

## Lama Chuck Stanford

Interviewed by Nathan Bowman in Overland Park, KS

June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015

**Abstract:** Oral history interview with Lama Chuck Stanford, co-founder and director of the Rime Buddhist Center in Kansas City, Missouri. This interview was conducted at a Starbucks near Stanford's home in Southern Johnson County, Kansas. This interview includes discussion of Stanford's creation of the Rime Buddhist Center, his own story of becoming Buddhist, his thoughts on meditation, and his work 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: I was wondering if you could describe the process that went behind starting the Rime Center, why you decided to start it, and particularly, what went behind choosing the location of it? I know you live farther south than here and the Rime center is in Downtown Kansas City.

Lama Chuck: Yeah, it's a 30 mile trip each way, so a 60 mile round trip. Well, I became involved in Buddhism in the late 80's early 90's. There are different forms of Buddhism as you know and this group that I became affiliated with practiced Tibetan Buddhism and I just felt a real connection to that. But the group itself was very sectarian, I mean, really sectarian, and there's kind of a history of that in Tibetan Buddhism. There are four lineages: Nyingma, Kagyupa, Gelugpa, and Sakya, and it's almost like denominations in Christianity. Historically one would have nothing to do with the other. They might be sitting side by side, and they would have nothing to share. Nothing. Teachers or teachings...so some very wise teachers back in the 1800's said "well this is really stupid. We need to get together." It's actually a Tibetan term, *rime*, which encourages a non-sectarian form of Buddhism. It's something that the Dalai Lama promotes very much. It's pronounced "ree-may". In about 1995, I told my wife, I said you know, I didn't feel like it was quite the right fit for me, this Buddhist group, so I said "I think there's room in Kansas City for a non-sectarian Buddhist group." So, in 1995, and this is our 20<sup>th</sup> year. Our big 20<sup>th</sup> year anniversary is in July. You're invited.

Nathan: What's the actual date on that?

Lama Chuck: It's Saturday July 25<sup>th</sup>. It starts at 4:30pm. It's also kind of my retirement party because I'm retiring at the end of this year.

Nathan: You're retiring?

Lama Chuck: Yeah. So in 1995 we began very humbly. We rented some space at the Roeland Park Community Center. Are you familiar with that?

Nathan: I am, yes.

Lama Chuck: It was formerly an elementary school, so what we had was essentially a class room. It was not a great ambiance. It was a linoleum floor, just like an empty class room. We'd have cushions in from the trunk of my car. I had a portable shrine; a lot of work. I sent out some emails, and we'd do this every, I can't remember, every Wednesday or Thursday night. Some weeks nobody showed up. Some weeks two people showed up. If we had five people show up, that was a big deal. So we continued to meet there for about two years, and then the Shambhala center that I was a part of, they were having some internal difficulties, some internal fighting, and people were leaving. They had a building that they, I guess owed is the right word. They had a mortgage on it, so they were buying. They were having trouble meeting their bills, so I suggested to them that we meet there one day a week and, you got to realize this was 25 years ago, we'd pay them \$100 a month. They said "great!" I mean, they needed the money, so we met there one day a week. Like I said, this was 25 years ago so that would probably be \$150-200 today. And so, it was great. It had a wonderful ambiance. They had meditation cushions. They had a shrine set out. We didn't have to bring all of this stuff and set it up. It was a very nice environment. And so, we met there for the next couple of years and started doing more programming, and the more we kind of grew, the more they diminished from internal conflict. We brought some Tibetan teachers over, and we did programs. We did retreats there. Finally, after about two years they asked us to leave, and I was devastated because my first thought was "Oh my God, I don't want to go back to the Roeland Park Community Center. They were upset because people were beginning to identify that building with us more than with them. There was no negotiation. They just said "you got to find another place." So, I started looking around. I looked at some buildings that were for rent. I was familiar with the building we're in now, and I was coming off of the highway at that exit, and it had a big for lease sign on it. Well, for 20 years, City in Motion, the dance company, I don't know if you're familiar with them, but they had been there for 20 years. That was their rehearsal space. They rented it. And the shrine room had a ballet bar on one side. On one side we have curtains against the solid wall. Behind those it's all mirrors.

Nathan: For the dancers.

Lama Chuck: Yeah, so we're just covering it up, you know? So, I called the number and asked about the rent, and it was way beyond our means. We had maybe seven or eight regular members at that time. I said thank you very much. Then I called the guy back again and said "we might be in a better position to buy the building than to rent it. Would you consider selling it to us?" He said, "Well what is it you want to do?" I told him, and he said "Aw, that's really interesting. Why don't we have a lunch meeting next week with my partner?" They owned the building together. So I did and they loved the idea of turning it back and using it for spiritual space. So they rented to us way below market value. They had had a falling out with City in Motion, who had been evicted, so we turned around and sublet it back to City in Motion on the nights we weren't using it and really that helped pay the rent. We couldn't have afforded it otherwise. But after two years we had grown to the size that we were now sustainable. They found their own place and moved out. And so, it was just, the perfect storm, or karma, or whatever. I mean, everything came together. I remember one of my board members thought I was completely nuts, that I had lost my mind. "We got six or eight members, and you're moving into a fourteen thousand square foot building!?" I mean, he just shook his head. And here we are, 20 years later...

Nathan: And you have a lot more members than that...

Lama Chuck: We have 400 members, and lots of programming. I think often new religions start, or branches of religions start because of dissatisfaction with the status quo. That's why we have Presbyterian and we have Methodists, you know?

Nathan: Yeah definitely. So you already touched on this a little bit, about your interest in Tibetan Buddhism specifically. I guess I was wondering, what specifically about the Tibetan tradition drew you to it. Did you have experience early on with other forms of Buddhism, and if so, why Tibetan Buddhism?

Lama Chuck: Well, my only form of experience was with the Shambhala center, which practiced Tibetan Buddhist. Tibetan Buddhism has the most ritual associated with it. If you asked in Christianity which denomination has the most ritual, people would probably identify Catholicism. The same in Buddhism, if you said "which school of Buddhism has the most ritual" no doubt it's Tibetan Buddhism. It's very rich with ritual. Some people like ritual, as I do, some people don't like ritual. I personally like it. I think it can be very meaningful. It can help you actualize things that you want to achieve. I don't know, did that answer your question?

Nathan: Yeah. So part of my studies at KU, and part of my emphasis in this project is ritual practice and observing, specifically, meditation, and looking at different forms of meditation and how it differ between traditions. So, I listened to your meditation instructions that I found online, so I wanted to talk about that a bit. My first question is that you mention that you meditate with your eyes open, what's the significance of that?

Lama Chuck: What I was always taught...Personally, I don't think it matters a great deal. I think meditating with your eyes closed, I find, the goal of meditation is to follow your breath. Keep your focus and attention on your breath. If I close my eyes, then I start seeing visual images and I'm much more easily lost in discursive thinking. So, that's one reason I meditate with my eyes open. But the reason I was given by my meditation instructor is that when we meditate, from the Tibetan perspective, we're not escaping from the world when we meditate. We're still fully engaged with the world even when we meditate, therefore, we meditate with our eyes open.

Nathan: That's very interesting because a lot of people view meditation as perhaps a detachment as oppose to an engagement.

Lama Chuck: Or an escape from the world.

Nathan: Right. Are there any other things about Tibetan meditation practice specifically that you think is unique to the Tibetan tradition?

Lama Chuck: Absolutely. We have higher practices. Specifically, two of them that are higher types of meditation practice. One is called the Dzogchen. The "d" is silent. The other is Mahamudra. They are very similar; essentially the same. Again they come from two different lineages. But they are very, very high practices. Some would say they are not even a type of meditation, but they are. We have a female lama coming this month, the last weekend of June. It's kind of unusual, a female lama. Her name is

Lama Leanna, and previously her Tibetan teacher from Tso Pema, India would come every year, year after year, and give these wonderful teachings on Dzogchen. He's just very elderly now, so now he sends his senior disciple. She's about my age. She teaches literally all over the world and goes to centers that he used to go to.

Nathan: And when is she going to be in town?

Lama Chuck: The last weekend of June. Let me look it up here. That would be the 26, 27, and 28<sup>th</sup>. And you're welcome to attend. We kind of changed our policy. We used to have fees, we still do have suggested fees, but now we're saying that anybody can come and pay anything they want. If they don't have anything, come anyway. If you can afford more, pay more, you can cover for someone who can't pay.

Nathan: Would there be a good resource that I could look at to read up on both of these types of meditation.

Lama Chuck: Dzogchen, Mahamudra? I think you can find a lot on the internet. Tibetan Buddhism has the most mystical, magical type of teachings. So, it's believed that if you were just to read about these, you'd get some intellectual understanding, but the belief is that to really benefit from them you'd have to hear them from a trained master. They call it direct mind transmission of the teachings. Just simply reading them, they believe, there is very little value in that. You wouldn't get anything out of it. My own feeling is that, I don't know, I'm not quite so sure that's true, but that's the belief.

Nathan: So I read an interview that you did with the Kansas City Star a couple years ago, and you mention that when you and your wife started meditation, you did not only for spiritual purposes, but for health reasons. So, I was wondering if you could discuss some of the health benefits of meditation.

Lama Chuck: Well, what really got me started in meditation, long before I became Buddhist, was, I'm 65 years old, so back in the 70's, when I was in my 20's, my wife and I both read a book, it's still published, you can find it today, it's called *The Relaxation Response* by Herbert Benson. He's a Harvard researcher. He's an MD. *The Relaxation Response*. Up until that time, there had been really, virtually, no research done on the effects of meditation, and at that time, transcendental meditation was really big. There are still centers today. They had actually encouraged Benson to study the effects of meditation, and he wasn't too interested in just one style, which was kind of commercialized. They charged a lot of money, like a thousand dollars to learn. We charge nothing. So, he finally decided he would do an experiment and he would study all the different types of meditation. So he essentially hooks these subjects up to, like a lie detector machine, where they measured heart rate, breathing rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, and galvanic skin response. I think I'm leaving one out, but essentially like a lie detector. And what he found, when I tell you this today it won't be very surprising, but at the time this discovery was revolutionary. He found it didn't matter the type of mediation you did, they were all equally affective. He studied a Zen practitioner, he had a ... practitioner, self-hypnosis, and there were a couple of others, I don't remember. It didn't matter the type of technique you used. They were all equally affective. All of them lowered respiration, lowered blood pressure, lowered heart rate, and smoothed out brain waves. All of them. Up until that time they didn't know, science didn't know, medicine didn't know, you could

control the autonomic nervous system. Today, everybody understands that. This was the beginning of bio-feedback. They thought the mind was separate from the body, and that you couldn't control heart rate or you couldn't control respiration. Turns out you can. So, Benson's theory was that the reason we have such a high rate of stroke, and heart disease in this country is because of the flight or fight response. Because most of us are stressed out, we keep eliciting this flight or fight response continually over the day because of our stressful environment. So his hypothesis was what if we did something with the flight or fight response, you know, where heart rate goes up, blood pressure goes up, respiration goes up, where you're in this heightened state of alert, what if you did just the opposite? He called it the relaxation response, which is just another name for meditation, which he found out lowered heart rate, lowered respiration, lowered blood pressure. What if you did that on a regular basis? Maybe that would counteract the negative effects of stress, this flight or fight response. So, that was his hypothesis, that maybe that was the cause of heart attack, heart disease, and stroke in this country. That was his hypothesis, and I thought that this made a lot of sense, so I started meditating. My wife and I meditated really for the health benefit. When I teach meditation, I still hold up the book. But then later on, there was a teacher by the name of Jon Kabat-Zinn, and he started something called the Stress Reduction Clinic at the Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester. So about thirty years ago, maybe, he started this center. He's Buddhist. I've seen him at Buddhist conferences, but he thought, what if we were to introduce this technique of mediation in a very secular sort of way. Not mention Buddhism at all. So he started treating people with panic disorders, with chronic pain, addiction disorder, insomnia, just on and on and on. It was a six-week program at the University of Massachusetts Medical center, and he had phenomenal results, and he published dozens of professional articles in professional journals. He's since retired from there, but I think it's still going on though. He published a book for lay people where he discusses various cases, people who had success who had chronic pain, who had addiction, who had insomnia. It's called, if you're interested, the book is called *Full Catastrophe Living*. Good luck spelling Catastrophe. And that's the other book I usually bring. It really documents how successful mediation is in treating some of these elements.

Nathan: So, stepping back from mediation just to talk about ritual in general, I'm just curious, when you were developing your practices at the center, like the specific prayers that you say for mediation or even your larger Sunday service, how much would you say is "authentically" Tibetan, if that's the right word to use, and how much would you say you've had to adapt and modify traditions that you've learn to fit more of a Western audience.

Lama Chuck: Well, first of all, in Tibet, well, the main practice across America, or Americans who practice Buddhism, is meditation. If you go to India or Tibet, and you watch Tibetans, lay Tibetans don't meditate. That's not their practice. They do something called circumambulation. They walk clockwise, and they have prayer beads, and they are saying a mantra of compassion. They walk clockwise around, it could be a temple, it could be a stupa, or even the Dalia Lama's residents. I think it's spiritual, but I think it also has a slight social aspect to it, because, especially older Tibetans (you don't see too many younger Tibetans doing this) they do it in the morning and they do it in the evening, so you can see them doing this. It's called kora. Kora means going around, circumambulating, always clockwise. They don't meditate. Monks do some meditation, but if you're asking how authentic it is, lay Tibetans don't

mediate. Monks mediate somewhat, but they do other practices as well. Our Sunday service, when I was with the Shambhala group, they would have on Sunday three hours of sitting, from 9am until noon. You could come for part of it. You could come for all of it. You could come and go. There was no chanting. There was no dharma talk. There was just three hours of sitting. So, when we moved into this building, I said I want to have a service that Westerners can relate to. So what we created is our own thing. You go into any other Buddhist center and you won't find it. So we came up with this. I feel it keeps some of the Tibetan tradition authentic, but then we introduce aspects that are very, very Western and not Tibetan. You wouldn't see, over in Tibet or Nepal or India, for example, we sing. Several of the mantras we put to song, which you've probably experienced, like the Green Tara or the Chenrezig. We do that to raise the comfort levels for Westerners. When I went to church, we would sing hymns you know? There is a printed service, and it's similar in some aspects to a service in church. At the end I give a dharma talk, the equivalent of a sermon. So, it's completely and totally created.

Nathan: What about the mantras, like, the mantras themselves?

Lama Chuck: The mantras are authentic. Yes, absolutely.

Nathan: So those all have sources in the Tibetan Tradition.

Lama Chuck: In Tibetan Buddhism, absolutely. And these chants, or these prayers, that we do, we do supplication to Manjushri, supplication to Tara, all of these supplications to the various, they're called bodhisattvas. Those are authentic. So there are parts that are very authentic, and there are parts that are very Western that we added. And you go to another Western Buddhist center, I mean, people think that this is what you do. If I go over here I'll find the same thing, but you won't.

Nathan: I imagine that was part of the decision to have a Sunday service.

Lama Chuck: Well, if you're Jewish it's a Saturday, right? In Islam, it's Friday. But Christians go to church on Sunday. That's what I was raised on, so I was used to going to church. It has no special significance to Buddhists, so I picked Sunday.

Nathan: Society kind of structured itself around that anyway, you know, making Sunday the day off I suppose.

Lama Chuck: Yeah. And I made it 10:30am because I'm not an early morning person. I did it as late as possible, but that we could still be done by noon. And there are many churches, I was just down at the Community Christian, Bob Hill's church, the one the Plaza, the Frank Lloyd Wright building, and he and most other churches, they have like, two, three, four, services on Sunday, and that blows my mind. I can't imagine doing more than one service

Nathan: Just because I want to get record of it, I think I've heard the story before, but part of the service is that you wear the red and the white garments.

Lama Chuck: Who, lay people?

Nathan: No, you do.

Lama Chuck: Oh, yes, I do.

Nathan: Yes, you wear the red and white garments. I was wondering if you could talk about the significance of the garments, specifically the color white.

Lama Chuck: Well, you're wearing a maroon t-shirt

Nathan: I am.

Lama Chuck: and that's almost the color that monks and nuns and lamas wear, this maroon. I don't wear much white, why did you ask about white?

Nathan: There is a white element that you throw over.

Lama Chuck: There is a shawl called a Zen, and the one that I wear is maroon and white striped, and that indicates that I am a lay person. A lama can be a monk, a monastic which means they are celibate, or a lama can be a lay person who can be married like I am. So, the Zen that I wear is maroon and white stripes, which means I am a lay person. If it was solid maroon it would indicate that I am a monastic, a monk. That is the difference.

Nathan: I was wondering if you could discuss the relationship you've had in the Rime Center to other, specifically non-Buddhist organizations,

Lama Chuck: Such as?

Nathan: Well, I'm thinking mostly of popular Christian groups and what not. Have you had much interaction with the local religious community? Working together, or has there been...I remember a couple of years ago there was a Lao Buddhist temple that wanted to be built in Olathe and there was a push back.

Lama Chuck: Oh, I was very involved with that. I became their media spokesperson because none of them spoke English.

Nathan: So I was wondering if you could talk about the relationship that the Rime Center itself has had with the local community.

Lama Chuck: I like to be involved in interfaith things. I've been a member of the interfaith council in Kansas City for twenty years. I've been the Buddhist representative. I think interfaith dialogue is just critically important. That's one of the things I really enjoy doing. But also, I have very good friends who are ministers in others churches, like Bob Hill. Last night I was at a meeting for something they are planning in the fall. There was Marvin Schneller, who is with the Jewish Community Relations Board, there were Buddhists, people from different traditions. And then, our really big annual event is called the Meditation for World Peace that we've been doing for 15 years. It itself is about 30 years old, but we picked it up in 2000 when it almost had died. It's truly an interfaith event; it's not just a Buddhist

event. We have a 15 or 16 members of the interfaith council who give prayers for peace from each faith tradition. We have an African American woman named ... who sings. She leads us in song. It's just very much an interfaith event, there is very little Buddhist about it. We invite people from other faiths and other traditions.

Nathan: Do you have much interaction with the local Buddhist community, like, other Buddhist organizations?

Lama Chuck: Well, I think we have good relationships with them. On the Plaza there is Unity Temple. It has several special interest groups that meet on different nights of the week. There's a Zen group that meets one night, there's a Thich Nhat Hanh group that meets another night. You know what I mean. And Janet Taylor, who has changed her name to Nima is sort of the director of that. I think she has a ministerial degree from Unity. Duke Tufty is the main minister, but she's a co-minister and oversees that. Then there are three, what I call ethnic Buddhist centers in Kansas City. There is that Laotian one that you talked about in Olathe. Not only is their whole service is Laotian, but almost none of them speak English. So I became their spokesmen when they were trying to get some land zoned for a new building. There is a Chinese group, or temple, they meet at a house in Leawood. From the outside you would never know it was a temple. It's just a big house off of 103<sup>rd</sup>. So we have Laotian, Chinese, and the third one is a very large Vietnamese Temple North of the river, and we've had a really good relationship with them over the years. Again, the monk, who is sort of the resident monk there, does not speak English. So that's always the challenge. And each of these do their service in Chinese, Laotian, or in the Vietnamese language. Westerners are certainly welcome, but it's kind of a challenge because you would have no idea.

Nathan: So these groups developed mostly out of first generation immigrants coming over and starting these communities?

Lama Chuck: I would think so yeah.

Nathan: I have one more question. I was wondering if you could just describe what it's like being a Buddhist in Kansas.

Lama Chuck: I don't think it's any different than being a Jew or a Christian. I don't think. People often ask if I've ever felt discriminated against, and I have to say, no, I haven't. I get some strange looks when I'm out in my lama robe. The funniest situation was a number of years ago. We had a visiting teacher and I was picking up some texts that he needed for his teachings. So, I was at Kinko's and it happened to be Halloween. It was October 31<sup>st</sup>, and I'm standing at the counter and this woman looked at me and looked up and looked down and said "great costume" and I said "yeah and it fits so well." But yeah, I don't feel that my life is much different on the whole.