



33. BRAD WARNER

Brad Warner (born March 5, 1964) is an American Sōtō Zen priest, author, blogger, documentarian and punk rock bass guitarist.

Brad was born in Hamilton, Ohio in 1964. His family traveled for his father's job and Warner spent some time in Nairobi, Kenya but grew up mainly near Akron, Ohio and attended Kent State University. As a teenager Warner got into the music of the 1960s and hardcore punk, and a friend of his took him to a show by Zero Defex. He auditioned for and joined the band after finding out they needed a bass guitarist. He began practicing Zen Buddhism under his first teacher, Tim McCarthy. Warner later studied with Gyomay Kubose.

He has played with Dementia 13. After the financial failure of his Dementia 13 albums, Warner got a job in Japan with the JET Programme, and then later in 1994 with Tsuburaya Productions who made Ultraman. Warner played the roles of various foreigners in their programs. While in Japan he met and trained with Gudo Wafu Nishijima, who ordained him as a priest.

He agreed to write articles for SuicideGirls, the online soft porn site. In 2007 he directed the documentary film Cleveland's Screaming, which depicts the punk rock scene in Akron and Cleveland in the 1980s.

Also in 2007, Gudo Wafu Nishijima named Warner the leader of Dogen Sangha International which Nishijima had founded. Warner dissolved the organization in April 2012.

In 2008 Warner lost his job with the Japanese company he had been working for in the States and as of January 2009 he was self-employed.

In 2012, Warner moved to California and started Dogen Sangha Los Angeles. In 2013, Pirooz Kalayeh directed a film about Warner entitled Brad Warner's Hardcore Zen. The film premiered on October 5th, 2013 in Amsterdam at the Buddhist Film Festival of Europe.

<http://hardcorezen.info>

INTERVIEW

Q: Can you please tell me a little about your back ground in Zen?

Brad Warner: Background in Zen. Ok. I first came across Zen Buddhism, sometime in 1983 or 84. I was a student at Kent State University Ohio and I took a class called Zen Buddhism which at the time I thought it was just an extra class I was taking to fill out my schedule.

I was very impressed by the class and by the teachers. This guys name was Tim McCarthy and he was an American Zen teacher and I just started practicing right then. It worked out really well and I just continued it as a daily practice. You know a lot of people get into Zen because they are actively searching for it, but I was not looking for it at all.

I had heard the word Zen before but I didn't know what it was. In 1993, 10 years after this I moved to Japan, not to study Zen but just to get a job. I got a job with an English teacher. Then I got another job working for science fiction films that made monster movies and things. And I wasn't in Tokyo first, but then I moved to Tokyo and met this Zen teacher named Gudo Nishijima. He impressed me as well and I kept going to his Zen class, which he did every Saturday. I also went to his retreats. I had been hanging around him for maybe seven years or something like that when he decided he wanted to make me his dharma heir, which I thought was an hour at the time (I'm sure I did not say "I thought it was an hour at the time" but I have no idea what I might have said). So it took me awhile to decide and I finally accepted it and he gave me what is called dharma transmission, making me a teacher in his lineage. Then I also went through the Soto shu which is a big organization in Japan. I registered there as well. That's the short version.

Q: Ok, great. So the next question would be about the first teacher you had, Tim McCarthy. At any point did he charge you for the meditation or for the teaching?

Brad Warner: In fact, no, Tim is really strict about that. He is much more strict than I am. Although he doesn't dislike what I do, he won't take money for anything at all. I think a lot of people would like to give him money. Then, he worked as a teacher at Kent State University which I figured payed his expenses. Now, he works for Lakeland Community College up in Cleveland and he figures as long as he has his living expenses covered, he doesn't need to take any money for teaching. He feels really strongly that taking any money for teaching Zen is tends to corrupt things.

Q: Did he say why exactly? Was that what he was taught from his teacher or did he come to this view on his own?

Brad Warner: I get the impression that he came to it on his own mostly because his teacher was a guy named Cobin Chino and I know Cobin Chino (he is dead now) accepted money for retreats. He never got wealthy from it, but I know he would get paid when he ran a retreat or something. I just went on one of Tim's retreats last weekend and all the money went to a charity. He wouldn't take any of it, so there you go.

Q: Ok. How did this work with your second teacher in Japan? Did he charge you for a sit (meditation), or was it a monthly fee that went towards the teacher? How did that work with him?

Brad Warner: No, Nishijima roshi also did take money for the teachings. He had a job with the Ida Soap Company and that paid his living expenses. He would charge when we met on weekends, on Saturdays. The place that we met was rented so everybody had to pay. I think it was 600 yen. You know which is maybe five dollars. I'm not sure if it's more. I always forget the exchange rates; 5 or 6 dollars more or less.

Q: How did he determine that figure? Also, how many people were in the group and do you know how much the rental fee was?

Brad Warner: No I don't, but I would assume knowing what I know about the way things work in Japan, the rental fee was higher than he was getting from us. It was part of Tokyo University. There were usually ten or fewer people who showed up on Saturdays. There could be between five and ten people on any given Saturday and I would guess that somebody else probably other than him was covering the short fall. But I never really knew how much was charged. The money as far as I knew went to the room rental.

Q: Ok, that comes to about 50 bucks if there are 10 people at 5 dollars each. So was that like an hour sit (meditation)? How long was the sit?

Brad Warner: It was a two-hour block of time. So it was half an hour of zazen followed by an hour and a half of talking. And sometimes sit went all the way for two hours and sometimes it didn't.

Q: That sounds very reasonable, five dollars for two hours.

Brad Warner: Yeah, it was pretty good, especially in Japan where everything is more expensive. For retreats, we all paid a fee that went directly to the temple for the rental of the temple. I think it was a three day retreat and it was 15,000 yen, maybe 5,000 yen per day so I'm just guessing from my bad memory, so it might be in that range.

Q: How much is that approximately in dollars?

Brad Warner: The yen value always fluctuates to about 100 yen to a dollar. So at any given time it could be 50 dollars a day; so 150 dollars more or less or in that neighborhood. And none of that went to him. In fact, he would treat us to a lovely soba lunch at the beginning of every retreat at this restaurant that was at the foot of the mountain where this temple was. And he always paid for that which was a bit of a thing for me, because when I started he wanted me to take over those retreats and a lot of people didn't understand that the soba lunch wasn't just free. Because Nishijima had been covering it for so long and it was expensive, (Laughter) and when I found out, I couldn't afford it. I couldn't afford to treat 15 or 20 people to a lunch that was 20 dollars per person every time we had these retreats. People had to start paying for their own soba.

Q: So when you took over for him, did he give you any instruction in the practice of dana (giving) or charging? Was he explicit about that with you?

Brad Warner: Yeah he thought that you should never take money teaching Zen because that would lead to a kind of corruption of the practice, because you would start to alter. Actually you know what, let me rephrase that. He actually said you should never make it your living. He never explicitly said not to take money for it, but if you made that your only source of income, that was when he felt the trouble started because you would be worrying about how many people you could get in and if a certain teaching was more popular you would most likely to do that. Or alter the things you said to get more people in and more money. So he was kind of strict about that. You know when I talk to him about making money from writing books though, he had a completely different opinion which is you should make as much money as you can from writing books because writing books is a legitimate kind of work. if they are books about Zen. (I don't think I said this.

It doesn't matter what the books are about. Writing is still a legitimate form of work.)

Q: Right, and that would also apply if you were into poetry or art work or music or whatever else it would be?

Brad Warner: Yeah and he was completely ok with that because that didn't enter into the teaching aspect as far as he was concerned.

Q: There is a quote in the Pali cannon where the Buddha said the Dharma shouldn't be traded. He also said it was the highest gift. How would you interpret this?

Brad Warner: Well, I agree, I think it shouldn't be traded and it is a kind of gift. On the other hand it's a complex situation because if somebody devotes their life to teaching Buddhism, they need to pay the rent somehow. And so there is always some kind of economic aspect to it. And even in Buddha's time, you had the advantage of an established system of supporting spiritual teachers in India in those days. So he took advantage of that. It existed and you could count on people to support you. Which we do not have anymore. I can't walk down the streets of Akron Ohio with a begging bowl in a robe and expect anybody to put anything in the begging bowl. I would probably get arrested. So you have to come up with something different and I can talk for hours on the subject of that because it's actually something that interests me a lot.

Q: What does the word dana mean to you?

Brad Warner: What does the word dana mean to me? This is a funny question because my teacher Nishijima never used the word dana. He would talk about generosity and free giving and the kind of thing which Dogen talked about, but that's a bit different from what people mean by dana these days which is a kind of donation given to a teacher for his or her teaching. I don't know, I have seen the concept of dana abused so I'm a bit skeptical of it. I was in Japan once and someone had highly recommended this teacher. He was a Canadian guy who was teaching in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and these people I met were so enamored by this guy and thought he was so great. And I went along to one of his sessions and he was one of these guys that follows a tradition which I'm sure you are familiar with where the teacher refuses to touch money. But he said many things that indicated to me that he was living a lot better than I was working a five day a week job for a film production company. He was able to go sky diving and that's not cheap. The thing that really irked me was that when we all went out after, there was a teaching thing, and I got invited somehow to go have dinner with him at this Indian restaurant. It was about 20 or thirty dollars a meal and he made this comment when the check came around, he said I can't touch money. So his disciples all kind of took a collection up for his food and I thought that's how this works.
(laughs)

So what I saw from that little snippet or slice of life was that there are ways that you can work the system so that you do not touch money, but you still live pretty well and you are still getting other people to buy shit for you.
(Laughter)

So what does that mean? When I was in Los Angeles I used to run across Orthodox Jews who used to look for any Gentile looking to light their cigarettes for them. I saw that happen, you know on Saturdays. So you are missing the point of the whole idea of abstinence if somebody else indulges on your behalf and gives you the fruits of that indulgence. I don't get it.

So I will accept donations when I give talks and things, because after I lost the job with the film production company I had to pay my rent somehow. And so I do it with a bit of reluctance, even now. It has become a substantial portion of my income and I'm actually looking into ways where I don't have to do that anymore. But the economic situation had a bit of a down turn at the very time when I'm thinking I better quit this and get a job, and then I can't find a job, so I'm stuck with the donation thing.

Q: So do you ask for a suggested donation or kind of leave it open-ended? How does it work?

Brad Warner: I tend to leave it open ended. If somebody invites me to do a lecture out of town, or sometimes in another county, I'm trying a variety of ways to do it. But I want to get my travel expenses covered and not lose money on it because I have out of town speaking things and teaching things where it has cost me money. And that was ok when it was at a time where I was working at another job and I could afford to throw some money at it and support the dharma too. But now I can't afford to that anymore so I try to at least get that covered and I always attempt to make it fair to whomever is inviting me. If it's a university, I know they have some money so I don't feel bad about asking for it. If it's some Zen center in some far flung area, I try to make it so that nobody is losing a bunch of money having me come out and talk to them.

Q: What are your thoughts on integrating Zen with aspects of Jungian psychology and trade marking Zen teachings? What do you think about this sort of entrepreneurial Zen?

Brad Warner: Well I find it to be disgusting, honestly. I understand where it comes from to a certain degree because that was my job when I worked for this company called Tsuburaya Productions in Japan. Part of my job was registering trademarks. So I understand trademark registration and why you do it. There's a lot of reasons: you don't want other people going around and claiming to be teaching in your name. Then you want to trademark to keep that from happening and keeping everything sort of pure. So that's the up side of it. The down side of it, what I often see, in being trademarked is often terms in common usage. The one that springs to mind immediately is this thing called "big mind" which is trademarked and that is something that comes from daishin, which translates to "big mind". It's an ancient Buddhist phrase that this guy has put a little TM next to and says I own this phrase now and if you use it, you've got to pay me. It gets weird.

Q: Didn't Shuryu Suzuki also use it in a big way?

Brad Warner: Yes. So to trademark that is odd. It gets into a funny area when you say ok, I own this. I can understand why it's done but it's just not traditional teaching style then. And if you claim to be a traditional teacher, you shouldn't be doing that. If you claim to be a guy that developed a new meditation system, then well, ok whatever, I just find it all bizarre.

Q: Where do you see this heading in the future? Will it be more towards a business style model of re-marketing and selling it or back to how it started 2500 years ago?

Brad Warner: I think it's unavoidable that it's going to go into a kind of business model direction, at least for a while because that's the only way it's done. Especially when you are talking about American society and

particularly western society in general where you have a society which is really economically oriented. So everything has a kind of economic basis to it, so people will only tend to understand things based on economics.

A lot of things go into an economic model because we have a society now where it understands the economic basis for doing things. It is considered to be more clean in a sense. Everybody understands what they are putting into it and what they are getting back and it doesn't become this kind of nebulous something when you're donating your time for a great cause. At the end of the day, if that great cause doesn't turn out the way you expected it or wanted it to, then you feel like you have been cheated or so on. That doesn't go.

And getting back to what I said earlier about teachers supporting and even students themselves, there has to be some kind of a support system. For example what I do is kind of independent. I don't have an organization behind me. There's some sort of organization called dogan sangha international but it's not really enough to be anything.

But he did not bequeath something that would support me. For example, if you think of the San Francisco Zen center, it's a big money making operation. I don't know if they make a profit or how that works but they take in a lot of money and they use that money to run all kinds of things. To pay for the rent on the various buildings they own. To pay stipends for certain people so they have a system whereby somebody who enters the San Francisco Zen center at a certain level can expect to be supported economically by the San Francisco Zen center. So they don't have to personally go out and raise funds, at least not in terms of begging for their own individual meals and so forth. But somebody is going out and raising funds and those funds are what buys them miso soup and whatever, new robes. And they get a stipend for living and they can have a few nice

things. I have visited people's apartments and they have a video player and whatever, so they are able to live in a modest lower income

Q: So they are not technically renunciates, they are not monks?

Brad Warner: No, they're monks. The Japanese system allows for monks to do that so they do consider them to be monks.

Q: Like a householder type monk? They are not celibates are they?

Brad Warner: No I'm thinking of the one person I know best, actually two people, who are a married couple and they have worked for the San Francisco Zen center for a long time and the center provided them a nice apartment.

Q: So do they call themselves roshi or sensei monk teachers; what do they go by?

Brad Warner: Well they wouldn't go by roshi. I think they would consider themselves to be monks at some level, but that's very common in Japanese to be both a monk and a house holder. Since the meiji restoration, that's become more or less the norm.

Q: Yes that's where it can get confusing. In some traditions someone can be a monk and a house holder, like in the Tibetan tradition where you could be lama and have a family.

Brad Warner: I didn't know that about the Tibetan tradition. I know about the Japanese tradition. Historically when the Meiji restoration happened, it basically got rid of all its governmental laws regarding monks. It's a funny aspect of Japanese history. Japan has been a very stratified country and they almost had a kind of caste system. Like they do in India too. They didn't call it that but one of the ways of getting out of your caste was by becoming a monk. But the powers that be back in the middle ages didn't want people pretending to be monks so that they could move up in society and they made various things that monks did as a matter of law. For example, there was a time in Japanese history, a long time ago, where you could actually be executed if you were a monk who had sex.

If he were caught having sex, this could be a capital punishment. That went away but the laws making it illegal for monks to have sex were still on the books up until the 1860s when the Japanese government was trying to westernize and as part of the program of trying to westernize, they got rid of these laws because they realized that other western countries did not have laws like that. It's a very complicated thing but once it became a matter of law, I suppose the temples and monasteries said ok. It's not just a matter of laws, but they expected you to follow these rules, but they didn't. And from that time on monks were allowed to marry and eat meat if they wanted to. They called them meat eating and sex laws. (Laughter)

Q: Did that change the system with respect to money and charging when they were householders and had families?

Brad Warner: Yeah and in Japanese Buddhism, particularly Soto which is the lineage that I belong to, the way they make money is generally by funeral ceremonies. They perform funeral ceremonies and they charge for those ceremonies and that's how they make their money. And they will do

things that sound very much like the Catholic system that Martin Luther was against like selling indulgences in heaven or whatever it was called. As part of the funeral, they would charge families for giving a person a posthumous Buddhist name and the better Buddhist name cost more money. So it's a really corrupt system and my teacher was very much against this and he was ordained through the Soto shu but he doesn't like them and he is pretty vocal about the fact that he doesn't like them. And that he thinks that they are doing a lot of corrupt stuff. It's pretty common.

END OF INTERVIEW