



Ted: And our guest today is Kenneth Folk. Kenneth, welcome to The Secular Buddhist!

Kenneth: Hi Ted, thanks for having me.

Ted: So let's talk for a little bit about your background. Tell us about that: how did you get into meditation and Buddhism?

Kenneth: I got into meditation in, uh -- it was about 1980. My brother and I lived in Los Angeles and we were, we were both musicians. And he taught me a simple meditation exercise where you, ah you look at the visual field with your eyes closed, and you just kind of sink into the blackness there, the darkness and ah, and I found that very calming and very compelling. Ah, I did that for a couple of years, just occasionally, but the reason my meditation -- the reason, the reason my passion for meditation and, and really obsession with meditation took off was because of a rather spectacular event -- in, I believe this was in '82. So in '82 I was addicted to coke and at -- was getting progressively more miserable as a result of that. Uh, I've been trying to kick that habit by the way and, and having no success. One day, when everybody else was away from, from the house, I ran out of coke and uh, was crashing and feeling horrible and I, and I remembered that I had some acid, some LSD, in my safe of all things -- and so that the fact that I even had a safe tells you something about my state of mind, at that time. So I dug out this acid and I took four hits of it, reasoning that, that it would be four doses, reasoning that aw it's been there for a while it's probably kind of, ah, old and stale, uh, I'll take more than the usual. And, now I had taken acid before, recreationally, and, and it was always entertaining, but something different happened this time: I, I meditated while I was under the influence of this drug, and because I was depressed I tried to will myself to death. In fact I was reflecting on a movie scene that I had seen; there was a Dustin Hoffman movie called "Little Big Man," and ah, uh, a wise old Indian chief lies down on a funeral pyre, uh, a funeral pyre, that's not lit, it's just a pile of sticks -- Chief Dan George, yeah -- and he says, "Today is a good day to die." And he attempts to will himself to death. Now he, he -- early in the movie, ah, he tries to do that and it doesn't work so he just gets up and goes and does whatever he's going to do but later in the movie, I think at the end, ah, he tries it again and, and -- I, I don't remember; it's not clear whether he succeeds or not. But the idea was fascinating, and my mind felt really powerful at that time. And I thought, well, I probably can will myself to death, ah, and I tried. Uh and I didn't die per se but I did have what in hindsight what might be called a near-death experience. I went up -- kind of a, out-of-body experience -- I went up through a, a glass tube into the sky, I me -- I'm laughing because it sounds kind of silly as I'm saying this whereas it was very real at the time, very compelling --

Ted: Yeah these are very compelling experiences that we have.

Kenneth: And I was, uh I moved faster and faster into the sky and was thrust up the end of it into this bright, wonderful, spectacular white light. And merged, and felt that I was merging with all of consciousness, some kind of global consciousness that, having read of some of the Christian mystics I thought of as Godhead. Uh now this was news to me because I never -- up 'til that moment I didn't take anything religious seriously at all -- I thought it was a bunch of hoo-ha. But it was a life-changing event. That experience felt to me more real than anything that had ever happened in my life up to that time, and in fact I thought the rest of my life has been a -- a waste because I haven't had access to this, this ah, unit of consciousness or this merger with Godhead. Something else happened in the wake of that experience: I lost my desire to use cocaine. So my coke addiction just vanished; it was no, no, no pain, no trouble: I just didn't want it anymore. So two things there: one, the subjective change in worldview, to believe -- now in, in my, in my heart and in my bones that there was something beyond my tiny contracted existence -- and this kind of objective if you will verification that something happened, because people don't usually report that their cocaine addiction vanishes without a trace. So after that I became very interested in finding out what it was, so I could get it back -- I thought, well, if it felt that good then I'd like to be able to do it all the time, so maybe there's some way. I learned that there was some connection -- that some people thought there was a connection between meditation and unit of experiences and I learned that there was something called awakening or enlightenment. And so I, I, of course, suspected that what I had a glimpse of was in fact enlightenment. I should bookmark that because I, I later was disabused of that notion -- actually what happened to me was just a, just an experience, and maybe a, an early signpost on a, uh, developmental continuum, that leads to enlightenment or, or is part and parcel of enlightenment as a, as a developmental continuum that doesn't really have an endpoint. But in any case, I

wanted it back so I, I read a lot about anything spiritual, I read Ram Dass and ah, I was interested in all his magical stories about his experiences and his guru; and I read "The Three Pillars of Zen," and -- lots of Zen, initially. But I wasn't satisfied with how they were -- I wasn't satisfied that they -- were giving me any kind of a prescription for how to, how to do this, how to get enlightened. In 1990 -- so, so about eight years after that initial experience -- I met a Buddhist teacher, an American man, named Bill Hamilton, and he started talking to me about the Theravada Buddhist idea of four paths of enlightenment, so now there was a more systematic approach or a, or a map, and he taught me Vipassana meditation, ah from the Mahasi tradition where you do follow-the-breath but you also do mental-noting, and he told me about the Progress of Insight, which is a a map that details the experiences that a meditator is likely to have on the way to the first path of enlightenment: stream entry. And I was really, ah, excited about that. So now I had a clear, ah, a method that I could follow. And overall, the next few years -- well, throughout most of the '90s -- I, I just meditated a lot; if I wasn't on retreat I was trying to figure a way to save enough money and clear enough time that I could on retreat. So during that time I spent about a cumulative three years in intensive retreat in monasteries and meditation centers mostly, ah, about half of that time in Southeast Asia in Buddhist monasteries, and I felt myself moving along this continuum of, of enlightenment: I was convinced that there, there's something to this and it was happening to me. In 2004 -- so there, there were a lot -- I'm, I'm leaving out a lot of really interesting at least to me experiences -- but in 2004 something I think really significant happened in that I had a, a shift in the way I experienced the world as a result of something that happened in, in meditation while on retreat and my depression went away. So -- the ah, the event that got rid of my drug addiction in '82 did not get rid of my depression and so forth -- for many years, for twenty-two years, I suffered crippling bouts of depression every year, often more than once, and, and for weeks or months at a time and I would be dysfunctional during those times. That stopped happening after that experience in 2004. All of this was for me validation that this idea of awakening is referring to something real, but it isn't referring, in my opinion, to becoming holy or, or sanitized or impeccable in your behavior. Rather what's happening is a change in perception -- and I think this could be modeled more effectively by talking about brain science than, than by talking about magical events.

Ted: Yeah and one of those we will be able to, perhaps, demonstrate in a lab, and the other -- might be more challenging that way.

Kenneth: Yes and there's a lot of research being done now to try and find the neural correlates of, of awakening and it's, it's very early in this, in this process, nobody has come up with a test, you, you can't put somebody in an MRI or an fMRI and, and say this person is enlightened because of the brain signature. But there's interest there and, and people are working on it. I'll, I'll be interested as it, as it shapes up over the years, if it ever gets that clean, if we ever come up with an, an Enlight-O-Meter that, ah, doesn't lie. And of course the, the idea, ah, is an exciting place to go from there: if you can come up with an Enlight-O-Meter then maybe you can develop a neural-feedback machine that will lead to that, whatever these brain changes are that, that signal enlightenment.

Ted: So Kenneth tell us a bit about enlightenment itself, let's explore that a little bit. What do you mean when you talk about it -- how, how do you define it?

Kenneth: Yes, my current favorite way to talk about this is to say that enlightenment or awakening -- and I, and I usually use those terms synonymously -- is the ability to see experience as process, in real-time, and when you can see experience as process, even the momentarily arising sense that this is happening to me is just part of that process. And what that results in, from the point of view of the person who has it, is a very robust kind of equanimity that I, I think of as meta-okayness. So meta-okayness is so robust that it's okay even when you're -- even when it's not okay. So to contrast meta-okayness with with uh mere okayness: okayness would be, ah nothing bad ever happens; you're, you're walking around in a cosmic bliss out all of the time -- now that's what I used to think enlightenment was, I was I was very hopeful about that; I I don't think that's what it is I don't think anybody's has ever had that, um I don't think humans work that way.

Ted: I don't think that would even be a good state. Uh a person walking around in a bliss state is probably going to be eaten by the tiger.

Kenneth: That is a very good point; I think you're right. So even though in our, ah, our more optimistic and, and childlike moments we might wish for 24/7 cosmic bliss out, it's it's arguably not good and I don't think it

happens. So we're left with meta-okayness. Now I can make the case that meta-okayness is even better than okayness, because with meta-okayness, for one thing the heat is off, you don't have to be perfect all the time, you don't have to be, um happy all the time, you can also be [unhappy] and that too could be okay. So that's where I think this goes. That's what I think enlightenment is. It's meta-okayness as a result of seeing it experienced as process.

Ted: Yeah one of the things I like about that way of looking at "awakening" -- using quote-fingers here -- is that, that seeing process, there is this, this on-going process and that's what we are, not only ties in very nicely with ideas about not-self -- because it is just process -- but it brings in a wonderful equal binary of being embedded as process and yet a bit of a distance and ability to have some perspective on that process and your relationship to it.

Kenneth: Yes this idea of embeddness, I love the fact that you used that word because I think Robert Kegan, the developmental psychologist from Harvard, has this right. He's talking about developmental psychology, adult development, but I think it also works very well with meditation. The, the mechanism by which we, we grow, along this continuum of development, is by objectifying the subject, and when you do that, you disembed from your experience, a little bit at a time. So wh -- one way of talking about this is with filters: if I have a uh a blue plastic filter over my face, everything will appear to be blue; uh in fact I will I will identify as blue, I think I am blue. If on the other hand I notice at some point that, that a -- there's a filter there's a blue plastic filter stuck to my face -- and I I peel that aside just enough to notice that, that there is a filter initially, that changes everything. My world might still appear to be blue but now I know I'm looking through a filter and so I'm beginning this process of disembedding. The more I can objectify this filter, the less embedded I am, the more awakened I am, and this process of making subject object is exactly what we do when we meditate effectively.

Ted: So that's an interesting twist on it because I, I see it in the opposite way that, because there is just that continuum of process, and that includes what we think of as our selves, our skandas and all, isn't a separation it isn't a distancing of self from process and self from the external world; it's in fact a, an inseparability of it because it's all just a continuum of process.

Kenneth: I think I understand what you're saying if you mean that in what I'm saying there seems to be danger that you would be observing your life through glass, you would think, oh here's -- here I am, over here the, the real me, the true witnessing consciousness, disembedded from and then observing this other thing as process; and, and certainly that, that can happen and does happen along the way. But if we take this all the way -- if we take this further -- that even this sense of witnessing consciousness is rolled into it, so that is also objectified, so there isn't anything -- I like to think of, of storm as a metaphor, so there's, there's a weather pattern, it's rolling around, and there isn't anything within that storm that can stand apart from it and, and observe it -- there's just the storm.

Ted: There's just [cross-talk] yeah there's just witnessing --

Kenneth: So all of this stuff is just coming [cross-talk] there is just witnessing how and you can witnessing -- I'm actually very interested in this idea that even witnessing may be a function of the way we talk about it. Because in fact there's just experience, and one of the things that's experienced is that it seems to be happening to me sometimes, and it -- there seems to be witnessing, and we have this kind of circular way of talking about it where we'll -- we like to talk about awareness, uh where we'll say, obviously there's awareness because I'm aware -- I don't know if there is awareness! I think awareness may be an artifact of the way we talk about these things. What I'm sure of is that there is experience. And so there isn't -- it doesn't make sense to me to reify awareness or witnessing. It makes sense to me to just acknowledge what is happening in any given moment; something is happening, or not, but there is experience.

Ted: So tell us about why this is important to a non-Buddhist contemporary audience; why would they care about this kind of Buddhist-y stuff?

Kenneth: This is important for, for everyone because I think it makes your life better to be really simplistic. And, and after all, why do we do anything -- because we either want to make our lives better or we want to make other people's lives better. I think this is a natural part of, of human development, ah this capacity to see

experience as process. It's something we're, we're born with, and if we train, we get better at it. And meta-okayness is a really attractive way -- it's a desirable way to live, in my opinion. It certainly makes your subjective experience easier to take. After all, ah reverting to Buddhist talk for a minute, according to the Buddha, ah life is dukkha, life is unsatisfactory. So given that, to be meta-okay with, with the difficulty of your life is a really beautiful thing. In my own experience, in those moments when I'm okay I'm less likely to make everybody around me miserable, and I'm more likely to make decisions that will, that will lead to things that are consistent with my values, and the reason I'm saying that is because what this is all going to come back to is, we want to have good lives, but for me part of having a good life or part of a life well-lived is, ah to feel like I'm not causing more trouble than I'm solving.

Ted: So shifting gears a little bit -- I'm intentionally using that wording -- tell us about three-speed transmission.

Kenneth: Okay the three-speed transmission is a schema I came up with to help myself understand how seemingly contradictory practices can all be useful. I was uh formally trained in Mahasi Sayadaw Theravada Buddhism so I learned the, the Vipassana technique, but I also was exposed through reading and through talking to other people I was exposed to self-inquiry, for example, a venanta style self-inquiry; you also see self-inquiry in Zen, this who-am-I question. And I was exposed to this kind of radical notion of just sitting, or letting it be. Now it wasn't clear to me how to prioritize those things -- they might seem to be at odds: for example, just sitting seems to be at odds with meditating like your hair is on fire, which is which is [an] early Buddhist idea. And having all these maps and models of a developmental continuum of awakening doesn't fit very well with just sitting, letting it be, and it also doesn't fit very well with questioning the sense of self via self-inquiry by asking who am I all the time -- the, the question is always who am I so if you say, uh I'm going to do Vipassana meditation and get enlightened, well that would be undercut by self-inquiry because you would say, well who wants to get enlightened? So I couldn't deny, after many years of practicing basically anything that I, I'd ever heard about I'd tried it -- and some of these things I went into very deeply -- I couldn't deny the value of these seemingly contradictory practices. So I wanted a system that would encompass that. So I came up with the three-speed transmission, actually riffing off of something Shinzen Young said. I once heard Shinzen say that when he -- when things are tough he will down-shift to mindfulness of the body. Because that's -- as a kind of first gear -- that's something that he can really access. I thought that was a very useful idea. So I thought well, if you've got first gear you can also have other gears so I came up with three -- uh I think initially there were five but I trimmed it back to three. So the three gears are practices that ask the question What, or focus on, on What -- so if Vipassana asked the question What, Mahasi style mental-noting for example -- you notice something, objectify it and you prove that you've objectified it by naming it: seeing, hearing, itching, thinking, excitement, agitation, interest, engagement -- I'm doing this in real-time right now. So that's the first-gear practice. Asking What. The second-gear practice -- the second gear is self-inquiry. So now you're asking Who, to whom is this happening, and who am I. That's second gear. And then third gear...it's over, forget about it: this moment is already here, whatever you're going to do about it or not do about it, it's not going to change this moment that's already here. So I'm either enlightened or I'm not, but this is it. Third gear, just sitting. And I found that not only are all of those practices useful, but I think they can be used together, synergistically, and you can even scaffold the one with the other -- you can -- I came up with a method where you can do First Gear for a while and then scaffold Second Gear via First Gear and then you second-gear it to scaffold Third. There was a time when I believed that this was a, a hierarchy and that the idea was to get to Third Gear and if you could stay there all the time, that would be ideal. I no longer believe that. I think that all these perspectives are, are valuable and valid lenses and there, there isn't a hierarchy; you don't have to go to Third Gear and hang out there all the time.

Ted: So let's talk a little bit about what we're seeing in our Buddhist communities today. What would you like to see happen, physically, virtually, in the next few years?

Kenneth: I'd like to see the community of people who have access to the benefits of meditation, whether they meditate or not, I would like to see that community grow. So I would like to see practices that, that lead to what I call awakening enter the mainstream and maybe be so secularized that people don't even remember that it came from Buddhism. I actually would be fine with that. And in fact, if we do come up with the hi-tech Enlight-O-Meter, and the and the hi-tech neural feedback devices that trains the brain to be awake, and people can do it in, in a week, or ten minutes instead of decades, fine; I'm okay with that. I of course have a, a little bit of sentimental attachment to Buddhism; I like it I like the ideas I think it's a great schema for teaching, but after all,

for me what this is really about is just having people benefit from, from awakening, irrespective or how they got to it. Although I, I am admitting to a little bit of sentimentality here, I like to say or I like to think of myself as being ruthlessly unsentimental in this way, ah, so at least my in my rhetoric at least, is that I would be willing to abandon Buddhism entirely if I knew a better way to do this, a better way to help people wake up.

Ted: It's a raft, it's a raft.

Kenneth: Yes.

Ted: So our guest today has been Kenneth Folk; you can find out more about Ken on his website KennethFolk.com. Kenneth, thank you for joining us.

Kenneth: Thank you Ted, it's a pleasure.