



The Wisdom Podcast Presents

Larry Rosenberg: Early Pioneer of Buddhism in the West



TRANSCRIPT

Larry Rosenberg:

I would say that my interest in what I now know as Dharma -- I didn't have that language -- began with World War II, because I'm old enough (going to be 87) to have been alive when World War II was going on and then the whole Nazi debacle and etc. But just the war in the Asia and so forth. I spent two years in the infantry in Germany, in the occupation of Germany right after the war. So I saw what a war does to a country and I didn't get there by accident. My aunt worked for a general and we engineered my travel plans where I'd be stationed from basic training, because originally I was supposed to go to Washington DC. I wanted to go to Germany. That was the main

reason I allowed myself to be drafted because I could not understand how could this have happened, what was going on there.

The reason it has relationship to Dharma is that once I got there and I saw the concentration camps and spoke to Germans and saw even with the Germans being Jewish, I had an emotional bias of course. But once I got there and I just saw that, you know, we're all just people and they were just, however that happened, this nightmare did happen. Humans seem to have this ability to be able to be diluted.

But in the military I learned about nonviolence because I was good at basic training. And I had a picture of Gandhi over my bed when I was growing up. And on basic training I noticed, I loved the machine gun and I won a sharp shooting metal. And it took me a while to realize this isn't just crawling in the lots and playing soldier. We're been trained to kill people and here I am. I have Gandhi over my head and the meantime I'm learning how to be a killer. And so I went to the company commander who was a real ramrod West Point, crewcut, straight, you know, square-jawed, like right out of a movie. And I told him, if you transfer me out of the infantry, and put me in the medical corps -- I have an affinity to medical things -- I'll be fine. I'll serve out my tour of duty. Two years. And if you don't, I'm going to become a problem cause I'm not going to bear weapons.

But I didn't realize I was yearning for sanity in the world. And I went from that to law school. That was definitely not for me. I thought my father would be happy because he always wanted to be a lawyer. He even pushed me. But I went. I dropped out. This is the University of Chicago, then I got a PhD at the University of Chicago in social psychology and I was a college professor at Harvard and University of Chicago, and finally the happiest at Brandeis University. And I thought I had found a paradise. I was a little guy from Brooklyn, immigrant background, you know, parents, fourth grade education. My father was a cab driver and now I'm a professor. I had money for the first time in my life. I had a nice place to live. I could buy whatever food I wanted. Some ladies liked me with my Harvard T-shirt, sweatshirt, more than I would've gotten without the Harvard T-shirt. For some reason it can be an aphrodisiac, I guess. [laughter]

So, and it lasted for about eight years and then suddenly I felt what I would call dukkha or suffering. For me, suffering came from the top down. Most people who I meet, students, it goes from the bottom up. They were suffering a lot and that drew them to Buddhadharm when they read about it or see or hear a talk or whatever. For me, I didn't know anything about Buddhism and was very anti-religious because I come from a long line of rabbis on my father's side. Fourteen generations. That's pretty long. It started in Germany, moved to Russia and then came here. But my grandfather, who was a rabbi, quit, threw it, chucked it all. He said, it's all a bunch of nonsense. Brought his whole family to the United States, to Brooklyn, New York, of

course. And so my father picked it up, was very anti-religious, but I had years of religious Orthodox Jewish training to appease my grandparents and my mother. They were very sort of Fiddler on the Roof Orthodox, you know, very believing.

And so my father just would say, just do it for them. Get it over with. When you get your bar mitzvah at 13, then you decide what to do. And I never came back to synagogue. I haven't been in a synagogue since I was 13. But I had orthodox, you know, I was fluent in Hebrew and all the rest of it. So, that was in me, kind of a conflict between secular and religious. And also by that time, the last few years of being a professor, I have everything. But something deep was missing. Social psychology. I knew everything about everyone else's mind. I didn't know anything about my own mind. And I started to realize that I knew about the Samoans and I know about, you know, everything, whatever you want to read, I know about the way the mind works. And it was all about, about, about. Finally I decided I knew I had a deep yearning for something. I didn't know what to call it. Quite honestly, the word "spiritual" was yuck, spiritual. You know, I've been through the whole anti-Vietnam war, you know, I was a caricature, you know, just I did everything, drugs and antiwar. And so someone once asked me "what got you into the Dharma?" I said, finally, I don't really know, but maybe one LSD trip too many, you know, because I started to see that everything I knew in social psychology was rather limited compared to what the real mind is like. Whoa. This is a big place. None of my studies, and I have a PhD in it and have been studying hard and I've even written books about it. This is the mind? And they literally do not know about the full potential of the mind.

So, I left university, sold most of my stuff, stored the rest of it with Jon Kabat Zinn, who is my oldest and deep dearest friend. We've known each other 50 years -- 51 now. Anyway, and I just wandered through Asia. I was homeless for about three or four years.

Daniel Aitken: In Asia or in here?

Larry Rosenberg: Both. Towards the end of my time at Brandeis, I had about another two years to go, a year and a half, my one of my colleagues, a man named professor Morrie told me, he says, I heard an Indian gentleman at the New School for Social Research over the last week in New York. He said "I didn't understand the word he said, but I think it's what you've been looking for." Cause everyone knew I was a malcontent. "He's coming to Brandeis for one week. We're going to film him." And so it was J. Krishnamurti. He arrived. I knew nothing about him. And there's a photograph of myself meeting him at the faculty club. I'm wearing a Mexican serape. All the other professors have ties and coats. In other words, I was on the way out already, but I didn't know where, where am I heading? So no one was interested. Very few people came to his talks.

Daniel Aitken: What year is this roughly?

Larry Rosenberg: More than 50 years ago.

Daniel Aitken: So he was quite popular at this stage or....

Larry Rosenberg: It was still in the middle range, I would say. New to me. But he died in 1986. And he was teaching since the 1920s and 30s, and he started to get known in the 40s and 50s, but still small and then it exploded. And so I had the wonderful opportunity to spend much of the week with him. We'd go for walks. I had a personal interview, and more than one. And then I still didn't know how to meditate. I asked him about it. And the whole week was going by and he just never answered. And we would take walks and he liked to walk in silence. He said, do you mind if we both walk in silence? That was hard for me. We'd walk in silence and one time he says, let's sit down here. Brandeis then had a lot of woods around the campus. We sat down and he said, as I recall it, and he said, take a look at this leaf -- pick something, a twig, a leaf, a tree, something, and just let's sit quietly and just look at it. And I said, okay. And I picked a leaf and I was looking at it and he said, see if he can see it without the word "leaf" or "tree" or anything and just see it. And it was hard for me to do. And then little by little, he kept me there. I don't know how long, maybe 10 or 15 minutes, I'm not sure. And finally, the mind got a little bit clearer than what it was used to, which was, you know, intellectually cluttered and I saw it and he stopped me. He said, what happened as you observed the leaf, he said. I really saw how it was and I said it brought tears to my eyes. A leaf is so beautiful, you know, all those veins and the color and the shadings of light on it. I had never really looked at a leaf and he said, you want to know what meditation is? Okay, go back to your room and look at your mind this way. That's meditation. When it was time to leave, he was going his way, I was going my way. I said, do you have any parting meditation instructions for me? And he looked at me. It's not that he used to sit, but he would make fun of people who thought the longer you sit, the wiser you get. You don't get wise. I've done lots of it. I'm not wise.

Anyway. So he paused and he said, yeah, pay attention to how you actually live. And he said the word "actually" and it was like it burned a hole in me. He said, "actually," not how you were brought up to live, not how your mommy thinks you should, not have the rabbi told you should live. But how do you actually live from moment to moment? That can be meditation. It doesn't have to be a monastery or the mountains or a cave. If you bring awareness to everything you do, but look at it without being for or against it. And it took me years to understand, especially after I started doing sitting. I got completely lost in long-term sitting retreats and all that until I realized there's more to life than sitting.

Daniel Atiken: Did you get a sense of how Krishnamurti actually lived? Profound instructions, but how was the man himself?

Larry Rosenberg: Very unassuming. When he was giving his public talks, it would be like fire coming out of his mouth. If you've seen him on film or video and in person, it's sort of... Once he came down off the platform, he just sat in a simple chair, a wooden chair. It was like a loving grandmother. Just very affectionate. Great sense of humor, warm, refused to play the role of Krishnamurti. Would hold your hand, put his arm around you, would listen to whatever you wanted to talk about. And then if he would get back up to give a public talk... I don't know, something was coming through.

Daniel Atiken: You think something was coming through?

Larry Rosenberg: Get it out of the way is all I knew. And we all want to sit right in front of him because we could feel he was really alive.

Daniel Atiken: If you read his biography, it seems like he would always want to be... There were certain times he wanted to be clean or something because he felt like something was coming through him. But he was very much against sort of superstition as well. It's sort of like contradictory.

Larry Rosenberg: Yeah. I think he realized that, in a way, the way he came to all this is not how everyone else is going to come to it. He himself says, he says, maybe I'm a human freak. But what he taught was very similar to the essence of Zen. Here's what a Tibetan... One Tibetan Lama who spent years with him, who was very close to Krishnamurti... Samdhong Rinpoche. Lovely man. Beautiful guy. Met him once. And uh, what Samdhong says about Krishnamurti's teaching is he couldn't see any difference between it and the teachings of the Buddha. But Krishnamurti would teach from the absolute all the time. The Buddha would teach from the relative and the absolute. From my years now of being in all this stuff -- obviously the Buddha was a brilliant teacher -- the relative seems to be essential until you can shed it. Krishnamurti, it's not that realistic. For example, now, for a number of years now, but I've been practicing for a while, I don't have a particular method. Just awareness. I just sit. Now and then if the mind's a little bit rocky, then I'll go to the breath. I have an affinity for anapanasati, mindful breathing. As you probably know. I wrote a book on it and did a lot of research and I have years of practice on it. But even that, it's just another technique and method. I'm just myself sitting and it's become easier to just watch everything come and go and without grasping and pushing away. But I couldn't do that at the beginning and that's when I realized I tried to do what he would say, and I saw that I wasn't doing too well. And then I reached out for a Korean Zen master who came to Cambridge.

Daniel Atiken: So before we get to the Zen, I've heard it said that Krishnamurti teaches from the top of the mountain, and basically his instruction is get to the top of the mountain, but he doesn't teach the way up.

Larry Rosenberg: Very good way to put it.

Daniel Atiken: And so, but then you described him talking about meditating on the leaf, like trying to see a leaf without the word leaf. That seems like a, a good practice. What's the gap here?

Larry Rosenberg: Uh, none. In other words, he isn't that bad. That's where he's really similar. I know Vipassana mostly, mainly, but I've had some Zen training too. Soto is in some ways similar to Vipassana. When he has you be mindful of the leaf, it's non-dualistic. Like it's such total attention that there's no observer, there's no meditator. And so it's both a means and an end. Whereas typically, let's say, even in the Forest Tradition, in a certain way, they're more realistic. Sort of like Ajahn Chah. Uh, he would say "be that which knows." Well that means it's the meditator because, in other words, realistically, to begin with we are all self-conscious. We're learning a new skill and we want to learn how to do it. And of course the meditator is ego. The meditator in capital [letter 'M']. And so Krishnamurti is saying real meditation is when you kill the meditator. Yeah. But you need the meditator to begin with. I was putting in this schema. There the difference is it's dualistic because they're saying there's an observer and there are objects that you watch. Okay.

Vimala Thakar who really understood -- an Indian woman who really understood Krishnamurti and spent years with him. When I spent time with her, she was much more down to earth on this issue and she said, look, it's only natural that you're going to be self-conscious. You're learning a new skill. You want to learn how to do it properly. You're going to ask people how to do it. Techniques have a place. Uh, and so it would be a dualistic thing but at a certain point it wears itself out. And then you naturally find yourself being in the nondual. And also there are moments when you're really interested in something, and if you check it, you'll see you're not there yet. And that's why it's so clear.

So Krishnamurti is always teaching that -- nondual, nondual. Perhaps. But it's, to me, it's a nice link between the world of objects and the world of emptiness. And his big thing that is very hard -- I just don't see the truth of it or I haven't seen. I wish it were true. I don't feel I need a teacher. Not because I'm arrogant. I've had a lot of teachings and a lot of practices and now I know what to do, in other words I found the path with heart, the one that works for me and it's just a matter of just do it. And so in my golden years I'm doing it and I'm still open to teachings and teachers. And if someone I meet can help me, I'm open. And if I -- to the degree to which I can still be coherent -- help other people, I do it. But I'm semi-retired, so I have much more time for myself. To do my practice.

Daniel Atiken: So Krishnamurti's instruction where you don't need a teacher, you're skeptical of that.

Larry Rosenberg: I am. I am. If I could link it up with the Dalai Lama. This was before Cambridge Insight Meditation Center (CIMC), which is now about 35 years old. Before it even started, right before it started, I don't know how I was fortunate enough, but I had a full hour with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, just the two of us. And he was the Dalai Lama, you know. I opened the door and I was ready to go through. I didn't know what... And he just puts his arm around me, so I put my arm around him. I didn't plan it, you know, and then he sits down and we sit down and then we start to talk and he says, "Oh, too much sun." He says, "Oh, greed already." You know. So we moved to where the sun wasn't shining, and then we talked about this, that, and the other. And then with about 10 minutes to go, he gave me advice. I can't tell you how important it has been. I was starting a center. I had had years of training in Asia and was starting the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center and I said, we haven't opened yet. We're getting ready to, and I anticipate a certain problem we're going to have. Having lived in Cambridge for many years. In Cambridge, there's an abundance of riches. You know, you want Tibetan Buddhism? What flavor. There are five styles. What Zen do you want? You want the koan Zen, more aggressive? Do you want a Soto Zen where it's just quieter? And I said, if you go through Cambridge there are all these pictures of gurus, smiling happy gurus. They all have the fastest way, the best way.

Daniel Atiken: Every flavor of ice cream.

Larry Rosenberg: Whatever you want! We got it. And I said, so when people come to the center, their heads are going to be filled with acupuncture, massage. Let's see, this is Tuesday. I have massage Wednesday. Macrobiotic diet on Thursday. And I said, so the mind is going to be full of all these smiling, happy gurus and different paths. And he went, "Oh, no problem." I said, no problem? Okay. He said, look all Buddhists agree on the Four Noble Truths. A little bit different. Each one is a little bit different, but we all agree on the Four Noble Truths. He said, you know the Four Noble Truths? I said, sure I do. He says, make that the real, very, very important part of your teaching. He says, make sure it's deeply in you. Pass it onto the people who are going to do some teaching helping you, because when people come in and you get to know them, you can see, oh, that person doesn't know anything about the Fourth Noble Truth. They don't have a practice. They're just theoretically all the time. So this person is on the Second Noble Truth, but they don't understand there is... etc. But the Four Noble Truths can be a paradigm, and that'll keep the center coherent. So that's what I've done. So see, we don't always call it that. I'm taking what I call taking a fresh look at the Four Noble Truths.

So the Four Noble Truths is a paradigm that I use personally. Now it's become so internalized that I don't need to exteriorize it to myself. But I do

when I teach it [because] sometimes people need to hear about the words and so forth. But the first noble truth -- and this is the hardest part of the teaching I do when you emphasize this sutra, which was the first teaching the Buddha gave supposedly -- is you're asking people to look at dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of life, the last thing they want to look at. That's what brought them here. And so I'm saying, and Krishnamurti is saying, just look at it. And he would give brilliant talks. He would assume that if you didn't have a teacher, you just look at your suffering.

And what I discovered over the years, and certainly since I started teaching is that's the hardest part of my job. Use humor, use anything. Back off if the person is not ready for it yet. Know when to go to the breath. Do metta, do some walking meditation or that person is stronger than they know. Keep with it, keep them in there. Often a teacher is very helpful, especially in that first noble truth, as inspiration, as someone who's been there, who knows their way around. Now and then you give an example. In the West, we have to do this and you know, sort of like... you should see how frightened I was of looking at my loneliness. You know, so you are inspiring and also giving support to people to do, which is for many, the hardest thing for them to do. In this particular path, you move from the foot of the mountain up.

Daniel Atiken: Yeah. And you can't race up there because you got to spend time with that suffering. I think for Krishnamurti if you wake up on the top of the mountain of non-duality, then of course you feel like you don't need a teacher. But for the rest of us, we've got to spend time on the bottom and stay there with suffering.

Larry Rosenberg: Exactly. Exactly. But I stayed with him. I had like what they used to call the university of double major: Buddhism and Krishnamurti. Because I knew it was very similar to what the Buddha was talking about, but it was stripped of no help. No supplementary practices... The Buddha was an amazingly skillful teacher and then gave birth to... when you go through all these countries, my God, the cultures that have developed brilliant teaching since the Buddha.

Daniel Atiken: So after Krishnamurti, you met the Korean teacher?

Larry Rosenberg: I did. But I just wanted to accentuate... The question was looking at a leaf. Here's the difference between the relative way in which they would teach the Four Noble Truths and how Krishnamurti would teach it. For example, the very last time I saw him, he gave talks at the United Nations. And then for one week, there were eight of us who spent the whole week with him, two hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon. And we took up the theme of fear and we'd go over it this way, that way, the way he works. And then we got to Friday and it was time for all of us to go home. And with about five minutes left, maybe 10 minutes left, suddenly we feel... I must say when he walked in, I hadn't seen him in a year. He was now about 90, 89, 90. And I saw a frail... he seemed shorter and frail. Once he started teaching, he

was timeless. I mean, wow. The energy that poured out of him. So, and then at the end of it, he'd get back into his...like it'd be... He's an old man, you know, and you could see it. He had a lot of afflictions, physical afflictions, which he didn't talk about. So, he starts talking. We figured that he's gone off his... his trolley has gone off the track. He starts saying, during the lunch period, my friends took me to one of the top jewelers in New York and I had one of the greatest jewels in the world in my hand. And I looked at it and I looked at this jewel and I saw the way it was cut and the way the light was refracted through it and the different shades. And he went on and on about the jewel. And then he said, and I got so totally in it that I went through it and I was free. And he said, fear is that jewel. And he said, what you don't realize is we're in Theravada they teach, let go of it, let go of it. But they don't teach too much, of transforming that energy. What happens to it when you let go of it, when you're aware of it? So what he was trying to say is that it's a jewel because there's so much energy trapped. This is my words, he wouldn't talk this way. So much energy trapped in something like fear, not the words, the energy of fear, that when you're completely open to it, it releases that energy and then it takes you to... you're in emptiness automatically. You have to be. It's gone, at least for a while.

Larry Rosenberg: And so, that's not the nondual approach. So it's both. You're paying attention to the leaf but you're also paying attention to his language by fully being with what is, you transcend what is. So in Theravada, they don't think so much, at least the teachers I had. It doesn't mean they don't know the nondual, they don't use that language because if you meet someone like Ajahn Chah or Buddhadasa or some of the others you may not know, they were out there, but they didn't talk nondual dual.

Daniel Atiken: Nondual dual [laughter]. Krishnamurti on fear. For Krishnamurti, for resolving fear, if it needs to be resolved at all, is paying attention to fear. He had a lot to say on fear.

Larry Rosenberg: To me, he's teaching the Four Noble Truths without calling it that. And it's just that he doesn't offer enough help with the Eightfold Path, which is the methods. He doesn't offer any methods except... Well, he does in a way, because he's saying learn, be aware without judging, a mind that's not reactive, that's not for or against whatever's happening. Well, we didn't grow up that way. It's a kind of method that in Zen they call the method of no method. So to do that, it takes some doing because to begin with, we have our conditioning which interposes between ourselves and what's happening in life, people and, and stuff. When he said pay attention to how you actually live.... At the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, why I founded that place. Why? Because having done years of long-term meditation and retreats, three months retreats in Korea, in Japan, here sitting alone for months at a time. I did lots of sitting and I sat with people. We did lots of three months retreats together. And, and then typically the mindset we had was like at

Insight Meditation Society where they do a lot of three months retreats and it's, you know, you sit a lot and it's a silent a lot.

Larry Rosenberg: So I was still a teacher, but I felt I was moving from Zen to there, and they invited me to teach and I said I'm not ready yet. I'm still too Zen. Let me learn Vipassana better. So, what I'm trying to say is what I saw for myself and the people around, the three months retreat would end and then we'd have nine months for the next three months retreat. And then, so at the three month retreat you accomplish a great deal, and then you walk out and within about an hour you're a jerk again.

Larry Rosenberg: You know, it doesn't take much. The Buddhist says mindfulness sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. That means it's a way of life. It isn't just limited to sitting and walking or formal practice. And so we needed a place right in the middle of Sodom and Gomorrah. So I started CIMC and a very wealthy woman fortunately bought all this. And people said, well, why do you want an a city? That's terrible. I said, there are plenty of country places. They're going to be more coming up and that are now all over the place. And I'm all for that. It's just inevitably you come off it. And there are a lot of people who can't go away for long three months retreats. They're married or they have jobs. So this or that. We need a place right here. And so this was perched between Harvard Square and Central Square. And the emphasis is on mindfulness in daily life because I found it was the biggest cliché in Dharma circles. Everyone believes in it and no one's doing it. Why? Cause it's hard. Relationship, the human race has obviously not done too well in learning how to live together, the extreme is war.

Daniel Atiken: This brings up this topic of the monastic life and the lay life. It does. Many of your teachers have been monastics. Krishnamurti wasn't obviously, but many of them have been, most of them have been. And so you're like that first generation of, you know, taking that lineage and trying to apply it as a lay person. What are the challenges and what are the solutions in that sort of situation?

Larry Rosenberg: Here when I spent time with Ajahn Buddhadasa, at the time of leaving, he was escorting me to where we were catching a bus and leaving. And I said, Ajahn Buddhadasa, do you have any parting advice for how to bring the teachings to Cambridge, Massachusetts. He said, I don't know. I've never been to the United States. And he said, but I know the history of Buddhism as it's moved from one culture to the next. He said, it has to be both conservative and radical at the same time. And I said, what do you mean? He saw me like startled. And he said, I don't mean politically. He said, conservative. He said, you travel all these thousands of miles to learn all this stuff. He didn't say stuff. And he said, and you got sick and couldn't eat our food, et cetera. Why did you do it? Because there was something here that was valuable, right? He says, yeah. He said, that's what I mean by conservative. There's something worth protecting and saving. And I said, oh

yeah. He said, but if you bring it back the way you learned it in Thailand and try to deliver it exactly the way you found it in Cambridge or wherever else you teach in the West, it'll die because you gotta figure out... there's a delicate balance between being radical and conservative. And it's hard to find it. You gotta feel your way into it. You're the first generation. He recognized what you just said, Daniel. And, he said, you're going to get that start. It may take generations to finally figure out what it is and then you know your culture well, and you're going to have to make some modifications. But you have to be careful that in the process of doing that, you don't dilute what you want to conserve, you know, which is the essence of what the Buddha was talking about.

Larry Rosenberg: I thought it was great advice he gave me in that. That plus the Dalai Lama's advice.

Daniel Atiken: Similar, right? Four Noble Truths...

Larry Rosenberg: Yeah. So those two have been, they've been my North star. But so then how do you do it? When I started teaching, all of us, Joseph Goldstein, all of us Westerners who were the first generation who didn't want to be monks, but we loved the practice. And I feel that certainly myself and I feel perhaps some of my colleagues, we are too much in protecting the conservative because this is what we had just learned for 10 years or however long we were there.

Larry Rosenberg: And, so I was too conservative, teaching stuff that was not as relevant. And then I realized it by people coming up and saying, I don't want to do that.

Daniel Atiken: What's an example of that?

Larry Rosenberg: Oh. When I was in Korean Zen before that, people would call up and saying I don't want to do the that Korean and Chinese chanting. Can we meet in the cafe? I like the teaching, but I don't want to do all that other stuff. So I would go to Master Seung Sahn who was a great teacher, one of my best. He was terrific. And I said, can we strip it down a little? Too much Korean. And he's got furious and he said, no, we teach it just this way. You will teach it this way. And I went, okay.

Daniel Atiken: Not so radical, I'd have to say. More conservative than radical.

Larry Rosenberg: Well, what he didn't realize, and some of it was later on, he started to learn as people started to drop away from it, that he had to make some changes, but he couldn't. We had to.

Daniel Atiken: It's the first generation. That's their job. Your job.

Larry Rosenberg: Yeah, exactly. So, at first I was too conservative. Then when I realized that I went to the other extreme. I was Mr. Free Spirit.

Daniel Atiken: Give me an example of that [laughter].

Larry Rosenberg: Oh, the Four Noble Truths is cute, you know, but, just be open to life. Here it is. Just be aware of it and learn from it, you know, sort of like that. Then I backed off on that. And so I would say it's been a steady... but trying to teach the Four Noble Truths in an urban center the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. First of all, the donors said we could have a larger place and where we could have 10 or 15 people living at it. I said, no, I don't want this to be dormitory living. That's what monasteries have and retreats centers. I want people to come here to learn stuff and then we throw them back into their life. But then we start talking about their life. One of the things I realized, we would ask them, how's your practice going? We would just ask them about their sitting. And after a while I realized I'm asking how their practice is going and they always automatically start talking about that: "Well, I didn't quite get to sitting and my sitting has been a little bit...etc." When I used to give a lot of interviews. And at a certain point, I realized they think practice is sitting, but the reason they do is because there's no accountability.

So then I say, how's your practice going? They say, well, I didn't sit much. So I started changing it. I said, I didn't ask about sitting. I asked about your practice. How are relationships going. He said, Oh my mother-in-law is driving me crazy. I said, are you suffering there? He said, yeah. I said, that's the place of practice. It's very rich.

And so we would kind of get people to do it and then, but a lot of my colleagues didn't understand what we were trying to do. For example, I won't mention names, but someone came through and he wanted to start a center like CIMC in California, a lay person, and then I told him, I said, we have interviews that are half hour having nothing to do with retreats because we talk about daily life and we really want people to talk about daily life and then we want to apply Dharma principles to what we hear.

We're learning how to do that. I said, I'm not a trained therapist. I've never even been in therapy, but I'm trying to learn how to do this. And he said, well, why don't you just send them to a therapist or just see them 5 or 10 minutes? I said, no, you don't understand. By doing that we're saying daily life isn't that important, although we say it is. But you can best do that with a psychotherapist. If we tell them it's important, we have to then ask them how you're doing so they realize we mean it. So that's been the challenge for all these years and everyone who has been trained to teach this at CIMC... And it's hard for us. I'm doing my best at it and I teach it and I make it clear. I don't know if we'll ever perfect it, but relationship is where we humans fall down. If we don't take care of this, but we want to save the world, it's

impossible because you can have confused minds trying to find other confused new ways to save a confused world.

More and more these days, people are asking questions about what used to be called, I don't know if it exists anymore, engaged Buddhism. They're saying, look, the planet is in danger. Politically I'd like to do this and that, but I also have a love for contemplative life. And historically my reading of this is that very often the contemplative don't bother with daily life. You take care of it. And the people taking care of daily life don't meditate that much. Thich Nhat Hanh tried to break that down. He was very helpful. I learned a lot from him.

Daniel Atiken: He said if it's not engaged, it's not Buddhism or something like that.

Larry Rosenberg: Yes and no.

Daniel Atiken: Well, I think there's a thing, this idea of engaged Buddhism. Just because you're Buddhist and you're engaged, it doesn't mean it's engaged Buddhism.

Larry Rosenberg: Exactly.

Daniel Atiken: So what is Buddhist about the engagement? That's a question. I think you touched on something very important very early about your visit to Germany and the recognition that those people were not so different in some way. We're all humans and we all have a sort of certain potential and recognizing this, recognizing something in you and them that is similar rather than this big sort of division that activism often starts with.

Larry Rosenberg: Exactly. That's one of the key things in my own teaching because, I love to sit myself personally. But I also know there's much more to life than that. Cambridge is an interesting place to teach because you've got a lot of people who are successful in many aspects of life, have good universities, good jobs, young, et cetera. It's an interesting place. And, many of them now know, your generation, they're going to get PhDs or they're going to work for a science research organization or for Wisdom. But you know, but they also want to keep the contemplative. And they want to know how can this practice help, help us this way.

And so here's a typical question. Person starts... I usually have a lot of time. We sit when I teach. We usually sit for about 45 minutes. And then we talk Dharma for another hour and a half was so, like this. And so person asks a question. He starts talking and there's a lot of energy there. He says, these oil companies are so greedy. Something has to be done politically. How much money do they need? And the person's going on and on and they're destroying the planet and just to make money. Don't they understand that they live on this planet? Don't they have children and grandchildren? And I finally, you know, there's a limit to how much of the narrative you can listen

to. He said, don't you agree, Mr. Rosenberg? I said, absolutely. I said, absolutely. And I pause. I would say something like, have you dealt with your own greed yet?

And they would go, uh, uh, uh, uh... You know, I'm saying your greed is the same as theirs. They're just on a bigger playing field. Yours is just tiny. It's not either/or. Start working on yours. That's the contemplative part and then if you do, your mind is going to get clearer. It has to, if you really doing it. Then for some of you, because I know that others of you have different issues. Some of you will want to help in politics, but you'll bring a mind that is a little wiser and a little kinder than the one you were going to use with just anger motivating you and do political work or work for a global warming or solar heating or whatever it is. And this is what I do. I'm trying to do my best to protect contemplative life, but say, by all means go out there.

Daniel Atiken: Yeah. I think you're making an important point that's very current at the moment and that we have to be wary of this idea that the world needs me so bad that I don't have time for my own practice. That's another form of spiritual bypassing.

Larry Rosenberg: It is, and related to it people who are relatively new, who are even somewhat not so new, say, well, isn't our meditation all about... isn't there the possibility you can become just narcissistic, just working on yourself, me, the self, attachment to me and mine, you know. I'm saying it can become narcissistic, but that's not the real practice. Because the truth is you're seeing through all of that, and that's what you bring to your life, whether you call it and engaged Buddhism or not. You can only give the people in your life who you are. And so whatever work you do on yourself is going to be more than just narcissism itself. Belly gazing. What is it?

Daniel Atiken: Navel gazing. Yeah. And so this experiment, you're running like an experiment. You've gone straight to the center of a city and you've planted a Dharma center there, and you've said, we're gonna work on the Four Noble Truths holistically in daily life. And I'm wondering how you think after, you know, it's been decades now, right? How is this experiment going?

Larry Rosenberg: First of all, let me back up. I'm going to lead into what you're saying. I gave the very first Dharma talk when the center opened and the talk I gave was based on something from an ancient Buddhist text called the *Visuddhimagga*. It's not my favorite text because... if that were it I would not be doing Buddhadharma. But there's some good things in it. It lists 10 places not to start a meditation center. So I started the talk on it and it said it shouldn't be in a busy area. It shouldn't be with political discourse. It shouldn't be where a lot of students are. It goes on and on. And I said, 8 out of the 10, we should not be here. I said, but that's exactly why we are here and saying, and I realized, this comes from my training in Zen from Master Seung Sahn who would often say "a bad situation is a good situation." That's why we're here

because this is the world we live in and it's not to discredit a contemplative life by all means. Go on retreats. Find time in your home and all, but inevitably you come back into the world.

Now then we get into the issue of what you asked earlier, Daniel: monastic versus secular. When I first started out, in other words, my mandate was very clear to me, but how to do it certainly was not, and that is, can we find a lay practice which has dignity and is not a kind of second class going to monks all the time and saying, please tell me how I should do my... One where it really has its own dignity and appreciation and respect. And it's not second class. How do we do that if it can be done? I also said, I'm fully aware that maybe next generation, there'll be no CIMC. And we'll realize, no, we got to mainly make it monastic. But this is what we're trying because this is the time we live in. And what I found in myself is, at first, I then developed an anti-monastic, you know, to help me do it. And I saw in myself, I was used to being a professor for 10 years, you know, Professor Rosenberg. And now suddenly the monks are higher than me, you know, and I felt like, what? You know, I'm a professor, an ex-professor. I taught, but now I gotta sit down on the floor and they sit out on a couch and I have to go like this. Even Western monks who've not been sitting long.

Larry Rosenberg:

I had some very bad rough experiences with some of the monks. One, I won't mention names, but a westerner who was maybe a monk for five years. And I invited about 10 students of mine, and some were colleagues, who had had years of practice, much more than him, and invited him into what was my living room, which used to be at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. And this Ajahn who will go unnamed, he sat up on the couch and we all sat on the floor and I understood that was protocol. And then he pontificated, was basically condescending and speaking down to us for an hour and a half, an hour and fifteen minutes, we'd ask questions and many people fell into that mode. And I, maybe it's arrogant or something on my part, but I found it nauseated that we didn't have respect for ourselves, so that at the end of it, when everyone left, I stayed and I said, Ajahn X, I said, and I bowed down three times. I said, what I'm bowing down to is your robes. But as for you, you had no respect for us. You didn't know anything about us. Most of those people have way beyond where you are. And just because you're wearing robes, you want that kind of treatment. And I was saying, but your tradition is protected. The monastic order is protected and also sometimes destroyed it. But mostly is protected it so that it's available to me. And it has a lot of credit because I have gratitude for it. And to his credit, this monk, he was humble and he said he didn't realize he was doing that. And he said, okay. I said, look, if this is gonna work, we lay people have to learn how to respect monastics and monastics have to learn how to respect us. And there may be areas where you can help us more and areas where we can... For example, some of the advice that some of the monks give about marriage and sex are ridiculous. They don't know what... They've

never, they've never been married, they've never had sex. I can give you one example.

Daniel Aitken: Please, this sounds interesting. [Laughter]

Larry Rosenberg: He won't mind. Years ago, he came and I was a teacher at the Insight Meditation Society and we became friends. And he said, Larry, I'm going to give some interviews. And he was very open and he still is a very open guy and he's terrific. And he said, would you come and sit in and tell me what you think about the interviews from a lay person's point of view? I said, sure. Cool, awesome. So, I did, and a couple went by. Was fine, you know some of the standard, by the playbook, you know, more sitting called for, you know. And then someone comes in, someone who had been married a year and a half. Ajahn, he said, we have not been married very long. And this was a three week retreat or two week retreat. And he said I really miss my wife and at every sitting I have fantasies, sexual fantasies about being with my wife. And he went on and said, what can I do? I don't know if you know *asubha* meditations. That's to contemplate the unloveliness of the body, you know. And he taught him that, how to go through the body, you know. Sometimes it's called the loathsomeness of the body, but I think more accurately is the unattractive aspect of the body. Okay. So then the guy walks out and Ajahn says, what did you think? I said, that is the worst interview I have ever heard. And he roared. He said, what did I do that was wrong? I said, look, put yourself in his shoes. He just got married, and he misses his wife and he's having sexual fantasies about her and finally the retreat ends and he knocks on the door and his wife has prepared a nice dinner for him and he knocks on the door and says, hi honey, welcome home. And he sees synovial fluid, urine, feces, blood, you know. I'm saying, do you think that's a good way to, to come back from this? And he said, and he roared. He said, yeah. I said, that's good for some lay people if they're obsessed with sex. It can be a nice corrective, and for monastics it's very good. He's not a monastic. So this is one of certain ways in which they mean well, but they, no matter how deep they've gone, there's something they miss.

Daniel Aitken: Yeah. These are important discussions to be having. I liked you started off talking about dignity.

Larry Rosenberg: Yeah, and I went from the point where I was putting down monastics to the point where I realized, wait, for those who are cut out for it, it can be a wonderful way of life for some of them.

I lived at quite a few of these monasteries. I've never been a monastic and never wanted to be. People say -- I have had short hair, even shorter than this -- they say, oh, you wanted to be a monk. I said, no, I wanted it to be a basketball player. When I grew up, all the best basketball players were from Kentucky and Indiana. They all had crew cuts. That's the only reason. I've never wanted to be a monk. Jews don't become monks. They have a different

ideology. They say you can't become a rabbi until... you can't be given the higher teachings until you're 42, married and have two children and until you're punched around by life enough, you know. We can't trust the good teachings, the high teachings.

Daniel Atiken: That is the good teachings.

Larry Rosenberg: That's the Jewish way. And I think it's also the aging process. It's not all bad news to age, like a lot of pettiness falls away naturally. And I compared this with Jon Kabat Zinn who's been at this just as long as I have in his own way. Not so much Buddhist, but he's really steeped in Buddhism. I've become less harsh and judgmental. And what happened was I realized the monastic life has its own beauty for those who it's appropriate for. When I lived in the monastery, I saw some of the monks who seemed, like in Korea, they had a choice: rice patties, army, or be a monk. Poor, uneducated, but they didn't really have... They weren't on fire the way the Westerners who came in there were. We were way more motivated and in the right way.

So, and then there were others who were just born to do it and were great at it, fine. And we can all benefit from each other. And so that fell away and I do have respect for the monastics. Granted, they do know some things that we don't know. I learn from the monastics and I'm happy to when I'm in that context to wear robes or whatever it is. But when we're not, for example, when I teach, I don't use any titles. I don't wear my robes. I have been given transmission and all that stuff. I just wear ordinary clothes. And it's a message. The message is I'm just a guy like you, or a person. Sorry, I don't mean to be gendered.

Daniel Atiken: Well, dignity comes from how you live your life. It's just as true for a monastic. What is to be honored about them is the way they live their life and the vows they keep. But equally, the lay person who lives with an ethical life has dignity. What about the other side? So we talked in monastic/lay and then there's this other side of the coin, which is this mindfulness practice that's become very popular.

Larry Rosenberg: You remembered. Yeah. Part of learning how to respect the monastic order - let's make it a complete, what I've learned now in 40 years of teaching lay people -- you asked how's it going? Many people are saying, oh no, it's wonderful. I feel they're being a bit extravagant. I'd say we're just beginning to learn how to do it. Some of what's helping now is that there is a dire need now for inner work, more and more people. I'm very impressed with your generation, younger generation who come to learn how to practice and that they already know. Like my generation, we were all half crazy, you know, from drugs, from not knowing what to do with ourselves, et cetera. These people are not, and they've studied, they've read it, they've listened to teachings. I mean, they come and they also want to remain in their lives and they want to learn how to do this. And so we're beginning to learn how to do

this. And I would say it's a bit like what happens, like in Thailand, which I know best, there are the monastics and then the villagers. Most villagers, with exceptions, most villagers are not interested in meditation. They come for weddings and bar mitzvahs, you know. Or they come once a week and they offer food. And then the monastic, whoever it is, will give a Dharma talk and they thank him. And, they're poor. Their clothes are tattered and it serves a role. It serves a place for them, but most of them are not meditators. Now and then a lay person who's really on fire with this. The same in Korea -- the monks give them tremendous teachings. They are not discriminatory at all. What I've seen in the lay world, it's just the same. Very small proportion of lay people really want to do it. And then most are still benefiting from it. And, for example, I used to be a little bit snotty and snobby, snobbish. People would come and if they didn't want to attain complete *anuttara samyak sambodhi*, get out! [laughter] You know, you don't want to attain full enlightenment? I just like to calm down. I'm a nervous wreck. Get out!

But what I've learned is, and this is to get to the mindfulness problem, which is spread all over the world and Jon Kabat Zinn is my close and dear friend. So he tells me how he sees it. And he wanted me to teach in his program and I tried it briefly, but I realized it was like teaching with one hand tied behind my back. I couldn't use everything I had learned in Asia. And so I just left. And most of my colleagues, most people in Buddhism that I knew, would sort of see that as, you know, like watered down Buddhadharma. They're discrediting the Dharma. A lot of it had to do with the fact at the people were going there instead of to Buddhadharma. I was part of that. I just felt like they're not, you know, and the truth is there is something comprehensive in the whole Dharma path that is lacking. There is an ethical component that's lacking, etc.

But here's what I've -- I've come to answer your question -- what I realized is, a number of years ago, not because Johnny is my friend (Jon Kabat Zinn), because I saw there's enough suffering to go around for all of us. There's really a lot of suffering in the world. Some of the people actually do better with mindfulness-based stress reduction than with Vipassana. They don't want what Vipassana has to offer. And so I see they start with Vipassana and then they move over and they start practicing and I meet them and they are much happier doing that. Great. Or doing therapy. Great. In other words, this wasn't for them. And some of them start off with mindfulness based stress reduction and they wind up coming to Vipassana. They realize, no, I want to go into Buddhism more. There's something in the richness of it, of an ancient tradition. And so they do. And I'm saying, there's enough business out there. Let many flowers bloom. And there is no shortage. Whatever helps people, I'm all for it. So now when people come and basically they just want a samatha or samadhi practice. They're not interested in his insight stuff, whatever that is, emptiness and sunyata, don't bother. Don't give me a headache. It's okay with me, but I make it clear that what I'm teaching is I

have my eye on aiming and bringing people to really to sunyata, which I can say, and I'm going as deeply as they can.

However, if you don't want to go there, that's all right. But I feel a real necessity and that's of course the conservative part, to conserve what's timeless. The Four Noble Truths I found to be, it's not the only vehicle obviously, but it's been useful for me. When Ajahn Sumedho came, he came here and we had a chat, he was sitting in this chair. I was on the floor and we talked about exactly this and he went through the same thing. He says we monks used to feel, you know, how dare they teach this stuff? He says, but now he realizes, my goodness, when you look around the world, it needs all the help it can get. So I would share that.

Daniel Atiken: Jump on the bus. Get off at samadhi if you want. Any other final thoughts you want to leave?

Larry Rosenberg: Yeah. About almost 20 years ago, I used to give Wednesday night talks. Just general talks. Anyone could come. And at the end of it, it'd be pretty crowded at CIMC. Someone raises their hand and they'd say, Mr. Rosenberg, are you a Buddhist? And I got very quiet. Apparently people told me for four or five minutes. And I said no. And half the room got depressed and the other half were jubilant. And then I paused and I said, if you mean by Buddhist, I don't know all the holidays and the, you know, I don't know any of that. If you mean as a guide to living, I'm a Buddhist. So when I came home, my wife who's very common sensical and down to earth, she said, "Just say you're a Buddhist for God's sake. They don't understand non Buddhist. The best way to be a Buddhist is not to be a Buddhist, and then you're really a Buddhist," she says. "Just say you're a Buddhist and make it simple." All right. I said, you're right.

Daniel Atiken: There's some wisdom for you.

Larry Rosenberg: Yeah. But there is something to that. Now in my own case, I try to see it because maybe I'm blocked there. I have such a prejudice against organized religion, but organized religion is what is used. That's not the right term because what's the opposite? Disorganized religion? Hey, maybe we'll sit at 2pm tomorrow. No, I think not maybe 1:30 now. I think 5pm would be better. Whatever you want. That'd be disorganized. Institutionalized, whatever can you come up with. You know what I mean – accepting the whole package, the whole ideology, belief system, ritual, ceremony and everything. And what Krishnamurti was very good at. He would say that most of the, most of what is called religion is not religion. It's just a circus. He was pretty insulting. Now because I have such an anti-religious thing that I got from my father and grandfather, I have that in me and I can't seem to get rid of it. But some of it's okay. So if you said for me what real religion is about, is there anything in life that's sacred? I think terms like divine would

be equivalent. In other words, untouched by humans. And when he put it that way, I would say what a relief. Sure. Okay. I'm religious.

Daniel Atiken: Thank you for sharing and thank you for coming on the Wisdom Podcast

Larry Rosenberg: Well, you brought all this out of me.