was what I was looking for. I just kept thinking about it and talked to one friend about it, and then eventually I talked to a teacher. Again, there is never any pressure because you don't want to disrobe. People do, and it's not like they are outcasts. They are still deeply loved and cherished, but it's just the action of disrobing. It's not a virtuous thing to do, but you can purify those actions, so it's okay. It's okay to disrobe. I don't want to get that wrong. It could be misconstrued. People disrobe and they are still part of the tradition. They are love and cherished. They made that decision. But when you ordain, you don't really want to disrobe. In other words, you could be doing this in your religious studies and you could get a teaching position and after two years go "you know what? This is cutting it for me." No problem. Go do something else. You know that if this isn't what you want, you could do anything in life that you want. It could take you to some other road, or some other interest. But when you ordain, you don't want the attitude that if you don't like this, I'll just change in a couple of years. You do it because you want to do it lifelong. But if you do choose to disrobe, it's something you can do without judgment. So, when I chose to ordain, many people want to know what kind of schooling you have to do. You basically have to love Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and his teachings. You have to have some sort of connection with him, which I did. Then my teachers, I had a strong connection there, mostly loved Kadampa Buddhism, because I'm ordained Kadampa. I'm not ordaining as a Zen Buddhist. And if I was a Zen Buddhist nun I would want to love my teacher and I would want to love Buddha's teachings on Zen. Like, Thich Nhat Hanh, I would love his teachings, which I do, but I'm a Kadampa Buddhist. Then I wrote Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and asked him. Well, I first talked to my teachers directly. Geshe was living in England at the time, so I asked my teachers and they said yes. They thought I would be a natural fit. Then I wrote, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and Geshe wrote back and said yes. Then we had an ordination ceremony. Even at that, sometimes people at the last minute decide not to. No problem. That's kind of how that

happened. We have a lot of freedom as monks and nuns. Most serve the center, but sometimes people choose to live in their town themselves and do their practice and come to things here and there. There is a lot of freedom.

Nathan: Because of the amount of traveling I know that you do, I might already know the answer to this question, but is there a lot of interaction between the local organization and the international organization, and how does that affect practice on the ground level here?

Namdrol: Those are such good questions. On one hand, we're an independent center, and then on the other, we're totally a part of NKT, New Kadampa Tradition International Kadampa Buddhist Union. So, we totally follow, like, she's changing offerings [pointing to a member currently working on the shrine]. So, we follow our mother center, which is called Manjushri. That's where I'm headed on Wednesday which is in the lake's district close to Overstone, with flying into Manchester, and that's where our mother center is. That's where Geshe first taught. So, I'll go and take pictures of how any ritual has changed. We're all connected, deeply connected. Let's just say we're going to do a fundraiser, I'd better check with the NKT to see if that's appropriate for an NKT center to do. The admin director, which is Barbara, would write Steve Cowing. It's very organized. We're very organized and it works, because we want to keep the lineage pure. If it's disorganized and people are doing this over there and that over there, you don't know what is coming and going. Does that make sense? We get incorporated, we have a board of directors, and we have internal rules. There is spiritual law and legal law, so that we're protected by both. But it's basically dharma. If you read through our internal rules it's dharma. It all set up on Buddha's teachings, like moral discipline. But there had to be some way, let's just say a resident teacher was really acting inappropriately, there has to be a way for that teacher to then, lovingly but directly, with a caringness for them, there has to be way for that teacher or admin director to not be in that position anymore that is fair, honest, loving, and kind. So, we have internal rules. Does that make sense? Yeah, we're very organized. Did that answer that well enough?

Nathan: One of the things that I noticed that's, perhaps, unique to Kadampa, at least that I noticed, is the use of the words "modern" and "western." Last night, one of the things that stood out was during the liberation prayer, it was put to vaguely Western sounding music. I am wondering, what does that mean to you, to be modern and western? How else is that shown in your practice?

Namdrol: Modern Buddhism is meaning that we are living in modern times. Way back when, people would go on retreat somewhere. You abandon your family and friends and went off, you know, what Buddha did. First he did not. At first he followed his parents' wishes and got married, an arranged marriage, and had a son. But it was at his son's birth that all the Buddha's of the ten direction came to him in a vision and said "now is the time" because he wanted to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all. Actually, Buddha was already enlightened, but he appeared in this world to help us know what that path is so we can get out of *samsara* and attain *nirvana*. What was the question again?

Nathan: What does "modern" and "western" mean?

Namdrol: So Western: I was so happy that you noticed that on our web, but I probably need to change those words. It started out that we would talk about how we are Western, but we're really

international. What that's meaning, and I don't know if I was talking last night about this afterwards, sometimes all the teachings mingle together. Tibetan culture is far different than our culture. I think I was explaining that when Geshe first tried to teach, he had never heard the word cancer. He was a healing lama, so we have malas, the rosaries. People were sick and these become deeply powerful because they are holy objects and they heal people through those. They say mantras and put the mala on the area that they need to. It's amazing, but they were not a modern contemporary society, and we are. So, people didn't want to sit through six hours prayers in Tibetan. [Some] did, and thank goodness there were a whole group of people that sat through and they felt better, but they didn't understand a word. They just had such deep faith and strong karmic imprints, and they loved Geshe, and they just stayed there. Then slowly, Geshe had interpreters, and one day he just said that he wanted to do it himself. My understanding anyway, is that he even got tutoring to learn English. That was his determination, to give teachings in English. So, we're modern but it's more than Western. His book, *Modern Buddhism*, is in Chinese and sold in Chinese government owned bookstores, which is pretty amazing. It's modern in the sense that you can get up in the morning and think "what am I practicing?" I won't give you too much here I suppose, but in Kadampa Buddhism, *kadampa* means that we are practicing a systematic set of teachings. They are the way Buddha's teachings were meant to be practiced. A Buddha named Atisha, from India, put the teachings in this order. It's called *lamrim*, and it means "stages of the path to enlightenment" and there are twenty-one different objects to mediation, from precious human life to relying on a spiritual guide. So, there are stages that we go through. We meditate everyday on a different meditation object, trying to mix Buddha's teaching with our heart so we adopt these different wisdom views. So that's our meditation practice. If you get up for meditation and ask "what is my practice for today? Well, I meditated on equanimity." So you want to remember that it's my own mind that mistaking by saying you're a stranger or an enemy. You're a friend. Everyone that appears to my mind, I want to have a friendly attitude. You practice that all day. Of course, sometimes you're just not doing that at all, but then that's your meditation object. It takes mindfulness. It doesn't matter where you are. It could be in an airport, or a long grocery store line, we practice these teachings. That's modern Buddhism. All we're abandoning is our delusions. Eventually, to attain enlightenment you do have to go on retreat. We have retreat centers. But you have to gather the conditions together that are necessary to spend time in retreat. Basically you can make you can make huge progress in your everyday life. Does that make sense?

Nathan: You kind of answered my next question, but Geshe came from a Tibetan background, so what makes the Kadampa tradition stand out and distinguishes it, in terms of meditation practice specifically, from other Tibetan traditions?

Namdrol: So, in Kadampa Buddhism we practice [the teachings of] Je Tsongkhapa. There are all of Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings, but Buddha Shakyamuni appeared in this world 2600 years ago, and like I said with this person Atisha, his teachings went to Nepal, Japan, Tibet, China. They went all over, so there are different lineages. We consider this a pure lineage. It used to be completely oral, but then began being written down. [The teachings] went to Tibet, but they were degenerating and people were not practicing sutra and tantric teachings correctly. It's kind of a long history, but you can read it in *Modern Buddhism* which you can download for free.

Nathan: The entire book?

Namdrol: Yes, the entire book. It was Geshe's gift to the world. I'll give you a card. This story, if you want to read it directly, is in *Modern Buddhism* and I'll give you more details. The Tibetans weren't practices correctly. They thought there was a contradiction with the teachings because it's a little different between tantra and sutra. You just have to understand it. It's not hard, if you get commentary then you can see "oh, because I'm practicing tantra we do this, and because I'm practicing sutra we do this." It's all the same. There is no contradiction. There was a King named Yeshe-O, and his nephew Jangchub-Oe, and they were pure dharma practitioners and were very sad that it was degenerating. King Yeshe-O said that we wanted to send people to India to find a teacher to bring those teachers back. So, what happened is that he got captured by an evil king, and he held him for ransom. He wanted gold in Yeshe-O's body, minus the head. So, his nephew Jangchub-Oe set out to get the gold and he knew he could go to war, but it would horrible negative karma. He went and gathered this gold and he brought, but he was able to speak through a window to his uncle and said "I've got the gold!" His uncle said "I'm okay!" because he is a true bodhisattva; giving his life. That is why we're here, because of the actions of Yeshe-O. He said "it is far more important to help all living beings, so use that gold as an offering." You have to read it is going to give you a better order. I failed to say that what had happened in this time, they had found someone [to bring to Tibet] and it was the most revered teacher in India. Yeshe-O said "Make an offering." Buddha doesn't need us to make all these offerings, but we need to make them. They are very meritorious and they make your mind peaceful. It is out of our love and appreciation. So he said "You must take that gold as an offering to Dipankara Shrijnana [Atisha] and bring him to Tibet. My life, I'm happy to give that. It is meaningless unless I can do this." So he did that. The Tibetans, going through all that heat, they gave up a lot, and a lot of them died. They went over and made this offering, and he relied on Buddha Tara, and he asked Lady Tara everything before he did anything. That's why Tara is a real part of Kadampa Buddhism. She is a primary deity and is the mother of all the Buddhas. There are countless female deities, but she is a primary deity. The reason is because Atisha relied on her and he asked "should I go to Tibet?" She told him "if you stay in India you will help thousands, but if you go to Tibet you will help countless living beings." His disciples didn't want him to go, but he did. He made his way through Nepal and into Tibet. And my understanding, although it won't be in the book, is that he did stay there. I heard he stayed just a few years, but I think it was just a couple of years that the dharma came back pure, but my understanding is that he did spend the rest of his life there. But he went over, and the Tibetan people just loved him, and he brought back these teachings. They named him "Atisha" which means "peace." Then he took Buddha's teachings and put them into this very concise, a deeply concise order. I believe it was just a page and a half, or maybe even a couple of paragraphs. It'll give you that absolute detail in *Modern Buddhism*. It was extremely condensed. *Modern Buddhism* is a fairly condensed book but not like this. It's like on one line people make commentary to get what Geshe is exactly meaning, and his other books he may explain a little bit more. But this was like one like having countless teachings. So, what happened is that it was a systematic order, the way we are supposed to practice Buddha's teachings. Then in the 1300's, this was the 900's, but in the 1300's Je Tsongkhapa appeared in this world. This had all been prophesied by Buddha. He said this many years ago. So, Je Tsongkhapa is known as the scholar of all scholars, coming from the land of the snows; the king of the scholars and the land of the snows. He wrote commentary,

commentary, commentary, to these teachings. He wrote them over and over again. So that people could understand he opened the teachings up. We look at Geshe Kelsang Gyatso as doing the same thing. We practice Je Tsongkhapa's doctrine of Buddha's teachings. They are still going back to Buddha Shakyamuni. He did not take those teachings and do his own thing. He just presented them in a way that people could understand. Geshe is presenting them in a way that we can practice them, because like I said, those old students hung in there but it wasn't working. They are Westerners. They are going out in their busy modern lives. They have different wishes and intentions, some are going to school. They are busy, and Geshe thought that it wasn't working. So, Geshe is doing the same thing. He has written twenty-two books that clearly explain the Buddha's path to enlightenment. He's opening them up so that we can have access to them and they can help anyone. If you want to follow that path, then the teachings are available in a way that we can understand them. So, that's helping to understand the "modern." These are modern times that call for modern teachings with modern day teacher, if that makes sense. So, this lineage is very important. Like, Atisha, I love telling that story because I know we are here due to his kindness. And Yeshe-O and Jangchub-Oe and all those Tibetans that gave their lives. It's amazing. Then there were people in Tibet that translated, and I believe this is in Modern Buddhism too, but I can't remember who it was, but he was one of these amazing translators who took Sanskrit and painstakingly transcribed it into Tibetan. Not a word is lost. That's what happened with Kadampa Buddhism. Geshe has gone through the texts and his students are helping to edit them (some of these students have huge imprints from past lives. Huge scholars. Amazing scholars) to edit so that they could be as clear as possible, but not lose one bit of Buddha Shakyamuni's pure teachings. They are pure, and the way you know they are pure Nathan, is that if you put them into practice you get happier. It's from inside; you are getting more peaceful. They just work. Geshe really would say, and he's teasing, but he'll laugh "you can sue me" in his little Tibetan accent. If you're not practicing them correctly they won't work. That's okay, but you have to talk to a senior student of a teacher to see how you need to tweak your practice. Sometimes people say "but the meditation said..." And you're like "oh, but you're not quite understanding what that means." Then you tweak that and get results. It's a pure lineage, and that's why this is so organized. This has never been done before. We are a tradition. Our lineage gurus, like Geshe Kelsang Gyatso who has been the holder of this lineage of Gelugpa Kadampa Buddhism. It has never been broken. His teacher was Venerable Trijang Rinpoche [Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso], and he was his spiritual guide that held the lineage. And his was Je Pabongkhapa. If you look at the crown of Buddha, there is what is called *ushnisha*, and every person if they are going to make it through the maze of their mind to enlightenment must have a spiritual guide.

Nathan: So the role of the teacher becomes very important

Namdrol: Yes. Even here, nobody is Geshe but Geshe in our tradition, but even myself. If I have Buddha in my heart and I am giving instruction, if you look at the teacher and you see Buddha on the throne, then for that time you are getting the blessings of Buddha. If you see them as a bodhisattva you get the blessings of a bodhisattva, and if you see them as ordinary you're not getting many blessings. Then, that shifts when you are talking to that person, discussing "did you do this or that," or you allow some freedom that they may say something. They are not Buddha in your mind anymore. It becomes that way for everyone. The spiritual teacher is important because they are guiding you, but also, spiritual

friends, or sangha, become important. It's not all relying just on the teacher. You could ask Barbara or Tom you I told you about, from his own experience if someone says "well, I'm having so much difficulty," he totaling has the experience and wisdom to that "I know what you mean. I've gone through that myself and this is what has helped me." Give some spiritual advice. It's so meaningful. Does that make sense? Sangha is the third Jewel. The Three Jewels are Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. It's so critical. I already told you how important it was for me, the community. I didn't feel judged. I felt accepted. I was hugely influential in my finding the spiritual path that would transform my life completely.

Nathan: Going off of the sangha comment, but shifting a bit, what sort of interaction do you or the group have with other local Buddhist organizations?

Namdrol: One thing I wanted to say is that I'm using myself, because it's just my experience. You know how I said I dabbled in everything? I was trying to be my own spiritual guide. We as Westerners don't know how to just drop it and allow and find the teachings; following the teachings. We think we know better, so it's a process to rely on the spiritual guide. I just wanted to add that in. We're not familiar with it. You know the truth is we don't have a lot of contact. Geshe teaches that there are different presentations of Buddha's teachings and they are all presented in a different way. But, they are all beautiful and wonderful. It's not about Kadampa Buddhism being better than a different tradition, but Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, and he's not alone in this, teaches to check them out. No problem with that, but find which one speaks to you. If you go practicing Thich Nhat Hanh, who I think most everyone knows that he too is such a holy and pure being (his teachings are pure, you know, if I wasn't this I'd be that but I love being Kadampa), and his teachings are pure, but if I were to say "I'm a Kadampa, but I love what Thich Nhat Hanh says here," yeah, it's probably really good advice. No problem, but if you mix that with the presentation the Geshe gives you get confused, and there is no doubt about it. It is confusing to follow Zen and follow Kadampa. But just take a little bit of Zen here and there, and I'll take a little bit over here of Theravada, and I like Kagyu over here. I like what this teacher says here. Do that, but again, from my point of view you probably do love what they say because it's accurate and pure, but if you follow one path, that's how you're going to get results. That doesn't mean we can't mix. Let's say I'm out and about and I met somebody and they said "I go to the Kagyu teachings here in town," we could have a lovely discussion. We could even become friends. But as far as sitting and having a discussion with the two groups, we don't tend to do that, because again, it becomes a confusing thing. How wonderful you have your path, and how wonderful I have my path. Kadampa Buddhism does get criticized a lot for being sectarianism. Geshe says sectarianism comes from not having the one way. It's not about saying ours is the best. I was describing this at the foundation program the other day. It's a wonderful couple of paragraphs that he put in to explain that in a book called *How to Understand the Mind*. I could take Thich Nhat Hanh very purely. Like, Thich Nhat Hanh had a stroke, and I was seeing it one Facebook and liking everything that was coming up, and I was reading what some of his disciples were saying, and my heart was totally opened. It was so beautiful because they love him like I love Geshe. It's not sectarian to follow just Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings. That's beautiful. They are making huge progress because of that.

Nathan: Is there any community interaction or relationship, or has there even been pushback maybe (because I've gotten that before) from non-Buddhist groups.

Namdrol: That have not appreciated us being here?

Nathan: That, or any other interaction that has occurred.

Namdrol: There is a group called interfaith. There was a time when I did do a couple of talks. They had a talk where they had different people come, and were just trying to open peoples mind, and I did do that. I've had groups come, and it's been really very lovely, like a group of Presbyterians from McPherson, Kansas and a group of Presbyterians (they just both happened to be [Presbyterian]) from Wichita in the same year. We had a group of thirty-five to forty people come in. They were led by different people in the church who were very open-minded, and they were trying to help people understand that they have nothing to fear from other religions. With people of other religions they should be happy that they have their way of practicing, as we do as Christians. So it was a very lovely group, and so were the people that were directing it. Each group had two choices to fill the day up, one in the morning, then lunch, then on in the afternoon. They didn't know each other, but they both chose Buddhism and the mosque. One person from the Wichita said that he gets comments from some of the people that they have guns under the mosque, and he said "I want to break down that theory. They have family, they feed their kids, and the love them. They love their religion and it is a peaceful religion and I want them to see that." It was a very beautiful intention. So those [groups] have come to use. I have a group of students coming in the fall, teenagers, and the person leading the youth group is doing the same thing. They are going to visit different places and study different religion and break down this myth that there is something to fear from people who practice things like Buddhism. As far as being a nun and getting hateful things, we had one time a little sticker on the window, it wasn't even strongly hateful, but it was a Christian verse of something that was definitely saying that we were not going to go to a correct place when we die. I've had people pull up and say that we're going to hell. But just a couple of times and I've been here ten years, and I can count on one hand. I get looks from people, up and down, and then they usually smile the Kansas smile. I'm very unusual, but I get a lot, a lot, and a lot of respect smiles, where people don't really know what I am, but they just smile. There is just respectful. [There was one time when] I felt disrespected, but it didn't hurt me. It hurt them in their mind, but that didn't bother me. Just very, very few times. Like I said, I get looked at, but that's normal. I don't get any reaction from people saying something that is negative. I also get "who does your hair? Who does your clothes?" Because they don't know anything about what I am.

Nathan: I forgot to ask this earlier, but how large is this group? How many regular members do you have?

Namdrol: You know, we're growing, and people come and go within. It's hard to know. We are definitely small. Our group the other night, I think we had eight. We are probably averaging seven to ten on a Thursday night, and Sunday morning it's about the same. Sometime its smaller, sometimes it's more, but it's a mix of people. But I'm trying to think of the people of Monday night, which now has really grown. Now that more like ten to thirteen, or even fifteen, on average but it doesn't have a strong Buddhist teaching in it. It's just breathing meditation, so they are looking to reduce stress, but it's a good place to start. A lot of those people will come to workshops and things. If I add all of them, and I don't know if I can call them members, you might look at thirty to forty of people who trickle in

and out. Then there is a core group of ten to twelve to fifteen that don't want the center to go. Those other people don't want it to go either, but there is an even smaller group of six to eight that really make this center function.

Nathan: One more question. It's simple and open-ended but it gets to the theme of my project and gives you a chance to sound off. What's it like being a Buddhist in Kansas?

Namdrol: I think being a Buddhist nun, I'm hoping what I just said is part of that answer, because as a Buddhist nun with people's reaction, you forget about it and I don't think it's anything usual, but then I [get a look]. That's part of my daily life. I'm a monk, but I go to the stores, I put up publicity, I meet people. But what it's like to be a Buddhist in Kansas? I would say it's the best, because I come from here. I went and talked at a Catholic Senior Care group and they are doing the same thing. They have a very open-minded event coordinator, and these people are really interested in why people follow Allah and why do people enjoy Buddhism? They are open-minded, and it was a group of probably ten to twelve. They live independent. They have their own homes but they are part of Catholic Care out East. They are just delightful. Just because it is fresh in my mind, they asked "what were you? You're from Wichita." When I said I was from Wichita, because these people are in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, and they just shook their heads, because look at me, I'm from Wichita. And then I said I went to Plymouth Congregational Church, and they would know exactly where that is and they would say "no way." They wondered how I could change. It's that open-mindedness to have this center here, because it's honestly and truthfully to everyone, to offer this practical advice. It's a process to become a Buddhist. Everybody's imprints are different, but you practice the teachings and you grow into becoming [a Buddhist]. I don't think it's different. You grow into becoming a Christian too, or a Muslim in Islam. You love [the teachings], you practice them, so they can become more familiar. It's familiar for you to think that it's possible to become an enlightened being. That was so foreign at the beginning. "I could become a Buddha? What does that mean?" So as I grow, and as my peace gets bigger and deeper, and my love (and I have a long way to go) but as it grows, there is nothing better than being a Buddhist in Kansas for me, just for me. Because I know the closed mind. You know, I went to East High School when there were race riots. Wichita is a wonderful town, its conservative though. It's got its closed doors. People of color or difference it's not an easy town. Or being gay versus straight, or transgender? I don't think it's an easy town, but I think people have grown inside because of it, and that's spiritual. So I think it's wonderful to have places that are different. And even people in yoga studios, it's been hard for them to establish something that is so different. Some of them haven't made it because it is an alternative way of thinking. So, for me being a Buddhist, I don't think about it in my everyday life as being different at all anymore, but I enjoy that it can help people to find practical teachings, and one day this center can be a temple and over time can be a refuge for more and more people who have those questions like "I don't understand how this happened?" and if you want to through your own wishes to seeks other answers, we're here. I love Buddha's teachings and I want them to be available to people. You don't have to change your faith to learn how to practice patience.