

Interview 2

T--I have a few questions about who you are.

What's your age

44

T--You're male

Yes

T--you're cultural background? Where were you born and raised?

I was born and raised on the East Coast, in Connecticut and Massachusetts. I was raised in a secular family. I never went to church in my life, as a youngster. My father's heritage is German and Scots Irish and my mother is Ukrainian Jew. My father family is a Naval family. They were Naval officers. My mother's parents were immigrants. They are, sort of, Bohemian, socialist, trade union activists. They were completely secular. Which, in a funny way, I see as being very traditional Judaism. It's a sort of bookishness. My mother's parents both had graduate degrees. For a woman at that time, that's quite unusual. My grandmother was a painter actually. My grandfather was a scholar of trade unions. He was very active. He was black listed in the McCarthy era. My own parents were more traditional.

T--Did you go to public schools.

I went to public schools.

T--But you didn't go to church?

No.

T--I'm looking at, you know, where we get indoctrination.

I should say, growing up in New England, it was very unusual not to go to church. All my neighbors went to church. There were a few Catholics, but most people were Protestant. Most of the neighbors' names were good Anglo-Saxon names, Potter, Wilson, Cooper, Collier, Whipple. The Anglo-Saxon names go on and on. So, that's where I grew up.

T--O.K. Now, you kind of hit on this, but, what is your race? The most exact question is what box do you check on forms?

Caucasian.

T--And you are fairly comfortable with that. Or, are you fairly comfortable with that?

Only conventionally. My experience has been that race was less formative than the sensitive creeds of Judaism and Protestant belief systems. My mother was the first Jew to live in my neighborhood, although I didn't know it growing up. So, I may be white, but my family is of a non-Protestant minority, within the white, protest majority of America.

T--Do you participate in a Religious tradition?

Well, I would say I pick and choose those elements that match my own experience. I am very interested in Taoism. Hinduism has always fascinated me, but, you can't be a Hindu really. Either you are born into Hinduism, or you are an outcast. I think, that checking any creed against your own personal experience is something that has always been with Buddhism. That is one reason Buddhism has appealed to me the most. I call myself a former Buddhist these days. I was in India in 1993 when members of three major religious traditions were slaughtering each other. I had a hard time accepting any religious identity from that point on.

T--How do these aspects of your life affect your practice of Engaged Buddhism. For example, how did your age and generation affect your becoming an Engaged Buddhist?

When I was a young teenager, the Vietnam war was going on. It was very much in the consciousness of the country. I was about fifteen when Nixon and Henry Kissinger called a secret bombing of Cambodia. There were major protests all over the country. I was swept up in that, probably without really knowing what was going on. Yet, there was something exciting and infectious about protesting American policy. Even as a youngster, I recognized that there was something wrong with my country. From about the age of fifteen, I remember being very interested in social movements and social protest, just because it was going on around me and I had a gut feeling that it was correct. It was righteous behavior in some way. In years since then I have certainly done more through study of social action. This tradition of revolution and the sense that the errors and problems of the world can be altered if citizens work hard enough. So, that's some of my background, there. I had early direct experience with social movements and protests from the Vietnam War.

T--It sounds to me that you encountered activism before you encountered Buddhism. Is that correct?

Probably, but, not too far apart. By the time I was sixteen or seventeen, I was aware of Eastern religions, and felt a certain pull to them. I read Herman Hesse. I was practicing Yoga. I had a dim sense of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Having grown up in the Boston area, I got very interested in Asian art collections in the local museums. They appealed to me much more than Western collections. As a younger

boy, I was already looking at art from China and India. They were conveying in some sort of immediate sensory way certain religious and philosophical traditions. You cannot separate Indian sculpture from the Buddhist and Hindu traditions it spoke of; and the same goes for Chinese brushwork or Taoist inspired landscapes.

T--How have activism and Buddhism played off of each other in your life, or do they?

Contemplation and action. Those are the two poles we are talking about. Every religious tradition has struggled with the relation of those. It's nothing new. I think it's something all humans feel. Perhaps there can be a belief that for contemplation you must withdraw from the world, but, that's not possible-- not after Vietnam, in my experience. Once you have a world that uses napalm and the kinds of conventional armaments that we have, or factories which are spewing chemicals into the air and the water, and the land. Once the timber and mining companies claim the land, where do you go? You can't avoid it. There is no withdrawal from the world in modern consciousness. So, when you adopt a contemplative tradition, one of the great struggles is how you work with that. I consider my earliest American Buddha ancestor to be Henry David Thoreau. Walden pond was about ten miles away from where I came of age. I spent a lot of time there as I was growing up. Thoreau has always been a major figure in my life. He was an activist. I'm not sure he ever named a religion in his writings. Although, in one of his earliest books, he did talk about "my Buddha" and "their Christ".

T--Do you think being male affects you as an Engaged Buddhist?

Very very little. The American Zen tradition has many women teachers. My experience might have been different if I was practicing Tibetan Buddhism, for example (which is traditionally male centered with male teachers).

T--That's very useful. The experience of having women teachers, I think, feels very different to women, as well as to men. So, I can see how a tradition with women teachers is different than predominately male traditions.

I'm going to clump together race and cultural background because they seem similar for you. How have those affected you?

Race and Cultural background?

T--Yes. How has where you come from affected you?

I think I am a committed secularist. I think within the range of secularism, religious traditions that are too wet, that is to say, too devotional are difficult for me to accept. Religions that are too exotic or too hallucinogenic, sort of grate against my secularism. I like the non-theism of Buddhism. Maybe even more so the complete nature awareness and absolute disinterest towards any sort of theism that you get from Taoism. This doesn't grate against my commitment to a secular world.

O.K. How would you define Buddhism.

That's a big one. I guess very simply, I go back to the simple early insights of the historical Buddha, the Four Noble Truths--suffering, cause of suffering, cessation of suffering, and a way to get there. That provides room for all sorts of cultural

possibilities, such as historical developments, art forms, other creeds and religions can step in. So, it is a really simple scaffold for me.

T--And fairly open within that simplicity.

Yes, very open in that simplicity.

T--How would you define Engaged Buddhism.

Engaged Buddhism... I'm teaching a class right now on the cantos of Ezra Pound. In one of the early cantos, he growls at his readership. The line is "You who think you can get through Hell in a hurry". I have meditated on that line ever since I saw it about twenty years ago. Just before that, he mocked T.S. Elliot. He made a comment to the extent, "You who think that the reverend Elliot has found a more natural language. You who think you can get through Hell in a hurry". I realized that the contrast he was making was between T.S. Elliot who had accepted the Anglican religion, and its promise of salvation, and the British Monarchy. By contrast, I think that Ezra Pound is saying that there is no simple way to get through Hell. I would say that this is like the Bodhisattva vow, you cannot get through Hell without bringing everyone with you.

T--And that is Engaged Buddhism?

That would be Engaged Buddhism. Or, as the Tibetans explain, it is the salvation of all beings down to the very last blade of grass. It is the vow of Avalokitesvara. He is the compassionate Buddha who had done all the Dharma practices for all those eons, heaped on one another, as many as the sands of the Ganges. He was just about to

step through the portal of ultimate bliss, into Nirvana, when he heard this loud noise behind him. He turned around and he looked downwards as he was about to pass the threshold into Nirvana. Avalokitesvara means, the lord who looked downwards. There is a picture of him looking back over his shoulder to see what this noise is. It was the cry of grief from all of the suffering beings. So, he stopped and said that he couldn't go through without all of the suffering beings. The lord Buddha said that, in that case, he would need a thousand heads and a thousand arms. He gave those to Avalokitesvara.

T--For me, that is a beautiful picture of Engaged Buddhism.

So, I would say, fundamentally, it comes down to the recognition that we are all implicated in one another. Our karma is interlinked. There is no satisfaction, no freedom of suffering, without the freedom of all beings. I was aware of that as a little child. I remember, as a little boy, when it would come time to blow out the birthday candles and make a wish, what I wished for was to be happy. Yet, it was clear to me that for me to be happy meant that my parents had to be happy, their friends then had to be happy, and those peoples' friends had to be happy. Very quickly it was way beyond the limits of what a child could understand. I knew that there was no happiness without including everybody.

T--Happiness included the inconceivable amount of everything.

Yes, a thousand heads and a thousand arms are what you need to blow out the thousand birthday candles.

T--How do you define Activism. Or how do you see yourself as being an activist?

Since the Vietnam anti-war protests, I have participated in certain demonstrations. I was active in animal rights for a while. However, as a writer I feel that I have to primarily focus on writing. There are endless projects and concerns calling for your attention, all the time. It would be neurotic to be paralyzed because there are too many of them. It's also neurotic to extend yourself so thin that you are ineffective. So, I think that the best thing a person can do is to take stock of your abilities and how you can best use them and, then, to choose those issues that are closest to your heart. It is not useful to spend undue time worrying about whether there are other issues that are more compelling. How can you compare ecological activism, civil rights, or anti-war movements? They are all connected in a way but, realistically, you can only be an activist if you focus on particular issues and focus on them. The poet William Blake said it beautifully, "He who would do good to another must do so in minute particulars. General good is the plea of liars, hypocrites, and flatterers". So, forget the general good. Work on specifics, and work with your best gifts. I feel that, generally, writing is what I have to contribute. As a writer, I don't mean just writing poems. I also mean letters to the editor, I mean writing essays, I show up at meetings when that would be beneficial, and I work to create networks. I think its a process of tossing ideas around and just trying to move the world ever so slightly.

T--How are you part of the Naropa community?

I'm a full time faculty member at Naropa which means, theoretically, I could spend the rest of my working life here. I may very well stay here. Naropa is a small college with lots of problems. They are typical human problems. They are exciting

problems that require a lot of tedious work to get solved. I appreciate all my colleagues as we try and make this college fulfill its potential. It is, as far as know, the only contemplative college on this side of the Bering Strait. I heartily approve of its Buddhist origins and its recent attempts to open to more traditions. I think that the writing program is one of the best in the country. I think that Buddhist Studies department, especially with its emphasis Engaged Buddhism is making new tracks in some way. I saw an interesting survey which, I believe, said that there was only one Engaged Buddhist degree program in the country, and that is here. The Environmental Studies program here seems to be the one science, and an activist science, that really meshes well with the Buddhist philosophy. I have done teaching for both Buddhist Studies and Environmental Studies. I think that is rare. It's unusual to find a college where you can move across some of these boundaries. The college has been very supportive of me. This is my role here.

I came here in a very unusual way. I had been interested in Buddhism and I had studied Sanskrit for a few years. I also had this sense of myself as a poet. There were very few places that these two worlds fit together for me. When I was working as a poet in the Bay Area, my involvement in Buddhism was matched by a few of my friends Gail Sher, Philip Wheler, Pat Reed, Norman Fisher, and a few others. Yet, most of the poets considered it eccentric at best. However, no one could understand my Sanskrit studies. When I ended up at the Naropa Institute, it suddenly made sense that these various areas of scholarship and activity all fit together and made me, probably, a good faculty member for Naropa. Also, it made Naropa, perhaps the only place in the country where I could fit in.

T--O.K. I think that, actually, I have asked all my questions. Is there anything else you would like to say?

From what I can see, they are ahead of us in Asia. We are just now waking up and, with the great combination of American arrogance and American optimism, creating this new mode of Buddhism, "Engaged Buddhism". Buddhist social action has been going on for a long long time in India. Perhaps, to some extent, also in China, Japan, Tibet, and Sri Lanka. I think Buddhism has never been permitted to let this kind of activism flower fully before. Buddhism has, traditionally gone hand in hand with the governments of the countries it has resided in. It's been patronized by those governments. So, it has not been easy for it to criticize the governments. This would be my main critique of Buddhism. I think the traditions of social justice, revolution, inquiry about social forms that comes out of the West meet very nicely with the more introspective qualities of Buddhism. So, perhaps the United States is the likely meeting ground of these sorts of things. But, ideas move world wide very quickly and I think Buddhist Activism has a stronger heritage in Asia than in the United States.

T--That's helpful, thank you. More?

In the context of activism, social justice, and ecological justice, as it meshes with Buddhism, there is a concept that American Buddhism is a white middle class creed. That's what you certainly see in Boulder. In fact, last weekend, I was at dinner with someone who said to me, "I understand that Boulder is the most Buddhist city in America, is that right?". I said, "Do you mean by percentage of practicing Buddhists?". He said "Yes". I answered, "I suspect that if you look at the White residents, Boulder may have the highest proportion of practitioners. But, you forget that there are whole areas of cities filled with non-White populations that might be entirely Buddhist. Boroughs that are probably as populated as Boulder itself is. Chinese San Francisco, Chinese New York, any place that now has

burgeoning populations of South East Asian refugees, all of these areas have large Buddhist populations. However, they are not the ones who are showing up at Boulder Karma Dzong, or the at practice room at Naropa. While this White middle class American Buddhism has started to include Latinos, Blacks, Asians, and other groups, let's not forget that Buddhism has been in this country for a long time before non-Asians became Buddhist. Recently I found in a book store a publication of Buddhists in Colorado from the early 1960's. This is before white Buddhists were really practicing in Boulder. This book was a Chinese publication out of Denver: "The Buddhist Church of Denver". It probably represents a Chinese population that has been practicing Buddhism in Colorado since the days of the railroad and since silver mines.

Good. Thanks.