



Terry Bean joins us to speak about Little Rock Secular Buddhists, an in-person group in the heart of Arkansas.

The term “Secular Buddhism” was virtually unknown a few years ago. But things are changing, as those of us who do identify as Buddhist, but not quite in the traditional sense, find one another. We have a voice with this podcast, social networking on not only our own Secular Buddhist Association site, but in twelve websites across nine countries. Those virtual communities are nurturing the creation of more in-person Secular Buddhist groups, and today, the term Secular Buddhism is becoming more common. People are learning that they can do this practice as contemporary Buddhists, and that doesn’t mean having to accept the ideologies of ancient and, to many of us, foreign cultures. Secular Buddhism meets you where you are, and doesn’t expect you to become anything other than that self... you don’t have.

Terry has had three careers; he retired as an engineer after 28 years from a multinational corporation, is currently as owner of a small business and also works as a professional artists team with his wife Maritza. They have created and installed public sculptures in Arkansas and their work has been in shown in exhibits in New York, Miami, Switzerland and China. They teamed up again after experiencing the rich spirituality of Secular Buddhism in West Palm Beach, FL and then established a Secular Buddhist group in Little Rock, AR.

So, sit back, relax, and have a nice Arkansas Razorback.

TM: Our guest today is Terry Bean. Terry, thanks for being here!

Terry Bean: Thanks a lot for having me on, Ted.

TM: It’s been a great pleasure speaking with you on Facebook and seeing some of the progress with the work that you’re doing so let’s start with asking you to tell us a bit about your background.

Terry Bean: Well, Ted, I’ve had a lot of practice with meditation but I’m kind of an accidental Buddhist. My wife and I split time between Arkansas and Florida, and in our time in Florida we had a chance to meet a couple that was heading up a secular Buddhist group at the Unitarian Church there and they invited us to come to a meeting and since my wife and I both have had meditation experience and like the idea of meditating in a group because of the energy it evokes — we didn’t know that at the time that we’d enjoy it as much as we have but they invited us and they were affiliated to some extent with the secular Shambalists group and so the Shambala people came about once a week to — I mean once a month to the group and lead a meditation. So we really started enjoying that, discussing Buddhism with the group, and their focus was to a large extent on [some monk or other] who’s an American Buddhist monk and she had a lot of books written on loving kindness and the group kind of liked those and then we decided to try and get a little deeper into Buddhism and took some Shambala training. And during this time, I liked the idea of the secular Buddhist. I was born a Catholic and at some point when I was a teenager the Christian idea of a God and et cetera was something I spent some time thinking about and started having difficulty with and I kind of became an atheist. And so for most of my life I’ve considered myself a humanist. And because I had difficulty with the concept of the higher power, so when I was exposed to Buddhism the pieces, just like a puzzle, started fitting together because of my scientific background — I was a, I worked as an engineer — things that have proof meant a lot to me. And that was one of the difficulties I was having earlier — was spiritual ideology. So when I found out that Buddhism basically is a path of common-sense ethics and morality, and that meditation had the benefit of strengthening the mind, then I started thinking, hey, this is starting to make a lot of sense to me. I also, at the same time, because aware of the Secular Buddhist Association and start reading a lot of the articles and listening to your podcast and a lot of the references on the Secular Buddhist Association site were really beneficial. And I remember reading Catherine Kerr’s work and others’ and so it really appealed to my scientific kind of bent that I needed to have proof before I could really commit to a spiritual idea. So the idea of the common-sense morality, ethics, right view, right speech, all of those things made so much sense to me that I wondered why I hadn’t discovered

it before. It kind of codified what I really knew down deep but hadn't really focused or crystallized in my mind as a practice. So that's kind of how we got into being accidental Buddhists: it was just through a fortunate meeting that we had with a couple at an art gallery and they said, why don't you come to our meetings on Monday night and we did and we've been really thirsty for the experience ever since.

TM: Yeah I think a lot of folks who are listening to the podcast would resonate with some of those experiences of finding this being a practice that you do that not only makes a logical sense but provides some energy in engaging with their lives and can have some pragmatic effects in the world.

Terry Bean: Yes. I, you know, I agree totally with that. You know, the idea that if we had people that were moral and ethical and had strong minds, could make clear decision-making, I think that would be wonderful, especially when I think about our politicians [laughs] — I think it would really be beneficial [laughs].

TM: So Terry, what prompted you and, and your wife Maritza — she's also a partner in this with you — to start this Meetup Group; what made you go for it and take that extra step? 'Cause that's, that's quite a big one.

Terry Bean: Well, Little Rock is right in the heart of the Bible Belt; so when we came back from Florida this last year, and we looked around, we couldn't find a secular Buddhist group in town. And I had been doing a lot of blogging and reading the articles on SBA's website and so I was just inspired to start our own group because of the rich spiritual practice that we'd experienced in Florida. And so there's a lot of Buddhist groups in Little Rock. They're small, and in general the larger ones, the traditional lineages in Little Rock, are based at the Ecumenical Buddhist Center. And it's a building that there's a — you know, the different lineages like the [x], the [y], and the Zens — several different Zen groups, et cetera — practice that. I checked that out; they didn't have a secular Buddhist group; so I turned to the Unitarian Church here in town and found out that they were very supportive of having a secular Buddhist group available for their congregation. In fact, the idea of meditation, and the idea of the secular Buddhist, kind of fits to a large extent with the Unitarian philosophy. In fact, one of — one of our members one time observed that Unitarians are to Christianity as secular Buddhists are to tr — to Buddhism.

TM: [Laughs] I guess that's a fairly good way to look at it [laughs].

Terry Bean: So, having an open-minded liberal group such as the Unitarians are — or other groups in town — there's actually, the Episcopal Church also is very interested in Buddhism, to provide a platform for their own members to learn about the practice and especially about meditation. So I found a willing sponsor and also a number of people in the congregation that were interested in secular Buddhism. Most of the traditional Buddhists were involved with the Ecumenical Center and so we kind of filled a hole in the community on the secular aspect of Buddhism, and because of that we've had a little bit of response.

TM: Yeah, it sounds like the secular humanist groups and the Unitarian Universalist groups are very amenable to having this kind of offering within their overall congregation, and whether it's just meditation and folks are doing this in a mindfulness context or they're more overtly secular Buddhists, there is an alignment in ideals and in providing some inspiration and guidance in just their daily lives that really resonates with what we're trying to do with secular Buddhism.

Terry Bean: I agree with that totally. And I think if you want to start a group out in a local area and — I look at us as kind of the storefront of secular Buddhism, where SBA is more the online international theoretical research blog and a place to explore ideas, and our group, we're more focused in, rather than in a theoretical aspect, we're in the applied aspects of taking Buddhist theory and then trying to discuss how to live that in everyday life when we're living in the Darwin-type capitalism; it's one of those things that you have to have a pretty good skill level to make that happen when things are moving so quickly and priorities of time and effort are so important, to remember right speech and various aspects of Buddhism and how to do that, so what we're trying to do is talk about — like in engineering, it's an applied science where physicists are a theoretical science — I kind of see us as being a storefront for applied-type Buddhism.

TM: So tell us about the group itself. I noticed on the site which — for folks listening, I'm linking to the episode page for this episode — do you have an agenda that you follow, and what are the meetings like — tell us a bit about that.

Terry Bean: Well, typically we meet for an hour and a half at six-thirty every Monday night. We start out by welcoming people that are new to the group, introducing ourselves, and then we do a fifteen-minute breathing-type meditation. Then the next thing after that, we have a book — again, it's an applied book on how to deal with Buddhism in everyday life — the book that we're currently working on is called "Work, Sex, Money" and we felt like those are certainly applied things.

TM: My sex life is often theoretical but —

Terry Bean: [Laughs] We actually haven't gotten to the sex part of the book yet but everybody's anticipating it! So then we discuss what we've read, then we do a ten-minute walking meditation, and then we do a five-minute wrap-up where we just — if there's any business things or any questions that people have, then we kind of wrap up the meeting at that point. And it's amazing how fast an hour and a half goes by. It's really easy to run over and so I have to watch the clock to make sure that we get people out at eight o'clock.

TM: Yeah I think that Mark Knickelbine has the same experience with our Practice Circle every other week, is that it's confined to an hour but we could easily go over that, especially with a larger group of attendees.

Terry Bean: That's really nice that you have that Practice Circle online. That's fantastic.

TM: So Terry, tell us a little bit about some of the challenges that you and Maritza encountered as you're contemplating this and putting it together — as you said you're in the Bible Belt; there may have been some challenges there but what are some other things you may have run into, especially for other groups who are considering starting up?

Terry Bean: Well, I think trying to understand the local scene, who are in the Buddhist community, making contacts with them because they're a fantastic resource for us. And also coming up with a sponsor like the Unitarian Church, trying to bring all of that together and make it happen. So we spent quite a bit of time attending the Ecumenical Buddhist Center meetings, getting to know people — we were meditating with the president of the society — and also we start participating in the Unitarian Church, and kind of bringing everything together so that we had a place and we also had the resource of the Buddhists in the community to support us with their experienced leadership. So, to me, bringing the whole thing together was the big initial challenge, to make sure that it could materialize.

TM: How about some of the positive experiences? What are some of the rewards that have come from having started this group?

Terry Bean: You know, for me personally there's the fact that I'm coordinating this group with my wife, the fact that we're a team is really important because it gives us a chance to talk about our practice and practice together and experience things and having realizations of our experiences in life and how Buddhism applies to that. That's really been a nice common bond for she and I. In terms of the group, the fact that we're a team also helps relates to the various people that come in. The Meetup website has been excellent for tracking new people, especially outside of the Unitarian Church, and it's one of those things, it's a slow build, we have people from Meetup sign up and then maybe never attend a meeting; we have some that attend and then not come back; then there's also a percentage that stay. And so it's a slow build but over time it's getting bigger and bigger. The other thing is that Unitarians ask me and Maritza to do a sermon on secular Buddhism and in the summertime at the Unitarian Church at Little Rock the minister's on vacation so they have guest speakers that have the pulpit on Sunday morning which is an incredible platform. So we were able to recruit members from that experience. So right now, probably two-thirds of our members are from the Unitarian Church and about a third from people from the outside that have heard about us from Meetup or from some other source. One of the challenges has been that, not having had any kind of psychiatric experience or counseling of people, it's amazing how people look to you as having sort of psychological capability! And I think you had a recent podcast on that about separating the meditation leader from the psychologist or psychiatrist because they're

two different things. And so that's a challenge, to deal with that and keep it in a relationship of a meditation leader and not get into the psychological lives of people. That's one challenge. I think the challenge of just keeping the energy up — I send out an e-mail every week with research material in it, with a quote of the week, a summary of what our last meeting is and what our next meeting is like — it takes a lot of time. It's not one of those things that, as you know, with your experience at SBA, it's extremely time-consuming so anybody that gets involved with it has to understand that it's going to take some time and energy and a lot of communication to keep everything rolling along. The other thing that we do is, about once every four to six weeks we bring in an experienced Buddhist to come in and talk about their lineage or something in Buddhism, maybe — we've even had people come in to lead us in chanting, and all of these things, for people that are open-minded and researching and analyzing as the Buddha said, to create in your own mind your practice and to follow it, these are all exciting things for people. So that has been a challenge to bring in the right people for that. The Ecumenical Buddhist Society has been very supportive of us for that, and we've drawn from their experience several times now. In fact, they've asked us if we'd like to even write up a proposal to a formal type of relationship between the Buddhist Society and our Secular Buddhist group and our group is looking into that currently.

TM: That's a terrific development because, Terry, that will be one of the first official recognitions of a group of traditional Buddhist sanghas that are working together, that secular Buddhism is in fact another lineage, it's a separate group and I would say it's rather unique because it is not really based on a previous lineage — we don't have that one-to-one relationship. And so I wish you the best of it — I was rather hoping to see that that kind of collaboration would develop and I really like your description of bringing in people from the traditions to expose your group to the different ways in which people in different cultural contexts, different traditional contexts, have engaged with Buddhism over, you know, the past two and a half millennia and that's one of the great things about a secular approach. And exploration is, we get to look at all these different ways in which people have done this and we see that with an open heart and open mind and see that, why no this particular practice might not be for us but it's still really fascinating and can help inform how we engage with our practice today.

Terry Bean: Yes and I talk about that quite a bit in our group, that you know being secular Buddhists we respect all lineages, that there is more than one path, there's many paths, and we, you know, we want to take the secular path but because we are secular it gives us the chance to focus on what the different Buddhist traditional practices have been. And I don't want to sound mercurial but to a large extent if you're interested in sociology and anthropology and history, things like that, you know, it just brings it all home — it gives you that anchor to the past as to how all of this materialized and that's fascinating too, you know, just understanding where you are in history, what this slice in time is — how it came about.

TM: Yeah, and I appreciate that you are modeling the behavior of friendly engagement with others with whom we won't always agree on all points and we don't have to and that's okay because we're a very diverse species as human beings; we as individuals have varied differences and that's a strength and I think the secular approach to this is one of our shared humanity and that's what really gives us an opportunity to share this with others, even across our own different traditional backgrounds.

Terry Bean: Well, you know, I have to thank SBA for my view on that. I didn't understand it at first, but going through it and thinking about it, it just made sense, you know. I tell the traditional Buddhists to, you know, please come and talk with us, and if some of our members decide to become [x] or [y] or Zens then that's what we want.

TM: Great, more power to 'em, they found a practice that's right for them.

Terry Bean: Exactly. Exactly. So, you know, as Buddhists we're taught not to cling to members, you know, not to cling to things to the best extent possible, and so clinging to membership to me is not what we're about, you know, we want to be open, we want to be respectful, we want to be respected as part of the greater sangha here, and that's one of the things I've really been working hard towards and again I have to thank SBA for the right view on that.

TM: So you mentioned something else: the sermon that you gave — I just want to let people know that I'll be linking to that as well, 'cause you provided a link to that, so folks who are listening go get a chance to take a look at that — is on the Meetup.com for Little Rock Secular Buddhists. But you also mentioned, folks who go to the Meetup, when you find this, if you're in the Little Rock area and you're curious about this and you look it up on Meetup, bear in mind what you see there for membership is just a portion because you also have a lot of folks from Unitarian groups that are not going to the Meetup because they're already there, they're already in-person, so it's more than the membership that you're seeing on the Meetup.

Terry Bean: Yes it is. In fact I've urged our members to sign up on Meetup and it not — it doesn't stick [laughter]. The people that sign up are basically the people that are searching for something, and the secular concept makes sense to 'em; there's many other Meetup Groups: there's atheist groups, there's all, you know, free-thinking groups, there's all kinds of people, and they have lots of members here in town. But our group hasn't, like you said, wanted to sign up on Meetup for the reason that as Unitarians they're already aware of our secular Buddhist group and are participating in it. So — but I have to say this, that Meetup has given us about a third of our additional members and our Unitarian members have been relatively steady, and the Meetup portion of our group is growing, you know, maybe one or two a month, which to me is, you know, really good.

TM: Yeah I think that's more than many in-person groups will see, is that kind of growth, and I think that will continue to grow with time; we'll see how that goes. So speaking of traditions, I also wanted to chat for a few minutes about — you have some visiting monastics coming in October. Tell us about that event.

Terry Bean: Okay! [Laughs.] Being an accidental Buddhist I have to pinch myself sometimes that we're sponsoring some traditional Buddhists — Tibetan Buddhists, the Gelugpa monks — that are servicing Tibetan refugees in India. And they're here on a national tour, and they were checking with Little Rock to see if Little Rock Buddhists were interested in hosting the monks. And as it turned out, the Ecumenical Buddhist Center is growing and changing locations and going into a larger facility, and at the same time when the monks were going to be in town. And because of our relationship with the Buddhist Society they ask us if we would be willing to sponsor 'em. And so, you know, we felt very privileged and jumped at the opportunity. And as it's turned out, it's really a fairly extensive program; we've got a curator from the Arkansas Arts Center, a past curator that is an artist and has focused on Tibetan art and has something like forty-five Tibetan paintings that she's done herself and also some Tibetan paintings that are original works from Tibet. And so on Friday night she's going to give a talk about her paintings, how she got interested in Tibetan Buddhism, and what the paintings mean, and then give a tour — we're hanging her paintings in the sanctuary and the fellowship hall — and so she's going to give a tour. So that's kind of going to kick the weekend off and then the next day when the monks come in we're going to have a welcoming and they're going to give a dharma talk, and then on Sunday they're going to be in the religious education building do sand painting with the kids; also do the sermon for — and talk about their Tibetan refugee situation and the political situation in Tibet. And, you know, it just keeps going on and on and then Monday we're going to do a community outreach and the Clinton School of Public Services is going to have them, and [Something] International, which has operations in India and services the Tibetans, are — have a headquarters here — and we're also going to go to a private academy with the monks. So it's going to be like a four-day Tibetan festival here in Little Rock.

TM: It's outstanding.

Terry Bean: Yeah it's October so it, it's, it, and it — and it's amazing how all of this stuff has come together, Ted; it's just incredible that, from the time that we got back from Florida, spring, 'til now, all of the rich spiritual experiences that we've had.

TM: And just in a few short months you've created a group, found bounds with other groups that are similarly aligned, gotten great support from that, brought people in using internet technology, and now you get to be a mover and a shaker in this sharing of the Tibetan tradition with people in Little Rock — which is, is again is just such a wonderful development; I'm so happy for you on that.

Terry Bean: Well, thanks a lot, Ted. Little Rock, you know, it has a history of both very conservative — politically, it's becoming more and more fundamental-conservative-type mentality, but in the past, you know,

we've had William Fulbright, Bill Clinton, David Pryor, and Dale Bumpers, you know, we've had a lot of liberal politicians too, so it's not that there's not any liberal community here; it's just that, in terms of domination of parochial thought, the fundamentalists seem to have the upper-hand right now.

[Laughter.]

TM: Time will tell where that goes. Time will tell; time will tell. Well, my guest today has been Terry Bean; Terry and his wife Maritza are the founders to Little Rock Secular Buddhists. They have a Meetup page which I will be linking to on this episode page. Terry thank you very much for being here; I really appreciate your time — and all of your work.

Terry Bean: Well I've really enjoyed it Ted; thank you very much.