



THE FREDERICK P.  
**LENZ**  
FOUNDATION  
FOR AMERICAN BUDDHISM

*Comments:*  
*Lenz Foundation Conference*  
*September, 2009*

Participant: From Michael Mugaku Zimmerman, Sensei from Kanzeon Zen Center/Big Mind

Thank you very much for the invitation to the conference and for putting so much effort into a very productive and informative event. I think the weekend was one of the more enjoyable and informative Buddhist events I have attended. As a person who came to Buddhist practice at 50+, and who has trained at one place with one teacher, and who has an active family and law practice life, I have a fairly parochial view of Buddhism in America. This is true even though I regularly read widely. Actually being at a meeting where there was wide representation from different Buddhist perspectives, and seeing and hearing them interact gave me a much more fluid sense of the waves of thought and interchange happening in Buddhist America. I don't think that anything in writing or on the web can compare with actually mingling with this sort of broad cross section of American Buddhist leaders. That alone made the event unique for me, and is something that I think you should seriously consider preserving in the future. I understand that funding and logistics may make a smaller gathering more practical, but the variety and breadth of the meeting is much of what made it special. Focusing the next meeting on subject matter, or on have a small group of "leaders" interact may be valuable, but there may be something lost in the process. I would make a plea to look for co-sponsors who will help with the event so that it remains open to a broad audience, and so that it includes as wide a variety of presenters and participants as possible.

Huge thanks to the Normans for being so ecumenical in their selection of people to attend, and of the people to whom grants were given. I don't think that anyone within a particular branch of American Buddhism could have been as liberal and inclusive as two non-Buddhists. That openness is the genius of the Lenz Foundation. And I think that is the essence of American Buddhism. Not that we will lose the lineages in some Chinese menu of practices, but that there is an opportunity for each of us, as we dig our own deep wells of practice and insight, will be able to come out of our holes long enough to learn what others are using for tools to do their digging, and be pragmatic enough and unencumbered enough by ideology to pick up what is useful as a technology without abandoning our basic path. I think John Dewey was right: The uniquely American philosophy is

pragmatism. We do what works. And that is about technology, here, the technologies of awakening.

In essence, the best part of the event was the fact that it brought such a broad sampling of American Buddhists together in one place to share their visions and activities. The secret, it seems to me, of the success of the event is that Norman and Norman are not Buddhists and that they have therefore relied on a variety of people and their own open vision with the result that they have been very ecumenical in whom they have supported. I suspect that no foundation run by Buddhists could have matched their track record because of internecine struggles, personal histories, and ideological divides. The Normans bring something unique to American Buddhism, perhaps what may eventually make it unique--a tendency to ignore sectarianism. That is not to say that sectarianism is absent from American Buddhism, any more than personality and power struggles are absent, but that what John Dewey said was the American philosophy--pragmatism--will steadily undermine the tendency for individuals and schools in America to build up their separate satraps. The underlying teaching I took away from the meeting is one of emerging technologies. How do we blend the various technologies at hand, whether from the East or the West, in a way that best addresses the American audience? How do we incorporate the discipline of martial arts, the insights and therapeutic methodologies of psychology, the political and social approaches of American liberalism, and the traditional practices of the various Buddhist schools that evolved in isolation, into a variety of brews that will minister to the Western population? What works and with whom? What is an advance, and what is a detour, on the path?

Participant: From Kari Lynn Esler, Rama Student

I would like to say, "Thank you!!" for all the work/effort that is provided by the Foundation--attending the Conference was (literally) quite life-changing! I am so happy to have attended, to have been exposed to and acquainted with all that the Foundation is associated with and represents. I would only ask that, perhaps, there be more gatherings led by our Rama-inspired "group" in order to fulfill the Dharma in the future; I believe that it is needed in respect of many of the topics covered at this most recent conference regarding "diversity" within Buddhism; I came away (newly) realizing that it is somehow perceived that there is "diversity", when my experience (always) with Rama was that he taught all the various different paths--"One mountain, many Paths"--to show that, in fact, there is no diversity.

It might be propitious and dharma-furthering to offer these conferences more often than every two- to four-year schedules...

If I have anything to suggest within my comments to your email soliciting them, it would be to say, "The more, the more"--step forward, don't be afraid to take a primary role even beyond what already has been accomplished by the Foundation.

I honestly believe, bottom line, that Rama's Teachings are to let all of these "diverse American Buddhism" paths know that, as always, it is and always was exactly the same!

Participant: From Mac McGoldrick, Professor, Colorado State University, Ft. Collins, CO

I enjoyed the conference immensely - as an academic of religion and as a practitioner. I was delighted by the opportunity to spend a few days working with the likes of Bernie Glassman, Genki, Genpo Roshi, Bob Thurman, Hal Roth, etc.... In addition, I was delighted to learn more about Rama, and his teachings, and was impacted greatly when I spoke with his students and colleagues. Remarkable. I also welcomed the opportunity to reconnect with old friends like Jules Levinson.

You'll perhaps be delighted to learn that during the weekend, I was able to begin arrangements for Genki and or Bernie to visit my students in Fort Collins in the future, and it looks like Jun Po Kelly will be visiting us in October. This will expose more than 100 students to Buddhism in America - and, I'm sure, will serve as real living examples of what the Dharma can do in people's lives. I'm very excited - both opportunities that would not have come about without your generous support, and without your wonderful event.

I am considering my 4 days with you all earlier this month only the beginning of our relationship - and will look forward to where this journey takes us.

Participant: From Elizabeth Pedalino, Rama Student

Thank you very much for organizing and making this event possible. Boulder was just the perfect place to host this event. It was wonderful to see the projects the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism is supporting across so many diverse Buddhist organizations. It was also very enjoyable to visit the Naropa University campus and learn about the programs available in this setting. This event was very educational for me.

Suggestions for the future:

- If possible, host the event in the same location that the majority of people are staying. This would help building interactions amongst several groups.
- Shorter days.
- Balance of lectures/presentations and practical application sessions. It was helpful to have guided exercises/meditations from different traditions (I thought they were carried out a bit too early – maybe 8:00 or 8:30 AM would have been more comfortable as starting times.)
- Earlier movies (7:00 PM instead of a 9:30 PM start.)

- I think people would stay longer for a concert if the concert were to be the last event.
- Ensure the video/sound system is top of the line for the presentation of videos and slides.

Thanks again. It is good to see that the Foundation is supporting a variety of programs and that Rama's teachings are available through the Foundation's website. It is also nice to see that this kind of event can bring so many traditions in the USA together.

Participant: From Gregory Beddingfield

The high point of the conference for me was The key note speaker, Professor Robert Thurman . . . There was so much enlightenment that evening. Enlightenment in everything. There was much light. . . .

Participant: From Jordan Ausman, Rama Teacher

Inspiring and energizing conference. Glad to see our community expanding. The opportunity for collaboration and networking is truly valuable!

Participant: From Lloyd Burton of Insight Meditation Community of Denver and Insight Meditation Community of Colorado

I remain deeply appreciative of having been invited to attend the conference and to make a modest contribution to the program. It was a great networking opportunity, and I was surprised at how my interaction with others helped me give greater voice to my own "front burner" program development ideas, concerning ways to direct the healing potential of the Dharma to work with combat veterans and others who live with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Participant: From Ana Gibb

Hello, I enjoyed the Conference very much, the talks were funny and informative for me, I liked the group meditations also and I especially felt a lot of joy when the kids from the Spanish Harlem shared their experiences. Thank you.

Participant: From Veronica Sanford, Rama Student

Thank you very much for the invitation to the conference and for putting so much effort into a very productive and informative event.

Some of the highlights for me were seeing the good that the Foundation grants have been making in the lives touched:

- The "Meditate '08" documentary filmed near the site of the Democratic Convention
- The Peace on the Street initiative
- The scholarship recipient / fellows at Naropa

And also the grant recipients work:

- Roshi Dennis (Genpo) Merzel from Big Mind
- Roshi Denis (Jun Po) Kelly and Roshi George (Dai En) Burch of Hollow Bones / Friends of Zen demonstrating Mondo Zen

As well as the other speakers:

- Lynne Twist discussions of fund-raising
- Robert Thurman

And hearing Bodhi (Joaquin Lievano) play again, of course! (I'm sure there are some very impressive and informative events I have forgotten to mention here.)

It was also very inspiring to meet Pannavati, the Abbot at Embracing Simplicity Hermitage, who is not yet a grant recipient, and hear of her support of homeless kids and female monks in Thailand. I was grateful that Rama's students were able to speak about what they gained from his teachings.

I liked seeing that there were some representatives from the Tibetan Buddhist community in addition to the Zen monks/lineage represented in 2007.

My only (uneducated) impression of the mission of the Foundation is that the spread of Rama's teachings (aka American Buddhism) have not been financially supported by the funds left by his estate. As a meditation teacher, the costs of purchasing Rama's books and cds for my students from the website have been prohibitive. I'm very excited by the generous gift to the Foundation to enable his oral teachings to be transmitted for free across the web.

Thank you again very much for all of your efforts to create and sustain the Foundation.

Participant: From Corinne LeBaron of The Lineage Project

I wanted to thank you and everyone at the Lenz Foundation for putting on such a wonderful conference last week. It was my first introduction to the Lenz

Foundation as well as the teachings of Dr. Lenz and I am so impressed with both! All of the programs funded through the Lenz Foundation are doing such important, incredible work & truly making a positive difference in people's lives. It was great to hear about them and actually experience some of their work directly. I look forward to getting more involved with some of them.

I met so many fascinating people, including students of Dr. Lenz. I hope to keep in touch with a few of them and explore the teachings of Dr. Lenz more deeply. I'm just sorry I wasn't able to spend more time speaking directly with you.

The Lineage Project had a board meeting this past Wednesday where I was able to convey my excitement about the Lenz Conference and the ideas for future plans. . . . A long-weekend to network with other grant partners and discuss fundraising and management is a great idea. Many of us at Lineage are familiar with Lynne Twist's work and know we could all greatly benefit from her expertise as well as the experience of our fellow grant partners.

Having events in-person are definitely the ideal but two years seems like a long-way out. I think that some kind of on-line conference in the meantime would be a great way to keep grant partners from across the country connected and provide on-going support and training in a more timely manner.

The grant from the Lenz Foundation has meant so much to The Lineage Project. It says a lot that you are so involved in helping your grant partners learn and improve their skills in addition to providing direct financial support. We look forward to continuing our partnership with the Lenz Foundation.

Participant: Professor Hal Roth of Brown University

Thank you for organizing such an interesting conference. It was enlightening for me to see the important work you are supporting and to learn more of the background to the Foundation. You also chose your presentations well: Thurman was superb...he gave one of the five best lectures I have EVER heard, and believe me I've heard hundreds. Also the Frederick Marx movie was breathtaking. I will try to get him to show it here at Brown as soon as possible. Also I thought Lynn Twist was brilliant.

Part of advancing the Dharma in America is to get people networking. That will, I think, be another lasting benefit of the conference. Also, on a more personal note, I was very happy to have the opportunity to reconnect with a number of old friends.

Participant: Simcha Knif, Rama Student

Dear Normans,

It was great to see you in Boulder. Organization of the conference was perfect, and you heroically sat through all the presentations - a wonderful example of respect towards participants, presenters, and most of all towards Rama and his impeccable way of approaching any project!

In total, the conference was very uplifting, informative and inspiring, and Joaquin's concert was over the top. Thank you again for putting it together and doing such a superb job managing the Foundation.

Participant: From Larry Harding, Rama Student

I studied with Rama in the 1980s and then left in good standing in 1990. His passing was a very difficult time for me, even after 8 years of separation. I can only imagine what it was like for those who were still involved and were tasked with carrying on his legacy. From what I've seen, I don't believe anyone could have done a better job with that assignment. I have a Stanford law degree and I know I could not have. The effort, the purity and the practicality are inspiring! Well done!

I attended the conference because I had a sense that I should, but seeing what the Foundation has turned into was uplifting beyond my expectations. The students who created the seed money were held in such high esteem by everyone I met - from the grant recipients to the general public - that it was a joy to realize I had played a small part in it. Some of what we tried to do as Rama students may have ended in failure, but the Foundation is a success. It manifests his spirit of service and commitment to Buddhism.

We may not have changed American society, and we may not have created much of a sangha for ourselves in the end, but we certainly helped the broader sangha of American Buddhists in a beautiful way.

Several things stood out for me at the conference:

- Both Professor Willis' and Professor Thurman's speeches were highlights. It was striking to me that both questioned whether we could ever have an American Buddhism without monasticism. Certainly part of Rama's experiment was to abandon the physical monastery and blend into American society, but as I age and find myself with no family and no support structure, I am not sure that I see a way for people to repeat what we did - to take a monk's vows and put their Buddhist practice above everything else, including family.

We practiced incognito. It kept the group safe while he was around, but a “go-it-alone” practice may not be the strongest way forward for others.

For the next generation to break free from the path that the world might want to impose on them, some new structure may be needed here - some new balance of monasticism, family and secular involvement. I can see both side of this argument, but the option to practice in your own home is always available. What’s missing here is the option to do it differently.

Can there be a monastery or practice center that would strengthen one’s personal power and future choices instead of limiting them? Can there be a professional cadre of Buddhist practitioners that cannot be co-opted and controlled by the financial powers? How would it work? There are a lot of issues to think about, but I’m not sure if it has even been conceptualized. People like these distinguished professors are the most qualified to help us think that through. Perhaps someone will make it their Ph.D. project some day.

Or perhaps we might fund a “think tank” project to flesh out Rama’s core ideas and promote them in American society, instead of leaving it to someone else. The RSO seems poised to make another pass at our traditional approach of disseminating Rama’s materials. In my view however he was about something larger than his own materials. In two words, he was about “Meditation” and “Enlightenment.” There are a lot of angles on those topics that we could work with and still point back to him.

I wouldn’t want to stop promoting Rama’s materials or stop reaching out to people with the message of who he was (and is). Dr. Graham’s young student at the conference is proof that he is still helping new people on a personal level. But many of us might have ignored him if we had not seen his enlightenment with our own eyes. People who don’t have that opportunity may have to be approached with more subtlety. There is definitely room for something new and creative if we can come up with it.

- The Peace on the Streets presentation was quite touching. . . . I met Stan Koehler in 1987 when I moved to Palo Alto with the Rama group. I suppose the highest compliment I can pay him is that I see Rama in him and his program. With the work he and the other Zen priests are doing teaching compassion, meditation and martial arts, I see this as a way to boost their efforts in the career success arena. And also to make a gesture to Rama and to Stan.

I’m thankful that I had the opportunity to attend the conference. It re-energized the Rama legacy for me.