

PS 97 Brad Warner Transcript

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John: [00:00:00] Brad Warner is a Soto Zen priest although he's not really as Zen priest but what else do you call him.

Brad: [00:00:06] Yeah I suppose you know you have these words that came out of the Catholic tradition like priest and monk and what happens in Zen is different. But you know it's the best equivalence.

John: [00:00:18] Anyway he's with me via Skype today to talk about Dogen. Japan's greatest Zen master from the 13th century. Brad Warner says he's got something to say to us today. And so we're going to talk about that as well as punk rock and zombie movies.

Brad: [00:00:32] And that's when you might want to look for a group to sit with because you'll you'll find that your aunt Tessy and your cousin Bob or whoever they don't really understand what you're talking about when you when you start to talk about these things you've experienced or things you felt you've understood through your practice. And then then you start to look for retreats and teachers and things.

John: [00:00:55] This is Progressive Spirit progressive spirit dot net. Stick around. Progressive Spirit is produced every week. It couldn't happen without the financial support of my congregation. South Minster Presbyterian Church in Beaverton, Oregon. Southminster's website is W. W. W. South min dot o r g. Progressive Spirit is produced in the studios of KBOO in Portland Oregon for the Pacifica Radio Network and PRX the Public Radio Exchange as well as podcast. Show KBOO some love. Won't you? K b o o f m and click donate.

John: [00:01:32] From the Pacifica Radio network, PRX the Public Radio Exchange and from the studios of KBO in Portland Oregon this is progressive spirit progressive spirit dot net. I'm John shock.

Brad: [00:01:43] But the truth is actually more in you than you are.

John: [00:01:48] Brad Warner is a Soto Zen priest. He also plays bass for the punk band zero defects. And he plays a Zen priest named Brad in the important film zombie bounty hunter M.D..

??: [00:02:08] There are zombies, bloodthirsty ferocious walking undead roaming the city sides. A band of civilians have come together bonded by altruism: zombie bounty hunters they call themselves.

John: [00:02:28] He also has a curious interest in the 13th century Japanese Zen master Dogen. He's in the process of translating Dogen's work for a modern audience. In the course of the hour we're going to explore a lot of stuff including Brad Warner's two books based on Dugan's work. They are: *Don't be a Jerk and Other Practical Advice from Dogen Japan's Greatest Zen Master* and *It Came from Beyond Zen: More Practical Advice from Dogen Japan's Greatest Zen Master*. Brad's website is hardcore Zen dot info. He's with me via Skype from L.A.. Welcome Brad to Progressive Spirit.

Brad: [00:03:04] Yeah thank you for having me on.

John: [00:03:07] Hey I know that sounds like it's going to be really unhistorical dry question but it

isn't. Can you. Can you just give us a history in a minute or two of Zen?

Brad: [00:03:17] The history of Zen..OK Zen is..zen people like to trace the move-the Zen movement all the way back to Buddha. But historians usually think of it as starting in China at a time when Buddhism had already existed for between 500 and a thousand years and they had kind of in the eyes of certain people straight away from its original intent which was this meditation practice. So historically the Buddha went around India teaching people to meditate, some short version of his story and then he died and this sort of religion grew up around him. And then later on after 500 or a thousand years people started to look back on and say hey wait a minute this was all about meditation to begin with. So let's focus on that. And zen just means meditation. So to say Zen Buddhism is like saying meditation Buddhism. However there is a certain sort of sectarian feel to it if you want to get into that. But it is. So it is a movement of Chinese teachers trying to bring Buddhism back to its original roots of being a meditation practice specifically. I think that's a short version

John: [00:04:36] OK. And and just to get some vocab down and then and tell me how and how to pronounce this zazen.

Brad: [00:04:43] Yeah zazen.

John: [00:04:45] And that's really the meditative practice itself right. But you also write in your book that zazen is different from meditation.

Brad: [00:04:53] Well yeah a lot of people who teach and practice Zazen would make a difference between that and meditation. And I understand that I've kind of I don't know I straddle the line there. I kind of sometimes call it meditation and sometimes don't depending on who I'm talking to. The difference is meditation is usually goal directed. So most forms of meditation that I'm aware of have have something that they're trying to achieve. They're either trying to achieve spiritual awakening of some sort or they're trying to achieve mindfulness or they're trying to achieve something. And in Zazen there isn't a goal which is the thing that drives people batty about Zazen. Because you're trying to get into the pure experience of just sitting still which you would think would be easy. Like Oh anybody can just sit still. But if you actually try it you'll see that it's a little bit more difficult than that.

John: [00:05:53] Can you tell me a little bit about the practice itself and what happens?

Brad: [00:06:00] Well what happens. I don't know. I mean I just did it a little bit before we started talking I do it every morning so I just sit there and and get my little cross-legged posture going on my cushion and let whatever comes up come up so I'm not trying to stop thinking I'm not trying to achieve anything but I'm just kind of letting go and this and this process of letting go is actually very active. You'd think that it it's a kind of a passive thing but you're you're actually Anytime something comes up you'll kind of get a little mental hook you know for certain things and you'll get stuck in a little mental place for a bit and then you realise that's happening. And you'll also notice if you are perceptive enough that your posture has suddenly subtly changed suddenly subtly is a hard word to pronounce anyway your posture has changed a little bit because your body always kind of follows the cues that the mind gives it. So you get your posture back in order and just continue until the next thing hooks you and you drop that get your posture back together. And this you know this just goes on for however long you decided to sit and it sounds very simple but there's there's a lot of depth to it because once you've kind of gotten through the superficial layers of what the mind tends to toss up at you when you do that there's a lot going on underneath that you probably are not at all aware of. That you might even be shocked by.

John: [00:07:41] It's kind of like and some with respect to kind of a truth serum.

Brad: [00:07:46] It's a bit it's like a truth serum for yourself because, yeah, that's actually a good analogy because you stop. You tell yourself a lot of things and you think you believe certain things and it's interesting to notice that you don't actually believe a lot of your own beliefs. I mean that sounds absurd when you first encountered the idea that that might be the case, but if you keep going with it I guarantee anybody will discover that they don't believe a lot of the things that they think they believe which is very ironic.

John: [00:08:20] I was speaking with Brad Warner who's the author of a couple of books we're going to get to in just a second called One is called *It Came from Beyond Zen: More Practical Advice from Dogen Japan's Greatest Zen Master* and that was preceded by his first on this series of *Don't be a Jerk and Other Practical Advice from Dogen Japan's greatest Zen Master*. Brad is a Zen priest. Is that is that the correct name for you?

Brad: [00:08:46] Yeah I suppose you know you have these words that came out of the Catholic tradition like priest. And what happens in Zen is different, but you know it's the best equivalent was I was ordained.

John: [00:09:00] So you are ordained. And that's a process to the cause that takes again all of that sincerity. That's what I read in the ordination process. It's really about a teacher saying this person may have it.

Brad: [00:09:15] Yeah the teacher kind of recognizes that that the person that they've been working with may be ready to kind of go off on their own and start teaching this stuff. So. So at that point there's a ceremony to acknowledge it and it's sort of up to the person who goes through that ceremony what they want to do with that. That's I guess where the difference between the Catholic tradition and the Zen tradition is. It sort of depends on your teacher. Some teachers have certain requirements that they want to have met, but there's no sort of agreed upon standard the way there is in Catholicism. I could go on and on about this because there are arguments raging within the ranks of about what I'm saying right now, but I think overall most people would agree that there isn't really an agreed upon standard. Some people think there should be, but that there just isn't.

John: [00:10:20] Well let's just call you a Zen priest because. And that my thing is how cool is that. I mean I'm a Presbyterian minister, but you know it's just simply not as cool. Yeah. I mean don't you ever say to yourself "wow I'm a Zen priest that is really cool?"

Brad: [00:10:34] You know, most of the time I'm ambivalent about it. I feel sometimes I feel like "God I never should have done that." You know, I had a I had a certain life before that happened and I wrongly assumed I could continue that life after doing the ceremony. But it wasn't to be. And it-all things considered-it's better I suppose than the life I had before. But you know now a lot of people react to me in ways that I'm still learning how to deal with.

John: [00:11:08] What I know. I think I know what you mean people have a feeling about religious people or clerics or whatever. I don't even that's the right word. I think we're almost magical that our prayers will work or we can change the weather--you get to that kind of stuff too. And you get lots of questions like I'm asking you.

Brad: [00:11:26] Yeah yeah. And it's the sort of mystical aspects of Zen kind of contribute even more so to that possibly I don't know. You know it might be the same with a Presbyterian minister. I don't really know. But there is a certain sense of this other worldliness or that that you have some kind of I don't know. Something--some mojo you know you're going to you're going to bestow upon

the people. And I got no mojo.

John: [00:11:57] I don't know about that. I thought you were pretty good in the film. What was that zombie bounty hunter M.D.?

Brad: [00:12:05] Yeah that was funny. Yeah that was my friend, Pirouz Calais is a filmmaker and he makes these films are super low budget, but they look very good because he knows how to get talented people to work for cheap. And that in that movie I play kind of an outlandish parody of myself. So and I'm even called Brad in it and I was really worried at the time that we made the film--like should we call his character Dave or something because people will think it's new.

John: [00:12:37] Well you know it's really good. It's funny. And you see now people might say well there must be a teaching moment in being a Zen priest and a zombie film. So I'll just ask you what is the deeper purpose?

Brad: [00:12:50] I'm not sure is there is there a deeper purpose it's just something I wanted to do and I was really attracted to the notion behind the film; it's how the internet is sort of corrupting all of us into being, you know, kind of prostitute's for fame. And I like the idea that I would play a character like a parody of myself who doesn't care in the film there's a zombie outbreak and then there's a group of people who decide rather than doing anything to stop the zombies killing people and eating them, they're just going to video it and put it on YouTube and become famous for breaking the story. But they have difficulty breaking this story, so they keep --they're almost encouraging more zombies to kill more people so that they can get more footage and then they wrote me into it. And I kind of play this. I see this in sort of popular religious figures all the time where they'll just do they'll just do anything for a bit of publicity and you kind of go really well isn't that antithetical to everything you stand for. But they'll do it anyway because it gets them noticed so. So that's kind of the character I'm playing.

John: [00:14:07] Well it's awesome. And you're also just another aspect of your life you probably are all kinds but this one is rather public too. You also play bass in a punk rock band.

Brad: [00:14:18] Yeah the band is Zero Defects and it formed in the early 80s actually. I wasn't in the first version of Zero Defects; they were active for a year or two before I joined but they kept--they had a kind of revolving door bass player thing until I became the bass player and then stuck with the band long term. And we were much more active in the early days and these days we play a couple of times a year. We've made a cup full of CDs though, so those are those are out there.

John: [00:14:50] If you're just joining us my guest is Brad Warner. His Web site is hardcore Zen dot info. A Zen priest for lack of a better word. And we talk about zombie movies and we can talk about punk rock bands but this is also a real, very serious scholar and have done a translation of the Japanese Zen Buddhist master Dogen. So this took some study getting this together. Tell me a little bit about Dogen and his importance.

Brad: Well Dogen lived in the twelve hundreds in Japan and he was a Zen monk as you say. His importance, though he came at the time Buddhism, had been a subject of academic study in Japan for a while and there were people who sort of consider themselves to be Buddhists, but there wasn't a lot of sort of practice and that was just beginning. Dogen lost both of his parents at an early age. He was the son of an aristocrat or two aristocrats who both died young. His father was murdered and we don't know why his mother died, but his mother died when he was young. And this spurred him to try to find something more true and deeply reliable. And when he was 11 or 12 years-old he became a Zen monk in one of the first Zen temples established in Japan. I think maybe it was the second or third temple that had been established in that tradition in Japan at that time. But he didn't

think that the teachers he met most of them really got it, but he didn't find one teacher he liked. And he travelled with that teacher to China to try to find the kind of roots of Buddhism. You have to remember that in these days Japan was kind of a little backwater nation that nobody cared about or paid any attention to. Whereas China was like the center of civilization even by European standards they were pretty far beyond what was going on in the Middle Ages in Europe technologically in everything else wise. So they went to China and found a teacher that he liked and who made him a teacher in his lineage. And he went back to Japan and he wrote a ton of stuff about Buddhist practice and established a temple. And then what happened, which I find fascinating, is the temple that he founded spawned a lot of sub temples and became very popular.

Brad: [00:17:25] And so Dogen for hundreds of years is regarded as the great man who had founded this series- this bunch of temples, you know--well in his lifetime you only had one, but they've spawned others after he died. So he was highly regarded but he--although he produced a tremendous body of written work, very few people read it. And it wasn't really widely read until honestly the 20th century. There are some--there are some blips if you look at the history where it sort of started to become popular to read Dogen and then faded away. And it wasn't until the 20th century that it became very widely studied. So a lot of people wonder why that is and I wonder why that is. And I have some speculations mostly around I think maybe the world wasn't ready for what Dogen had to say five hundred years ago or 300 years ago. You know, he was working and writing 800 years ago but it took the world that long to catch up. That this is my opinion anyway.

John: [00:18:30] And the and the work that you have translated and paraphrased in these two books Don't be a Jerk. And It Came from Beyond Zen is from his work called The Shobo Genzo. Is that pronounced right?

Brad: [00:18:43] Yeah Shobo Genzo and it just means treasury of the true Dharma eye. Tends to be less of a mouthful. Once you can remember it to say Shobokin so and try to give it the English translation which is why I think it kind of stuck with the Japanese. Yeah and it was this it wasn't even a book as such. He just would because the books--bound books didn't exist in Japan in his day. So he would just write these little chapters and we don't know how many copies were produced. I mean they had to be produced by hand. But in his lifetime people estimate maybe fewer than ten copies of his written works even existed while he was alive. So yeah that that's his masterwork is Shobo genzo.

John: [00:19:26] And as you had said that only like about maybe 50 people at most might have ever read it and in his lifetime.

Brad: [00:19:32] Yeah that's my guess and I'm, you know, you mentioned me being a scholar and I feel like I am not. I don't if I'm really qualify as a Dogen scholar. I mean I'm privately, but I've never held any degrees in it. And I went and asked somebody who did have the proper credentials what they thought of that estimate. I forget who it was anyway, but he said he said he would estimate it but far less than 50. He seemed to think it was, you know, a dozen people might have read it when he was alive. So. So I think 50 was a generous estimate.

John: [00:20:06] I'm speaking with Brad Warner and we're talking about his book. That is a paraphrase really of this book *The True Treasury of the Dharma Eye* by Dogen back in the 13th century and your paraphrase here. You talked about it being kind of written on a model of a person here from Portland Mark Russell who wrote a book called *A God is Disappointed in You*. And I have that book it's awesome. It's really what it which and that is people want to tell folks what that is that's a small paraphrase of the Bible for folks who don't want to read all of the bible--stuff you know all the repetitions is kind of down to earth. Now it's really a paraphrase; it's really loose. I'm guessing your paraphrase of Dogen is a little closer to the text.

Brad: [00:20:51] It probably is. Yeah I found that book or a friend of mine found that book *God is Disappointed in You* and she made the suggestion that I tried doing that with Dogen. And yeah I think mine is closer. I'm not--And I think that's because fewer people are familiar with Dogen's writing but I kind of have this--I've kind of come along at an interesting historical point at which there are a few good normal translations of Dogen out there if anybody wants to look for them. If I tried to do this book 20 years ago, that wouldn't have been the case and it would have been kind of an absurd exercise. But now that there are more standard versions of Dogen's writings available in English I feel like "OK I can kind of bounce off those and make something more readable." And the problem with Dogan is that it's 800 year-old Japanese philosophy so if you make a straight translation no matter no--matter what you do it's going to be difficult. And even the best attempts at doing a straight translation that are supposed--supposedly easy to read kind of fall apart. I mean people have even complained that my stuff isn't that easy to read and read the original. But I'm trying to--I'm trying to take the ideas I find in Dogan or the understanding that I've gotten from reading him and make it into something that anybody can read. And you know I do it with some jokes and humor. I actually feel like Dogan has jokes, but I think most translators missed them because they're so weird.

John: [00:22:33] Yeah well it also--you talk about it--you put it this way I thought was really well: you want to get the meaning behind the words not necessarily the words. I don't know if that's the right.

Brad: [00:22:45] Yeah I mean I don't think it's important to know it, you know, for example he'll take an example from Chinese philosophy or an example from Japanese folklore and things like that and then riff on that for a while. And I realize that my readers aren't going to know these old traditional stories so I try to find the best sort of contemporary Western equivalents because often these stories kind of transcend culture, you know, with a lot of cultures have variations on the same stories. And you know you can take something like what was it. I did the "Beer and Rivers" sutra has one of the things because of the Mountain and Rivers Sutra and he was just taking an example of something that his audience living in the mountains would have been very familiar with. So I thought well what are people now very familiar with and I don't know beer and Doritos is probably too a step too far. But, you know, I tried to find the same you know to say the same things about our commonplace stuff as he says about the commonplace stuff of his time.

John: [00:23:58] Give a little bit of an overview if you could. I don't know. There's certainly not as you said--he isn't a book. Is it really a lot of disparate pieces?

John: [00:24:08] Yeah well each--he tended to do this thing where he would title a chapter Shobo Genzo and then a subtitle so to kind of indicate that they belonged together. He died quite young. He was 54 when he died and nobody knows quite sure why. All they know is that he got very ill and then passed away. And, you know, there was 800 years ago so that was happening more frequently than it does now. And so he left behind this this work that was mostly finished, but nobody had ever compiled it together into a piece. So there was--there have been some scholarly arguments about how to, you know, which chapters belong in which but it's the normal version that you get these days is arranged chronologically. Which is probably not what Dogen would have done, but it's chronologically in order of when each one was composed because he puts a date at the end of each of his writings. And then compiled together like that and it ends up being this giant telephone book style sized piece of work that I'm trying to cut down into more bite sized chunks. I've barely scratched the surface of it with two books about it. I don't know how many more I'm going to do. And we'll see.

John: [00:25:34] So you didn't complete it. I mean there's a lot more of that when you say

telephone size really than that. I mean that many words.

Brad: Yeah it's huge. My teachers my teacher, Goudeau Nishigima, produced what was at the time--it was the only version that was in print for about a decade. I think in English that that contains the entire Shobogenzo.

[00:25:57] And nowadays I think there's three versions in print that contain the entire Shobogenzo and then maybe half a dozen more that contain pieces of it in English. I'm talking about. So in my teacher's version is in four volumes and in each volume is, I don't know, three or 400 pages. And he includes a lot of footnotes and things, but there's not a lot of extra in there. It's mostly Dogen's work. So so Dogen wrote for a guy who was only writing between the ages of 30 and his late 40s. He really produced a lot of material. It's kind of impressive how much he was able to get down on paper.

John: [00:26:42] I'm speaking with Brad Warner; he's the Zen priest from California. He's the author of *Don't Be a Jerk and Other Practical Advice from Dogen Japan's Greatest Zen Master* and the follow up it came from. *It Came from Beyond Zen. More Practical Advice from Dogen*. So don't be a jerk. What's good advice from Dogen?

Brad: Yeah he writes a chapter in Japanese is called Shoakumakusa, which is--which just means "don't enact wrong things--don't do don't do wrong things." And I looked at that chapter and I said "oh you know if I wanted to say this in contemporary language what he's saying is just don't be a jerk." He's saying that each individual act we do has a kind of ripple effect into the--into all of humanity and perhaps even beyond that he would probably tell us. So. So you have to kind of watch what you do. And of course there are going to be times when you have conflicts with people and there are things that have to be resolved and so forth, but you never. He's very. He points out that you should never deliberately do something that you know to be wrong or to be hurtful to somebody else for any reason. You are--you are and that this is the essence of a Buddhist practice which I think is very interesting because for a lot of people Buddhist practice this very mystical esoteric thing, and they don't really care about, you know, what else goes on in their life as they're going through this quest for spiritual awakening. Dogen wasn't like that. He thought you had to treat people well and that was incredibly important.

John: [00:28:34] I'm John Shuck; I'm speaking with Brad Warner. We're talking about Zen. How cool is that? This is Progressive Spirit progressive spirit dot net. Stick around... Brad Warner is my guest his website is hardcore Zen dot info. We're talking about Zen and the 13th century Zen master Dogen who Brad believes is now ready to be paraphrased in contemporary language and idiom. *Don't be a Jerk*. And *It Came from Beyond Zen* are two books of brands that provide translation and commentary on Dogen who according to Brad Warner is Japan's greatest Zen master. With that--when Dogen is writing all of his works. Where is he getting it from? I mean is he reading other people. Is he meditating and getting truth that way and for you or for anybody I guess for that matter. We talked about meditation as kind of a kind of a truth serum or something like that. How do we--what level do we read others and do we go within ourselves to find out what's real?

Brad: [00:30:19] I think it's a bit of both and I think most people would tell you that meditation is the most important thing and then there are examples of famous teachers of Zen who were illiterate, for example, who couldn't read the sutras and they're held up as great examples of teachers who had an understanding that was innate, but was also buttressed and supported by the standard teachings because they would hear them of course. So so it's a--it's a bit of both. I think the meditation is the most important thing.

[00:30:54] And I don't--I don't really think it's important to be Buddhist, you know, to go around

saying, "Look I am a Buddhist" or to kind of identify with that. I think I think it's teaching in the meditation practice transcends that to a great degree that you don't really--you could be--you could be a Presbyterian and do Zazen and it's -- if there's no contradiction at least from the Zen side of the street in in doing both or in having Christian beliefs and doing zazen or having Muslim beliefs or Jewish beliefs or Hindu beliefs or whatever that what we're trying to get into is a reality that's beyond all of that. So it just so happens that the Zen stream contains a lot of written stuff that relates to meditation practice, and it happens to be a really good source but I never even look at it. The only source even from my own stuff.

John: [00:31:57] And what you just said really shows that we often think, "well here are the world's religions; there's Hinduism and Buddhism and Christianity and Buddhism" certainly on one level--maybe on some level fits into that category, but in another of what you're just talking about it doesn't.

Brad: [00:32:13] Yeah it's kind of interesting thing because, I mean, I was a history--that's my degree--the one degree I have, which isn't an impressive one is in history, and I find history really fascinating and what happened I think in the West is that the West started out as being very religion oriented. You know, the Western civilization was kind of spread by the Catholic Church and things like that. So there was this very religious center to it, but then they started to discover science and technology and these things conflicted in some sense with religion. And so what you had to do in order for people to get good technology and flush toilets and electricity and all the rest of the things we enjoy today steam power and stuff like that. You had to make a category so that religion could function on its own without having to constantly come in conflict with science. And so you have a very strong understanding of that religion is one thing. And science is another thing and philosophy is another thing and medicine is another thing. Well this didn't happen in in Asia. They--there wasn't that big split and there wasn't a big problem with science conflicting with religion. So. So that meant that Buddhism kind of exists in this kind of nebulous sense in which it includes aspects that we would recognize as religious and aspects we would recognize as philosophical that don't have anything to do with religion. And as such it's a bad fit as a religion I guess. Although what has happened since West--the Western culture has become so dominant in the world is that a lot of Asians now look upon Buddhism as a religion and then try to kind of make it a religion. So so even-- you'll even find Chinese, Japanese, Koreans et cetera who have made Buddhism into something that's indistinguishable from religion. I don't think it's all like that.

John: [00:34:23] And of course there'll be a great difference between all the different kinds of Buddhism, as well as those who are--who may consider themselves Buddhists within even the same tradition right? I mean there are people who are--who are, while I don't know maybe, and I'll ask you is that true?

Brad: [00:34:39] Yes yeah for sure. And that's something I find that a lot of people don't understand because we haven't had Buddhism in our midst for very long, so people don't realize that Buddhism is 500 years--predates Christianity by 500 years. And so we know that Christianity includes not just Presbyterians and Catholics and things we recognize as standard Christianity, but it also includes Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and all sorts of other offshoots. I think the Moonies are consider themselves Christians--the Sun Myung Moon people.

Brad: [00:35:12] So you have--you have just as much variety in Buddhism, perhaps even more variety in Buddhism. So when you say Buddhism it's very much a blanket term and in fact is the word Buddhism was invented by the British when they were studying the various religions of the lands they'd conquered, you know, India and parts of China and so forth. And so they were the ones who first grouped these religions together and said, "Oh they're all forms of the same thing" whereas the people who practice them at the time weren't really aware of that. They didn't really

consider themselves to be all practicing different forms of Buddhism until the British started classifying it that way which I also find interesting.

John: [00:36:01] Now I'm speaking with Brad Warner and you're listening to Progressive Spirit and we're talking about Zen Buddhism and we're talking about a couple of books that he has written: *It Came from Beyond Zen* and *Don't be a Jerk*. These are translations of the 13th century Buddhist Zen Buddhist master of Japan called Dogen. I mentioned earlier that I am a Presbyterian minister and this is what drew me to your work because I see you reinventing your tradition. I look back on my whole slew of Christianity; a lot of the stuff I don't believe and in anything that happened, you know, whether you're talking about resurrection or life after death or any of those things. And yet there's. And so we're always kind of trying to re-evaluate and take to the present. Some of the stuff that was revealed a long time ago. So, for example, when I go with--when I'm thinking of your work reincarnation is kind of a big traditional part and I often wonder do I really have to believe all that.

Brad: [00:37:00] No you don't. It doesn't really matter. There was a part I put a chapter in. *Don't be a Jerk* called, "Did Dogen believe in reincarnation and does it matter if he did". And I found that an interesting question because it's come up; I'm a bit of a skeptic when it comes to reincarnation. I mean, I don't want to go into the whole ins and outs of it but I'm I'm. So I say I'm a bit skeptical and I found that I was encountering a lot of strong reactions from Buddhists when I would put statements about my understanding of reincarnation out online and in books. And that that chapter actually stemmed from a little bit of an argument, I suppose, or a disagreement I had with a Zen priest who's quite a scholar--much better scholar than I am. Who said that Dogen did teach reincarnation. And I went back to the chapters in which that's addressed and I find that Dogen mentions reincarnation quite often but he never--he never tells people, "OK after you die are going to be reborn as something else and you better believe that." He--in fact, he tells people just the opposite. He says when people start asking him about that. He says, "no that's nonsense. That's not Buddhist belief." And yet, you know, 15 pages later in the current--the way the editions are bound together right now--he's telling you about somebody who was--who died and was reborn as something else.

Brad: [00:38:33] So you find this weird contradiction but he's always--whenever he mentions the reincarnation stories, and I still have yet to find an example that counters this proposition. He's using them to talk about something else. For example, there's one part where he gives a detailed expression: an explanation of what supposedly happens to a person after they die. But what he's trying to emphasize in that chapter is how you need to be very devoted to the three what are called the Three Jewels in Buddhism which is Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Buddha as being the person from whom you received the teaching. You know, who could be the historical Buddha or just your act your teacher or the dharma is teaching itself in. The Sangha is the group that you practice with. And he's trying to emphasize that these are so important that even after you die and go into the Bardo realm and then get reborn, you should keep chanting praises to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. But so his intention is clearly not to tell you to believe in that you're going to die and go into the Bardo realm and be reborn and so forth. His intention is to tell you Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are super-duper important, you know. And so all the examples where he brings up reincarnation are like that. And when he--whenever he addresses the straight up belief in reincarnation he denounces it. And it's very interesting because it's quite confusing actually when you when you read it and it takes a bit of work to try to resolve how this fits together.

John: [00:40:13] Like that's the matrix out of which he comes. Right. That's everybody's kind of there. And so he's explaining what he really wants to explain in the language that's familiar to people.

Brad: [00:40:24] Yeah yeah that's the case. The most of the people he would have been addressing because a lot of these things in shobogenzo are transcriptions or at least written versions of speeches. We don't know if he actually gave the speech that he wrote down, but what we're left with is the writing. And they were delivered to various groups of people, most of whom would have already believed in reincarnation to begin with. So it's, you know, it's like saying, I don't know, it's the one of the comparisons I used in an early book as to how Woody Allen in a lot of his movies will say, "Jesus" you know, but he's Jewish, you know. So it doesn't--it doesn't mean he's Christian because he just yells Jesus. It's just an understood expression in his world. So he just says it.

John: [00:41:12] Like like in Christianity there will be people who will be listening to this program and say, "no the resurrection; you've got to believe in the resurrection of Jesus and that." But I would say I value the resurrection perhaps as a metaphor; I can speak the language or talk about something else.

Brad: [00:41:25] Yeah well, I think the resurrection is one of those interesting things because I often like to look into Christianity and Christian beliefs because I think it's really fascinating and I think if your--if your whole thing is dependent upon the historical veracity or truth of a reincarnate of resurrection as a something that actually happened 2000 years ago, well you're kind of stuck because you can't prove it. Nobody has a video of it happening or anything like that so you're kind of stuck with believing something you can't prove. So I think it's better to kind of just leave that question, you know, to the side and look at the rest of what the tradition teaches and try to learn from that. That would be my advice or that's how that's the way I understand Christianity myself. Yeah. Well whether he was really resurrected or not I don't know. You know, maybe he was but I just don't know so. So I want to try to dig into the things I can know and I think there's a lot in the New Testament that's really really solid stuff and really worth pursuing. And if you're going to say, "well that all falls apart if he didn't right raise from the dead" and say "well no it doesn't." It's still great stuff. Even if he never raised from the dead at all. You know, I think I think that's important.

John: [00:42:48] I'm with you on that and I'm also with you on the level of suggesting--well I've lost my thought--OK I'm going to come back to it and get there. I do want to talk about a couple of things before we go. One is ethics and the other thing I want to talk about meditation retreats. But tell me a little bit about ethics and Buddhism and a popular stereotype is that those--and it isn't just Buddhist--it's also those within the United States about self-help stuff. People who like to talk about mindfulness frankly are kind of an escape and not really involved in the real world but obviously you're very much involved in the real world.

Brad: [00:43:34] Yeah there's not much--that that kind of worries me. I think I'd rather have there be a mindfulness movement than not be a mindfulness movement, so I don't want to say too much negative about it, but I think they're missing a lot of that because they're trying to secularize it and then they say, "well the ethical teachings of Buddhism are part of the religious aspects of Buddhism" and then we have to leave them aside. And I think that's the wrong way of looking at it. I think you really need to have the ethical foundation, but Buddhist ethics are funny because we've got the ten precepts which are in--several of them are almost exactly analogous to the Ten Commandments and they're just good. Good Moral sort of things to do: don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, you know, don't give way to anger is one of them that isn't one of the Ten Commandments but maybe it should be so. So we have those ideas that the history of them is kind of interesting because when Buddha first had his awakening moment and started trying to teach people, he just tried to form a group of people who would gather together and practice with him. The problem was they had all sorts of conflicts, you know, as human beings do. And every time a conflict would come up the Buddha would be the arbiter or the ultimate arbiter in the way you resolve it and people would remember how he resolved all these conflicts, and after he died hundreds of these were compiled into lists of rules for monks. You know, there were I don't know three or four hundred of these little

rules. Later on, people realize well that's how could you deal with that. That's too much. So they are trying to winnow them down to the basic principles, and they came up with ten and they're all kind of open ended. So some people say that that the there's this idea of the koan the unanswerable question; a very short hand version of what a koan is and the precepts are looked upon as a kind of unanswerable questions. Because you say with first one is don't take life. But even the most observant vegan in the world has to kill something in order to just maintain their life. So no matter how good you try to be, you can't fully observe the precept of not taking life, but you try you aim for it. And this is considered to be important. And that's the ethic where the ethical standards come in and you really kind of try to point yourself in the direction of being an extremely ethical person while understanding that there are times when the rules you set up for yourself actually get in the way of being truly ethical. That's the conundrum you often find yourself in.

John: [00:46:37] This is what I was getting back to my original thought--the question that I lost my thought. What is your--the work--what I appreciate is continue to search for what is true and real. Don't let your beliefs be the boundary that stops people from really exploring what's there.

Brad: [00:46:56] Yeah I think that's important. I think you have to kind of go beyond what your own beliefs are. Like I said early--time that you don't believe your own beliefs, you know. So you kind of--you kind of find this this sense of truth that goes beyond you. My teacher had this weird--my first teacher the American one--had this weird phrase that he used. Well I only heard him use it once. I don't know if this is a thing he ever told anybody else, and he said, "it's more in you than you could ever be" and meaning the truth is actually kind of embodied and you are part of that. But the truth is actually more you than you are. Which I find to be a very weird sort of phrase, but I think it's it's useful and valuable.

John: [00:47:45] Is that what you mean with the title of your book: It came from beyond zen?

Brad: Yeah that's a little bit because Dogen writes this chapter called inmo-- it's not even a Japanese word. It's a Chinese word that just means 'it' or 'something' or 'that thing over there' you know that whatchamacallit. So he uses this word inmo to refer to something that's beyond human understanding and I think given that some of the mystical traditions within Christianity and Islam and Judaism and the Western equivalent of the what he's talking about would be God, although not God in the sense of an old white man with a long beard sitting on a throne in the sky. But a more transcendent sense of God in the sense that this universe is alive. We are alive because the universe itself is alive and we don't understand that. And we separate living from non-living as well as categories of understanding things, but that's just a human categorization. We actually--and actually did some research into it, and scientists these days are having some hot debates about where to draw that line. We used to think it was, you know, very clear and easy but there turned out to be a lot of things that fall into this vague category where you can't really say they're alive by the standard sense that we understand it, but we can't really say they're not alive like crystals or viruses or some other things. They've just kind of been discovering it's very interesting stuff.

John: [00:49:25] Final question: meditation and meditation retreats. If someone were interested in saying why hey, there's Brad Warner. It sounds like it's fun; I'm interested in zazen here--what--do I do that on my own? Do I go to a meditation retreat where you suggest?

Brad: You know, I think for most people starting out just doing it on your own is perfectly fine. You can learn how to do Zazen from--I have some videos out about it there's a lot of people have videos and little things online you can find very easily lots of books you know are there too. And so you might as well just start on your own. Eventually you will probably start to feel the pull or the need to share the experiences you're having with others. And that's when you might want to look for a group to sit with because you'll find that your aunt Tessie and your cousin Bob, or whoever, they

don't really understand what you're talking about when you--when you start to talk about these things you've experienced or things you felt, you've understood through your practice and then you start to look for retreats and teachers and things. Personally I got lucky; I found a good teacher right off the bat. And then when I left him I moved to Japan to get a job--not really to study Buddhism, but I happened to luck into another teacher--one of the few Japanese teachers who takes foreigners as students. I just happened to be--to live near enough by that I could start going to see him, but you don't really. That's not an absolute necessity. There were some people in the ancient times who only met their teachers once or twice an entire lifetime. And so it's not necessary to kind of just jump in and join a temple or to shave your head and become a monk. You can kind of do it on your own for a while before you need to do that.

John: This has been a great conversation I have been speaking with Brad Warner. His website is a hardcore Zen dot info. And we've been talking about all kinds of things but including his latest book called *It Came from Beyond Zen: More Practical Advice from Dogen Japan's Greatest Zen Master*, so Brad thank you for being with me today and for and for all what you're doing.

Brad: Thank you for having me on. It's been really interesting. It's always good to talk to somebody who's deeply interested in this stuff.