

Paul Norton

June 18, 2020

Interview by Carolyn Wood

Carolyn: Hello, I am Carolyn Wood. It's June 18, 2020, and I'm talking with Paul Norton, our spiritual teacher at the Mindfulness Community of Milwaukee. Hello, Paul?

Paul: Good afternoon, Carolyn. How are you?

Carolyn: I'm good, thanks. Beautiful day.

Paul: Yeah. I just wanted to start by saying that this particular process of interviewing me is just horrible for my practice, just horrible. It's more selfing. And I have lived a lot of my life not doing selfing. Meaning, I'm trying to detach from this idea that I have this thing that's called Paul Norton that's important and all that other sort of stuff. So I realize that I will actually need to do, quite frankly, extra work to kind of make that kind of go back to the way it is.

Carolyn: Oh!

Paul: That being said, I do know that I have been the person that has been there the longest at the Milwaukee Mindfulness Practice Center run by the Mindfulness Community of Milwaukee. I've been there for 22 years. I was one of the six founders, I've been president a lot, I've taught a lot of classes.

I realize I'm an important person in that regard, but I don't want to be looking at it that way. Matter of fact, I don't want to be special at all because I believe that I have done—I'm very happy with where I've gotten to in my life. But I believe it's absolutely available for everybody. I have no special skills, special talents, anything like that. I'm just a person who decided to practice and practice and I think that that's really—Anybody can do it, anybody can do it.

Also, when we start talking about interviews, especially when you start talking about the biographical part of it, that is, of course, going to be absolutely inaccurate. The story that Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "With perception, there is deception" is absolutely true. If you look at most of the research done on memory, then you find that there are certain

things that are just completely wrong, that people get wrong all the time, that they're certain.

So a lot of this interview is depending on my memory. But my memory is inaccurate, like everybody else's memory. And it tends to be inaccurate in a way that makes me look good. [Paul laughs] If you were really being truly biographical about it, you'd have to get some background and you'd find things.

Here's an example of this; we all know where we were—those of us who are old enough to have experienced this—we all know where we were at the Kennedy assassination. I was in my classroom and it was a sunny day in November. There was a big kind of hush, we had just had televisions put into our classrooms at Assumption School in Emerson, New Jersey. And I watched very keenly as brother Francis DeSales went over to the television, he turned it on, the whole thing with Walter Cronkite in shirt sleeves and everything else, and yada yada. It is an extremely vivid memory for me and I know it. And I think many people have that.

Many years ago, not many years ago, maybe 5 or 6 years ago, I don't know why I was thinking about this, but I did the math. I was not in Brother Francis DeSales' class. He was my favorite teacher. He's probably my first dharma teacher and he's very important in my life, but he wasn't my teacher that year. It was Brother Phillip, the year before. I had taken this memory—and I still can't undo it—I had taken this memory and put my favorite teacher right in the middle of it when he actually wasn't there. And I realize that we do those kinds of things all the time.

So whenever we talk about people remembering their past they're always talking about their manifestation of the past in the present moment. It's not an unimportant thing because it tells us a lot about how we've decided to make that past. But it's completely inaccurate.

I think almost everything we remember from childhood has been modified. The computer people like to make the analogy that

when you actually remember something you corrupt it just a little bit. The file is corrupted just a little bit every time you remember. And then if it's something like the Kennedy assassination, which I've probably remembered hundreds of times, of course it's corrupted, of course it's not correct. So that's going to be true of a lot of the major events in my life.

When you come down to that, you have to kind of take that this is my best approximation. But more importantly, I think, is to kind of get an idea about my feelings about where I came from, and what's going on with me now, and how this path has been so valuable. And that anybody who is reading this interview, you can do this, too. I am the most fortunate person in the world. I really am. I have just gotten so many things that fell into place for me.

But the most fortunate thing that happened to me was that I was exposed to the dharma and I practice. That's really what has made me so joyful and happy right in these very days.

So you can do it, everybody can do it, and that's kind of how it is. We are all enlightened beings. We don't always feel like enlightened beings. As a matter of fact many of us may feel like we're enlightened beings maybe 1% of the time and the other 99% of the time we're just, oh my gosh, what a mess I am. But we are, we're all enlightened beings. The only difference between me and someone else is that I practice so that this realization came forward. It's just practice, nothing else, no other talent. I wasn't smarter than any other person, I wasn't more even-handed than any other person. As a matter of fact, just the opposite. One of the things that I can't do, but I wish I could, is that most of the people who know me have known me over maybe the last 5, 10, 15 years. I don't have any people around me that knew me, say, 25 or 30 years ago, when I was absolutely an emotional basket case.

Carolyn: *Oh!*

Paul: When people see me now they say, "Well, you know you're really good but, you

know, so what, because you're an even-handed person. Of course, you had this situation, of course you can do this dharma well because you're even-handed, it just flows off of you." They have no idea what I was about. They have no idea about a lot of my existence back when I was a struggling medical student and a struggling young physician in the '80s and '90s. They didn't know about me having to go off to the emergency room in the middle of the night sure that I was having a heart attack when it was really a panic disorder.

All of this has happened and then I'm willing to corrupt myself with the selfing that we're doing here only so that I might be able to inspire people to practice.

Carolyn: *Well, I thank you very much. I have a question; getting back to the memory thing, when I first heard you say that, I thought, well, that may be true for most people but it's not true for me. [Carolyn laughs] I thought, I have a pretty good memory! Surely, there are some things that are definitely true. You said so much of it is wrong, but there must be a certain amount of it that's actually true, or very close to being true. Right? In your preparation or in your thinking about this interview, did you find your selfing resurfacing and resurfacing?*

Paul: Absolutely, sure. Here's my selfing, right here. I'm doing an interview about me! About this organic creature called Paul Norton. I mean, that's selfing. That's not really good for my practice. But I understand and I have the antidote so I can be okay with it.

The idea, of course, with memory is there's always something factual. There's always something factual. Because there's something that is clearly factual, you buy the whole nine yards. That's what the whole thing is. It's never that a memory is completely— Well, I shouldn't say that. It's rare that a memory is completely made up, because it always has bits and pieces that are really true.

I don't know if you've ever had this experience, but I have, I remember having a brother and sister together with this, and the brother said, "Oh, our dad, he was just out to

lunch, he was so cruel, he was really mean.” And the sister said, “What are you talking about?” She would go on about how kind and open he was. Neither one was wrong, but neither one was right.

Actually, it's very interesting, Thich Nhat Hanh right now in his book—and for those people who are reading this, I'm presently part of the Plum Village tradition, that's what we call it now, and Thich Nhat Hanh is our teacher. Thich Nhat Hanh in his book on communications says that his answer for almost everything when people say things to him is, “You are partially right.” There's a story in one of the videos about, and I can't believe that somebody really did this, but they came up to Thich Nhat Hanh after he gave a dharma talk and said, “That dharma talk wasn't very good.” Thich Nhat Hanh didn't get very defensive or say it's a matter of opinion. He said, “Well, you're partially right.”

Those are the ways to kind of look at things. Almost everything we have as a memory is partially right. But it is partially wrong as well. The real problem is, we don't always know the difference. We can't tell which parts are right, we can't tell which parts are wrong. I have often even found that people sometimes say in families, “Well, I must have had this memory right because my sister remembers it this way and my brother remembers it this way.” But families get into their own individual folklore and they all kind of reinforce themselves. And they all have the same line. So memory can be collective in that way.

That being said, I will do the best I can. [Paul and Carolyn laugh] There are certain facts; I can tell when my birth date was, who my parents were, all that other sort of thing.

Carolyn: *Well, okay, with that let me just start with some basic questions. Where were you born and raised?*

Paul: I was born outside of suburban Philadelphia. 1952. June 10, actually, I just had my birthday.

Carolyn: *Happy birthday!*

Paul: Then four years in Erie, Pennsylvania,

then back to suburban Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Then through the 60s, I was living in a suburb of New York City in New Jersey, called Emerson, New Jersey.

Carolyn: *That was with your family of origin?*

Paul: Yeah. My mother was from Effingham, Illinois. On her side of the family, we have the direct lineage, I think seven generations back, to William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Carolyn: *Oh, wow!*

Paul: It's interesting though, but if you do the math you'd think the chances that I have **any** DNA from William Clark is about one in four. Any chromosome at all, because you can't have that many ancestors. My grandfather was Lithuanian and my grandmother was probably Ukrainian, but we don't know, she had some other lineage. That's my heritage, but really we just, you know, good old fashioned middle America type of person. Very, very boring, very boring.

When when I was older I came to this realization that this wasn't bad and I'm sorry that my parents died before I had a chance to tell them this but, I used to think of my parents as being very boring. I said, well, I always had food on the table, I always had clothing, they made sure I got up to school on time, they rescued me when I was in trouble, all that sort of stuff. But they were so boring. Now I realize, I see so many other families where there is alcoholism, and drug use, and infidelity, and all this other sort of stuff, and I realize boring is probably pretty good. [Paul laughs] I have a lot of gratitude to my parents for leading me on this very straightforward—But, you know, they were supportive, they were always there, that kind of a thing, throughout my formative years. I've nothing but gratitude, my parents were great. You know, like I say, not earth shatteringly exciting, but really great.

And I have four siblings, two older, two younger. We're all kind of okay with each other but distant. We don't get together, we don't talk about things very much. But I love them all, they're all a little bit different. My brother is a Trumper. [Paul laughs] About eleven kids in

the next generation, including my two kids. So, anyway, my family of origin was really good. Like I said, we didn't have any great, I don't know what you'd call it—

Carolyn: *Drama?*

Paul: Addictions. Yeah, not a lot of drama. The drama was why isn't there any drama? That was the drama. Like not really, nothing's happening here. You know, that kind of thing. Which is great and I really appreciate that. Nothing going on here, that's good. Because most of the things going on are troublesome.

Carolyn: *I thought you visited your family like once a year, you'd make a trip out east.*

Paul: I visit over Thanksgiving if I can. That's most years, but not every year. When my kids were younger we went to the Jersey shore, the holy shrine for people who live in New Jersey. You know how people in Wisconsin go up to Door County? Multiply that by ten, that's how people feel about going to the Jersey shore. Everybody in New Jersey goes to the Jersey shore. You go, you dip your toes in the water, you hang around the boardwalk, all that stuff. We used to do that. My sister, who doesn't live there anymore, used to live right in Tom's River, one of those border towns, one of those shore towns. Yeah, that was then. Now she's gone around chasing her kids everywhere where they're having their grandkids.

Carolyn: *Paul, were you raised with any religion?*

Paul: Yes, we were Roman Catholic, very much so. My dad was raised Roman Catholic from the time he—In Philadelphia, which is where he was born in 1919, there were various churches. He was Lithuanian, so his family went to the Lithuanian Church, because Lithuanians are Roman Catholic. I think at some point, I thought I wanted to be a priest.

Carolyn: *Really?*

Paul: Yeah, yeah. I was kind of heavily into that, and then when I got to college I became disillusioned. I went to mass every Sunday, pretty much, I don't think I missed any except for illnesses and stuff, until I was a sophomore in college.

Carolyn: *So you were pretty positive toward your Catholicism when you were—*

Paul: Yeah. I was an altar boy, all that.

Carolyn: *Interesting! How did you start to become disillusioned?*

Paul: It sort of didn't make sense to me. Then, when you have all of these truths that you have a contradiction for, but an authoritarian voice that says, "You must believe everything." When you have a doctor that contradicts another doctor, how do you believe both of them? I always thought, well, this is kind of difficult, because if God gives you a rational mind, you're not gonna be able to resolve these two things. There are more than just two, but, you know, these two things that don't make any sense. So I got a little bit more disillusioned and—You know, this was at a time when they weren't talking about pedophile priests and that sort of stuff. I was really aware when I was in college about the wealth of the church, and that bothered me. It was really just I couldn't reconcile the—And it was really hard for me to leave and say I'm not gonna do this anymore.

I dabbled with, and still have a lot of fondness for, Bahai, the Bahai faith. Some people I knew in college who are doing that. But eventually, because I needed to keep my GPA up, I found Buddhism.

Carolyn: *Oh, you found Buddhism in college?*

Paul: Yes. Well, here's the story. I was pre-med. All the stories about people with pre-med worrying about their GPA is absolutely true. I needed an easy A, and Eastern religions—I needed to have a humanities kind of component—Eastern religions was an easy A. So I took it. When I got to the Buddhist part, it made a lot of sense to me.

I would probably say that I was philosophically a Buddhist maybe for 15 years before I was a practicing Buddhist. You know, if for whatever reason, you're in the hospital and they ask you what religion you are, when I was 25 or 30 I would have said none, I didn't have one. But I was probably leaning more towards the Buddhism. And then I always had this

feeling in the back of my mind that something was going to get my attention and make me practice Buddhism. Was I ever right about that! In 1989, I developed a panic disorder and it really gets your attention. [Paul laughs]

Carolyn: *Wait a second, where were you in your path to becoming a doctor?*

Paul: I had already become a doctor. I was already practicing. Yeah, I was 37 years old. My panic disorder came about and I said, "I really need to practice."

I didn't know that Buddhism was going to be the big thing for that, but it was really like somehow the universe said, "Pay attention! Guess what? Things are not good, do something about it." A little background for panic disorders because people misconceive exactly what it is: It's an instantaneous bam thing where you're in full panic all at once.

Carolyn: *All at once?*

Paul: Yeah, so it's like at 12:00 you're as calm as you usually are, and at 12:00 and one second, you're in full blown panic. It's a very spontaneous thing, it's much more like a seizure disorder than it would be, say, anxiety. It's amazing! It's truly amazing! You spend about an hour or two—roughly that kind of time frame—with absolutely full blown panic with all of the signs going on in your system. That's what's happening. It's very difficult because you don't have a specific thing that you're really afraid of. It's free floating fear. Wow! I said, "Well, this is really, you know."

I remember the first time I had my really worst one, and then I end up in the emergency room because, like I said, I thought I was having a heart attack. It was very interesting because I looked at the blood gases in the EKG. I mean, I could just see them as a physician and I said, "That's not a heart attack!" I was just saying to myself, "What are you doing here?" Quite frankly, they didn't tell me much in the emergency room. I got more education about that the next day from my own physician.

Carolyn: *Oh, really?*

Paul: Yeah, but it lived with me for a long time. Well, it lived with me on a daily basis for

probably four or five years. You know how they talk about it, I guess I could say I experienced that, when you're like a 19 year old boy you always thought about sex? When you're a 37 year old person who has had a panic attack, and it came out of the blue like this, you think about panic attacks all the time. You think about it ALL the time. You are never sure when the next one's going to come, and you're powerless once it hits you. You're just powerless.

Carolyn: *Wow!*

Paul: It would tend to happen once a month for about two years, then petered off. I think a lot of it was because I was practicing. I had started to go to the Shambhala Center and I started doing a regular meditation type of thing. So that really helped.

Carolyn: *So you were you in Milwaukee at that time?*

Paul: I was in Milwaukee, right.

Carolyn: *And just to back up a little bit, what brought you to Milwaukee?*

Paul: I had two medical schools I got into, one was in New York City, and one was in Milwaukee. I knew New York City and I always knew I could go back there for residency or something, so I wanted to see what Milwaukee was about. That's why I came here because I had a choice between those two places.

I have to admit one of my first experiences with Milwaukee was really—I remember it very well. Of course, like I say, memory is always, but this one I think is really accurate. I came for an interview and when I came for the interview, the Medical College was where the Marquette campus is downtown, and a short distance from there, very inexpensive, was the YMCA which is at 9th and Wisconsin. Go to 9th and Wisconsin and stay in a room overnight. Waiting. Got in during the afternoon and had interviews the next day. Turn on the TV, regular news, and there's a puppet doing the weather. I had come from the New York City area, this would not happen. There was a puppet doing the weather. I said, "Yeah, we're not in New York anymore, we landed someplace different." [Carolyn laughs]

I acclimated and I guess when I got to Milwaukee I did four years of residency, I mean four years of medical school, three years of residency. I didn't know that I was going to stay. I really didn't, I thought I'd eventually go back to the east coast. I just stayed.

Carolyn: *It sounds like you knew, even in college as an undergraduate, that you wanted to be a doctor.*

Paul: Sort of. [Paul laughs]

Carolyn: *You were pre-med.*

Paul: I was actually a biology major, because they didn't have pre-med at my school, which was an engineering school. I went to school to be an engineer. Changed my mind. So I wasn't always wanting to be a doctor. Actually, I felt kind of bad about that because I got in. I had all these other pre-meds that I hung around with. Some of them didn't get in, some of them really wanted it bad. I was like if I didn't get in, I would become an engineer. That's not a bad job. I would have just been an engineer. In a lot of ways I felt bad about—I can't give my acceptance to you, I'm sorry, but you know. That's kind of the way it went.

Carolyn: *When did you decide to become a pediatrician?*

Paul: After I did my rotations as a junior medical student. You do rotations on various things, you do an internal medicine rotation, you do a pediatrics rotation, you do one on surgery. And you do one that's kind of a conglomerate of a lot of things, like I think it's ophthalmology, and anesthesia, and psychiatry, all in that block.

I liked pediatrics, I liked the kids. It was kind of fun. So that's why I decided to become a pediatrician.

There are so many things that in my life that I've just sort of fallen into. I got lucky. My sister—I remember after I'd been out of residency for awhile, about 1985 or so—my sister Sue, who I was closest to at the time said, "I don't know anybody who has as perfect a job as you do." She says, "You know, being a physician you get to do all that kind of thinking type stuff, but you get to be with kids all the time, and this is just perfect for you." And,

yeah, I really was. It was a great job to be a pediatrician, it really was. I had a wonderful time doing it. Again, there's no engineering where you hang out with kids all day and their families. The families were just fabulous. I mean, I really enjoyed talking to parents, it was just terrific.

Carolyn: *Your practice was on the East Side or where?*

Paul: It was on the East Side. I was in Shorewood from '84 to 2000. And then I went to the Bayshore Mall from 2000 to 2006. Then I just made a switch to do developmental behavioral pediatrics.

Carolyn: *I'm sorry, what year was that?*

Paul: Developmental behavioral pediatrics from 2006 to 2016, and that was in Glendale.

For all of those things that people say—just as an aside—that I've been successful at, my developmental behavioral pediatrics thing, at least in the part that I wanted to do, which was to set up a mindfulness program for people and their families, was an absolute disaster. I never got anybody interested. Never. I taught a fair number of families and patients individually about mindfulness, but I wanted to do a regular program, like a MBSR thing, mindfulness based stress reduction thing for kids. I had the whole thing planned out, I had curriculum and everything set up. No one came. [Paul laughs] Oh, well.

Carolyn: *You actually initiated the program but nobody showed up?*

Paul: Right.

Carolyn: *Wow!*

Paul: Schmoozed my old colleagues; why don't you send me some people, you've got some kids who were anxious, maybe you could do this, you got some kids who were acting out, maybe they could do this, or you have families that are just doing that, I'm happy to do that with the families as well, why don't you see what—No, no one sent me anybody. That's just the way it is.

Carolyn: *Wow. I wonder if that would go better now.*

Paul: Don't know. Thought it would go really

well back then. [Paul laughs] That's the way it goes.

Carolyn: *You learned about Buddhism in college, and you were philosophically drawn to it, but you really didn't start a practice until after you started having panic attacks.*

Paul: Right.

Carolyn: *So you were already a practicing physician.*

Paul: Yes.

Carolyn: *And did you have children by that time?*

Paul: Yeah, my son was born in '84, my daughter was born in '88. My panic disorder came full blown in August of 1989, while Teddy Higuera, a member of the Milwaukee Brewers, was pitching in a very close game against the New York Yankees. I was listening to it on the radio and I was getting very—I said, "I'm getting way more worried about this than I should be, I don't know what's happening here." Yes, I remember that part of it, yeah.

Carolyn: *Wow. Is it true for most people that have panic attacks that it comes on so suddenly like you said?*

Paul: Yeah.

Carolyn: *Interesting. You realized it wasn't a heart attack, and you learned it sounds like the next day that it could be a panic attack from your doctor. That's so interesting. At the time were you able to ascribe it to anything in particular in your life?*

Paul: Well, I was having trouble with my marriage, and I was a young parent, and a physician who had started his own practice, which had its own pluses and minuses. So there were a lot of dynamic things going on, but I don't know. I don't know. I mean maybe, maybe not. One of the funnier stories about this was that I remember talking to my dad, and saying "You know, Dad, I got this thing going on right now. I've got this thing called panic disorder." He says, "Well, what's that?" So I described it to him and he said, "Oh, yeah, I had that!"

Carolyn: *Really? [Carolyn laughs]*

Paul: It's like, well, maybe you could have,

maybe you realize, maybe if a little bit of it is genetic, and you could have, but no, who knows—But, anyway. That was kind of funny, yeah. And I didn't know, but looking at my dad who was kind of an angry person when he was younger and mellowed out as he got older, that I think somewhere along the line he developed some emotional regulation. He wasn't a meditator. I don't know. But he certainly sort of smoothed out and did better with that.

I actually still even to this day, and I haven't had it for about a year—So bingo! Out of nowhere. I get the bingo every once in a while. I get this thing that says, "Boom!" It's almost like a little jump in time. There it is, all of a sudden everything—Boom!—it's different. And I know in the past when that happened, a cascade would go to the panic disorder, panic attack.

Now it happens! And I wait. Okay, it didn't happen! That's good! But the little blings that happen that were the initial initiation to a panic attack still happen. But the panic attack isn't full afterwards.

I'm always waiting. I mean, people who have had panic attacks, you never say you're cured. My last one was 1998 but I still would never say I'm cured. I'm always aware that circumstances could occur that have that—And I warn people. I warned Jane about this. I said, "Jane, if I have a panic attack, you are not going to recognize me. I'm going to be anxious, I'm gonna be swearing, I'm gonna be strutting around, I'm gonna be impossible to console. All these things are gonna happen, I'm just letting you know. I mean, I don't think it's going to happen, but if it does, that's what happens, that's what it is. There's nothing to do except just kind of be with the person until it passes.

We all know, I mean after you've had a couple, you know that they never go on more than two hours, usually about an hour. You know that at the end of the hour, you're going to be okay. Which is good because if it really went on, I really understand how people with frequent panic attacks became suicidal. Because if I was having that every single day I

don't know what I'd do.

Carolyn: *Wow! Do you start meditating or anything when you feel—*

Paul: Oh, I start—right now, the breath practice comes right in, I'm breathing, I'm aware, I'm taking inventory of what's going on in my body. Again, when the blings come up, I just wait. Two or three a year since 1998. How many is that? Maybe 30 altogether and no panic attack.

But the bling still happens. The thing that I know is the initiation that happened before, there it is—Boom—there it is! I am so grateful for the practice because, I'm sure that's what's made it better.

Carolyn: *Yeah. So you never actually had to take medication for it?*

Paul: No, they didn't have SSRIs back then. Serotonin selective reuptake inhibitors, of which Prozac is the one, or Prozac-like drugs, that's what they use now. They didn't have those back then.

Carolyn: *Oh, I thought they used benzodiazepines or something.*

Paul: Well, yes, so when you actually have the disorder—Yes, I went four years walking around with a bottle of Valium in my pocket **all the time**. If I left my house and said, "Oh, my gosh, I don't have my Valium with me", I went back. I **never** was without it. It did take the edge off a little bit. But that's the only thing you could do. I always, **always**, always, always had valium with me, always.

Carolyn: *Just as kind of a security blanket thing just in case you needed it?*

Paul: Yeah. And to show you just a little mind of people who have panic disorder, I realized that when I was having my panic disorder it was usually around the middle of the day, noon, 1:00. I just noticed that. I gave up lunch. I gave up lunch because if I had a panic attack I wanted the benzodiazepine, the Valium, to work, and it would work so much better on an empty stomach. So I gave up lunch. I didn't eat lunch anymore.

Carolyn: *Wow! Did you keep seeing patients? Would you work while you were having a panic*

attack?

Paul: Only the very last few I had. I remember one I had. I had this and I brought my MA—my MA and my whole front staff knew about this—I brought my MA back into my office and I said, "I'm having panic. I see that our next couple of patients are here and they look like relatively low stress patients, so I'm gonna go ahead and see them and let's see what happens. And I did! I actually saw those patients through the panic attack at the end there.

But, no, when that was first going on, they were way too overwhelming, they were way too overwhelming. They would knock you off and you were just—I mean, there was no way to function, there was no way to function as a doctor at that point.

Carolyn: *You started practicing at that point. And you said you went to the Shambhala Center. Did you also have a daily practice?*

Paul: Yes, I started having daily meditation practice at that point.

Carolyn: *You went to the Shambhala Center, was it on Oakland at that time?*

Paul: It had just been opening as a matter of fact. I'm one of those people that did sweat equity to knock down walls and stuff when they were building it. So I was actually there when they were building it and part of that community a little bit.

I think the Shambhala Center opened in '90 or '91. I was part of the just volunteer people that just show up. Sure, show up and knock out a wall. I was happy to do that, dragging stuff down to the big dumpsters and things. I was part of that community at that time.

Carolyn: *How did you start the Mindfulness Center?*

Paul: It starts by getting involved with Thich Nhat Hanh, which was, of course, another wonderful circumstance that happened with an act of laziness. In 1993, I'm a member of the Quality Paperback Book Club. Do you remember when they had book clubs before there was Amazon and stuff? They'd send you a book. If

you didn't send the card back to say I don't want this book—In 1993, I don't know, I was kind of like a little bit distracted and things. Anyway, my thing for the Quality Paperback Book Club came and I didn't open it, and the next month they sent me the book. May of 1993, *Peace is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh. I never heard of him, never heard of him.

I started to read it and I said, "This is my teacher." Right then and there I started to read it, I said, "This is my teacher. He speaks to me. Better than Chögyam Trungpa or the other people at the Shambhala Center." I had great friends there, they're wonderful people. Chögyam Trungpa, not so much, but the people who were actually at the Shambhala Center were really nice people.

Another happy accident: September of 1993, Labor Day weekend. Thich Nhat Hanh had a four day thing in Mundelein, Illinois, right outside of Chicago. Drive down in my car. I drove down with one of my friends from the Shambhala Center. We had a wonderful time with it. The Mindfulness Community of Milwaukee was formed after that retreat.

They got together—and they still do this—they kind of get people together in dharma discussion groups geographically. They got a bunch of Milwaukee people. I didn't know any of them except for the one person I came down with.

They said, well, we're gonna meet, let's just meet on a regular basis. Let's meet once every week, once every two weeks, something like that, we'll continue to do this. Well, we need a name, what was the name? We couldn't figure out the name, what it was going to be. No one liked Cheesehead Sangha, that was my suggestion. No one liked my suggestion. I don't know, Cheesehead Sangha would have been great. [Carolyn laughs] So we decide like you often do in those sorts of things; we decided to have a placeholder name until we figured out what we were going to call ourselves. The placeholder name was the Mindfulness Community of Milwaukee. [Carolyn laughs] We've never gotten around to changing

it. That's what it became. And then people came and people left—

Carolyn: *Wait, you didn't have a storefront at that time?*

Paul: No, we were meeting in various people's homes. Sometimes we met in People's Books bookstore basement, we met at Plymouth Church once or twice, a variety of places, but mostly in people's living rooms. We were meeting once a week, maybe once every other week. I was continuing to go on retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh in '95 and '97, he was coming every other year. I took the mindfulness trainings in '95.

In '98, at that time when people were meeting in my living room, I said something like, "You know, it would be kind of interesting if we had like maybe a place to look at, if it was like a storefront or something, maybe we could see if that could work."

Once again, accidents, complete happy accidents that I had no agency in, that just happened. One of our people who was in the group, actually was somebody who had moved from California and was teaching at UWM. Quite frankly, she didn't last, she couldn't stand allergies, she had weird allergies in Wisconsin. But before she left, she said, "You know, I was walking down on Locust Street and I saw this empty storefront. Maybe you ought to look into it."

I looked into it, and again **so much help** from so many people. We got together and decided we were going to make this a go. We needed to become a nonprofit in the State of Wisconsin. They were very, very good about that, told us everything we needed to do. I needed bylaws. I talked to my lawyer, how do you do bylaws? He said, "Well, here, I have an organization that is really similar to yours, why don't you just copy theirs?" And we did.

We wanted to be a 501c3, so the people at the big federal building—the big blue cube downtown?—incredibly helpful, very helpful. They told us exactly what to do. I knew Jack Lawler by that time and he was a lawyer so I would occasionally, I think twice, I asked him a

legal question about this. He said, "Well, I don't know but somebody in my firm knows, so I'll find out." All this stuff just came together, and then on November 1st, 1998, we had our first Sunday sangha there.

Amazing, amazing, amazing. And just, like I say, I'm just astonished that all of this has happened. I really am. People say, "What did you do?" The universe threw these gifts in my lap and I open the presents and said, "Thank you." That's what I did! I didn't have any special talents or skills here, it just worked out. That's kind of how things go, that's how the center got started.

Carolyn: *You said about five people founded it with you?*

Paul: Yeah, there were six people, six of us all together, yeah.

Carolyn: *That was taking a risk renting a place, a storefront.*

Paul: Yeah.

Carolyn: *What did you do, start advertising or something?*

Paul: Yeah, we started doing a little advertising, a little word of mouth. We were kind of struggling, but still doing things. We started doing things on Wednesday as well as Sunday. We tried to get people to do some yoga or tai chi, who said they might do it, but they didn't. We were kind of just schmoozing around, not necessarily doing all that great.

A very weird occurrence happened. I don't want to say it made the Mindfulness Community of Milwaukee, but it sure helped a great deal, and it's not something that you actually wanted to have happen: 9/11 happened. After 9/11, people wanted to come see what we were about. They were lost and confused and they didn't know what to do.

So after 9/11, we started becoming more of a sort of community. Instead of having 6 or 7 people for sangha, we were having 15. I taught classes all the way through. Instead of having 6 people in my class, I was having 20. I mean, it just happened. That was a very weird thing that happened.

Also, moving ahead several years, the

other thing that kind of got our center going was the Great Recession in the mid 2000s—2006, 2007, 2008—that got people coming, too. Of course, you don't want to have the Vietnam War and 9/11 and this tremendous recession that people had difficulty with, you don't want them to have happened in the world. But they are definitely part of the compost, they are part of the mud that made this lotus grow and it's really interesting how that is.

I don't know, we might have not been there if I hadn't been—Look at all the things that had to fall into place there: I had to get a panic disorder, I had to be lazy enough to not send the book club thing back, somebody had to walk by and say, "Hey, there's an empty storefront", because I wasn't looking for a storefront (they were just, "Hey, let's just do that"), 9/11 happened, the recession happened, all these things going on. It's astonishing how this all comes together. Any one of those things doesn't happen, we're not here, we're not having this conversation. That's just amazing to me.

Talk about feeling blessed, oh my gosh! How many more gifts can I get here? This is really amazing to me! That's why I'm saying, you know, people often look and say, "Well you have this talent or something." I said, "No! I was just there, it happened!" It happened, that's all. I wasn't doing anything except doing my regular practice like everybody else is doing practice. That's the only thing that was different, I happened to be there, and it worked.

Carolyn: *You started teaching, you started having your classes. Was it an early version of your intravaganza?*

Paul: Yeah, I've evolved with that class over a while. I originally started it as a very close approximation to the John Kabat-Zinn Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. And found out very, very quickly that, although I have many talents, I am the world's worst yoga teacher. I am absolutely horrendous. [Carolyn laughs] Part of the mindfulness based stress reduction thing was to do yoga and I got the yoga going and everything else. But after I did

that for about a year, I said, "This is stupid, I don't know what I'm doing. These people could get hurt, they ask questions about what do I do with this posture, I don't know what to tell them. I'm letting that go." So I modify and drop the yoga part, and it became more and more towards what it is now.

And much kudos; there's somebody here, there you are! I need to have this class done; I want to kind of do it myself and I want to dictate it. Who's going to do that for me? You did that for me. There you are! The class is not the same if you don't show up and do the dictations and kind of do that sort of thing. I'm so happy we did it that way, too, because it's evolved so nicely. New things come up for me that I can suddenly put into the class and have a different perspective on as I evolve. So I'm quite pleased with it right now.

Carolyn: *I took the class twice and I've often thought it would be great to take it again.*

Paul: I get people who come up, this is one of my favorite things people say—and I know they're not always right, sometimes they are—"You know I took your class before. You didn't do this." They say this kind of thing. I really love that. And I sometimes say, "Yeah, I did that. [Paul and Carolyn laugh] Somehow your mind wasn't ready for it or something but, no, that was part of the class before."

Carolyn: *I remember you having so many components it might have been hard for people to remember. So in this process, you're teaching and you're opening that [storefront], when did you become part of the Order of Interbeing?*

Paul: 1999.

Carolyn: *Oh, not too long after you open the [center].*

Paul: Yeah.

Carolyn: *And how did you decide to go through that process?*

Paul: Well, I liked it and I like the concepts of it and back then it was much simpler than it is now. We only had to do a year after being an aspirant and I had these really wonderful sessions. There were four of us who were

aspirants. We would meet quarterly at Jack Lawlor's place in East Troy. They were wonderful. It was just Jack and the four of us. We just had deep discussions. I remember doing walking meditation on the black ice out there, that was really interesting. Just a phenomenal thing to be an aspirant.

Then in October of 1999 Jack ordained me at the Dodgeville retreat. My good friend Dorothea, and Virginia, who was from a different sangha, got ordained with me, too. So the two of us, Dorothea, another person who was very much a part of the Mindfulness Center until she moved away to Oregon. She got ordained in that summer, she wanted to get ordained with Thich Nhat Hanh, so she got ordained with Thich Nhat Hanh.

That's when Ed—who was such a nice guy, a wonderful person—said, "Nah, I don't think it's for me" and decided not to get ordained.

Carolyn: *With that, being a part of the Order of Interbeing, does that give you certain, I shouldn't say privileges, but to teach or anything?*

Paul: Yeah, it gives me the privilege to do weddings and funerals. I have, I've done maybe a dozen weddings. That's the basic thing with this. It doesn't give me the chance to transmit the mindfulness trainings to anybody.

So yeah, that's kind of what it does and it's just a special order of practice. Really no different than taking the five—Taking the fourteen, is very similar to taking the five, except the first three of the mindfulness trainings of the Order of Interbeing are about such things as non attachment to self, non attachment to views. Those aren't in the five mindfulness trainings. But that's really the only difference. Mindfulness trainings four through fourteen are just the five mindfulness trainings rewritten and maybe expanded on.

Carolyn: *You say it's a more difficult process now for people?*

Paul: Yes, it is much more difficult now. Well, Cornelia, our good friend, has been ready for for three or four years and I can't get her ordained.

I just can't do that. I think she was going to do it in August but we found out that there was this big pandemic and the retreat that she would have got ordained in has been canceled, so we don't know. Maybe next year.

But I've taken under my wing a group of people that have been ordained into the Order of Interbeing: Bob Weiss, Dave Zeman, both of the Lowrys, Jim Barrett.

Carolyn: *Several people. I have to take exception to something you said. You said it's been mostly luck and everything, but I've been going to the Mindfulness Center since about 2008, and at that time, like you said, there were meetings on Sunday and Wednesday. It's expanded so much to where now there's one, at least one, sangha session per day, even during the pandemic via zoom. I think this is largely thanks to you because you've been open to others taking leadership roles. I think some organizations, not just Buddhist, are stymied because of the leadership not wanting to share, wanting to retain their leadership. That's why I wouldn't attribute it to just luck. How were you able to do that?*

Paul: It is of my nature, though. It wasn't a big stretch for me to be open to people and things. It became even more my nature when I saw other sanghas fail, because of people being too heavy handed or find it too loose.

Interesting thing. I remember clearly—and again, like I say, my memory may be off—around 2001, 2002, on a retreat, somewhere in that, they were talking about mindfulness practice centers, which were brand new at that time. We had one, but very few people did and actually to this day very few people really do. One of the guys who was, I think he was, a Presbyterian minister—besides being ordained in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition as a dharma teacher—said something like, “Well, if you're part of the process of getting a mindfulness center together, you may be reluctant to be authoritarian and to take charge. You may feel that you might want to be more in the background and just let things happen organically. Get over it. Someone's gotta do it,

so do it! I mean, do it kindly and do it! You know, just do it!” [Carolyn laughs]

So I've been really happy at how it has happened. When I have let people do stuff, they did stuff! That's really great because a lot of times in other sanghas, they get people who say they want to do stuff, and then you ask them and they say no, or they don't do it. Jim Barrett doing the Marion Center, I didn't do the Marion Center, Jim did. He got in there, he rolled up his sleeves, and he did all that sort of stuff. To find the Marion Center was because my partner Jane found it. You're right, I let a lot of people do stuff. And sometimes I had to step in because people really weren't doing stuff. But most of the time people have just stepped forward. I like to say that one of the things I want to do is just empower them. Even if you think they're screwing up a little bit, why don't you wait and see if they fix it on their own, rather than kind of jumping in and doing that?

Carolyn: *Have you found that approach works?*

Paul: Yeah.

Carolyn: *If you notice somebody's not doing it quite right.*

Paul: Right, and then you get people, especially a lot of people, unfortunately, that say you should jump right in and do stuff. I said, “You know, people can find things on their own.” They're not doing any damage and they're just figuring it out. I will be able to help them eventually. If they ask for my help, I will give that. I'm not jumping right in and doing this, I'm just not. I think that this is the best way for an organization like this to be. If people feel that every time they try to do something Paul Norton is going to step in and tell them they can't, they're not gonna feel very invested. They're not gonna feel like this is part of what they want to do. Because some of the ideas that people will come to, I say, “Hmm, that's not exactly the way I would do it but okay, see where it goes.” It's worked out well for me for the most part.

Carolyn: *Interesting.*

Paul: If I have a talent, it's why I keep my

hands off it and stuff if I have to. I also had this—and this is part of dharma discussion group stuff more than anything else—it did inform into my other life; when we started at the Mindfulness Center, started doing regular sessions, after we'd been doing it for about seven or eight months, a person, her name was Carolyn actually, pulled me—

Carolyn: *Not me, right?*

Paul: Not you. She pulled me aside and she said, "You know, you don't have to talk so damn much." [Paul and Carolyn laugh] And I said, "Oh!" And I realized that, yes, you don't want to be the teacher all the time. You don't want to be the administrator of all, you don't want to do that. You let people do it on their own. You find that it's so much better.

One of the more gratifying things I do when I'm teaching is that I lead people up to the conclusion and don't give them the conclusion. I let them figure it out on their own. Most of the time they do, and that's great. Because, oh yeah, that's what this is about and so, you know, it's really nice that way.

Again, you can say, well, yes, I may have a talent for it, but I didn't earn the talent. I didn't go to some sort of business school or take a how-to-be-a-dharma-leader's class. This is just my nature, it just kind of fell in. So that's really nice in that way.

You're doing too much selfing. You're going to make me do much more practice next week. All of this selfing. [Carolyn laughs]

Carolyn: *When that person said that to, did it take you aback a little bit, did it surprise you, or did you recognize that it was true?*

Paul: I hate to say this, because I don't encourage people to do it, but when people criticize me, especially if they're steeped in the dharma, I want to hear what they have to say! I wasn't taken aback. I said, "You know, I think you're right!" The discussion probably went something like, "But I'm always worried that people aren't going to say anything." "But what's wrong with just letting it be silent for awhile?" And the answer is, "Yeah, what's wrong with that?" So it's silent! We're Buddhist! Of

course, there's going to be silence sometimes. If nobody has anything to say, you don't have to jump right in and start teaching. That's kind of how I've been with that.

Carolyn: *I see. That's good. You've mentioned your panic attacks. Are there other life experiences like being a doctor, having kids, going through divorce, does anything come to mind as having helped your practice or likewise been informed by your practice?*

Paul: Being a doctor gave me a lot of opportunity to practice. You're in a room with mostly scared parents, even when there isn't much going on. We certainly had difficult situations. Rare, but when you do make a bad diagnosis, it's not fun.

All my practice was involved with what Thay had taught us. [Editor's note: "Thay" is a Vietnamese term of respect for "teacher" and Paul uses it here to refer to Thich Nhat Hanh.] It really was. That's the most important thing, although early in my career I wasn't doing that. Of course, you always wish you could go back and redo things. You wish you had started the dharma ten years earlier.

My divorces, I've had two divorces, they were both kind of difficult. Ellen, my first wife, is just a wonderful person from the standpoint of being a mother. I am really glad that she's—if you ask anybody in this situation, "Would you rather have her be a great mother or a great partner?" Well, I'm raising these kids, I'd rather have her be a great mother, quite frankly, if I have a choice between the two. She is a great mother, but the marriage just didn't work. So the marriage ended, and it was sad.

That was an opportunity to practice. The second one was also just a mismatch. Things just happen. I haven't always had the best luck with women, let's say. [Paul laughs]

Carolyn: *Can you tell me what your daily practice is, your typical daily practice?*

Paul: I meditate, sitting meditation for about a minimum of 20 minutes, maximum of an hour and a half, that's probably how it goes. I don't ever do more than like 40 minutes at a time, so if I'm doing an hour and a half or so it's usually

a couple of times. I always do sitting meditation.

My real practice is the everyday stuff. When I go to the Wisconsin Athletic Club to work out, I'm practicing. When I'm ordering a latte at the Colectivo, I'm practicing. So many things I do, that I'm doing on my daily practice, is just practicing. I'm aware. It's become more seamless to me. I don't have to make an effort to remind myself, "Hey, be aware." I'm pretty much always aware now, that's really what my real practice is about.

The sitting meditation, the formal practice, has been a great place for me. And sometimes I have special practices that I need to do. I usually do loving kindness every day. I'll do some things like, for example I'm doing all this selfing, so I'm going to have to do the five remembrances next week a lot. A good antidote for selfing.

Carolyn: *[Carolyn laughs] I've screwed up your schedule here.*

Paul: And the 11 guidelines that are in the book that Thich Nhat Hanh wrote about the sutras, at the end of the eight realizations of the great beings, there's these 11 guidelines for life. They're terrific, they're terrific. Which is basically like, don't expect anything good to happen, all right? They sound like Pema Chodron could have written them.

Carolyn: *Don't expect applause?*

Paul: Don't expect applause. What do you expect, what's going on with you, you know?

Carolyn: *You have your sitting meditation everyday by yourself, and then you also come to the sangha and you're leading these meditations or participating in them.*

Paul: Right.

Carolyn: *That's in addition to your daily practice, and then it sounds like you're being mindful in your everyday activities.*

Paul: Yeah, yeah. Sometimes I'll have special practices. Actually, and it's really amazing that you can just learn new stuff; I'm doing this class on Wednesday nights on the brahmaviharas. One of Brother Phap Vu's colleagues, sister Ocean, she gave us an assignment. She said

figure out two or three times a day, you can figure out how to do it, something spontaneous happens you will decide is there suffering here and can I be in touch with it? And is their joy here and can I celebrate it?

I decided that my mindfulness bell would be my phone going off for texting. Because somebody always texted me two or three times a day, I don't get a lot of texts, but that's about right. When the phone goes off you have to answer it, but when a text is going off I decided to look at those things. Always something. You can always touch something. You can always find somebody who is suffering and you can extend compassion to them. Always, always. And there's always joy, there's always joy going on, and you can celebrate it. Always. It's always there. It's a very interesting practice if you can kind of do that.

You also realize that having discrimination between those two is not very good. Kind of like whatever you need to kind of do is what you do. In other words, one of the things that is part of our practice, as you know, is acceptance. You accept that things aren't going well and that there's suffering. Just accept that and you do the best you can. You also accept that there's joy. Just having that kind of acceptance has really been a terrific thing for me.

The other thing I've been doing a lot lately is—and this is part of my daily practice rather than sitting, although sometimes I do it while I'm sitting—is the idea of like versus dislike. The second of the four foundations of mindfulness, which is often called feelings, but it's actually more—I mean, the official fancy Sanskrit name is vedana—it's actually more a feeling tone; this I like, this I don't like. It happens very quickly. To kind of get into: Hmm, I'm having a like here, I'm having a dislike. Just noticing that has been very helpful for my practice.

Carolyn: *That happens all the time, liking and disliking things.*

Paul: Liking and disliking happens **all** the time. I really love—the most instructive part is when you can't figure out exactly why. Met somebody

in the hallway the other day. They were moving into our apartment building. I don't know, just one person moving in. There's a guy, he was moving his daughter in, who was moving from somewhere else. He was about my age, moving boxes in and stuff. I immediately liked the guy. Immediately! Before he said a word, I immediately liked him. Before he explained to me that he was moving his daughter in. What's that about? I don't know. Some kind of deep memory and that kind of thing. Especially those kinds of things that happen in our memory that are related to difficult moments.

So we get these things called implicit memories. Implicit memories are not obvious, we don't remember them, but they impact who we are. If you had a weird uncle who really had bad breath and he was giving you noogies and you just couldn't stand him, and he had a bushy mustache, but now you haven't seen him since you were four years old. You won't know why, but when you're an adult and people have bushy mustaches you immediately don't like that person. You don't know why, you don't know why. That's the kind of thing, and that's where a lot of this stuff goes. We can't really get to the root of why we like or dislike. We've been trying to do that, which is kind of one of those big things that Freudian psychotherapists like to do, I think is fraught with complete difficulty and, quite frankly, probably made up.

Carolyn: *In your practice of like/dislike, it's most important to notice that.*

Paul: Yeah, just to notice it.

Carolyn: *Just to notice it, and then you try not to judge it.*

Paul: Right.

Carolyn: *You try not to push it away—*

Paul: And you try not to figure it out. I like this guy who is moving in his daughter. Why? Does he remind me of somebody? Or do I like the principle of someone helping their daughter out? Which, of course, he's about my age, and maybe his daughter is about my daughter's age. I mean, is that what's going on?

So you go through all this mental talk. Drop it. Stop that. Like, just like, and notice

that you like. And notice that was very instantaneous and just how that is.

More important is to notice the dislike, though, because if he had been a person who I didn't like, I would at least have to notice that. Notice that it's also automatic and very much related to earlier life experiences that I no longer remember. It doesn't really matter, that was then, this is now. I can go beyond that initial dislike and say, "I have an initial dislike I don't have to go with." It's a very important part of the practice, I think.

The kind of thing that I rail against a bit is these things called gut feelings. I don't like that guy, I have a gut feeling about it. Well, I think your gut feeling is probably related to something that happened in your early childhood. Maybe not, or just it could even be when you're older, but it is a memory that you've forgotten. It may not be true, your gut feelings may not be correct. Always that Thich Nhat Hanh thing about: Am I sure, am I sure? The only answer you can possibly give to that is no. I mean, you're **never** sure. You'll always have to have a little bit of openness to that. I think that's really been a very big part of my practice is having that idea of openness to everything.

I mean, openness to everything makes, besides just being a really good way to treat people, makes life so much more interesting. You know? I see somebody playing with their dog out in the yard out there. I wonder how long have they had that dog? Wow, it's really something that this dog is around, this dog is really amazing! You're open to it. Not just one more thing.

Actually, I will go so far as to say that that kind of saved my pediatric practice, I mean my ability to practice. Because after 10 years of doing well child checks and seeing ear infections, it kind of got stale. Then I realized not every well child visit is the same. There's always something different about it and I would look for the differences. Not every ear infection is the same, not every kid who has asthma is the same, not every diaper rash is the same.

They're all a little bit different relating to the kid and the family and everything else. You could find those differences if you like. It makes life really a lot richer.

Carolyn: *Interesting! Your awareness and your looking for the differences helped your [medical] practice.*

Paul: Helped me stay in my medical practice. Eventually I did leave and become and do something else. But I have to admit that one of the reasons I did that was so I could do mindfulness in the office. All that time when I started it, when things started to get stale, I was also in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition. Being in the Plum Village tradition, noticing and meeting people where they are, you could see that, like I say, every ear infection was not the same as every other ear infection. It meant something different to this child in this family and to society as a whole.

Although I will say this relating to ear infections, one of the things that made me kind of get out of general pediatrics is I didn't want to treat ear infections anymore. It's not that I didn't want to treat them. I would diagnose them, but I wanted to say, "You know, you really don't have to use antibiotics here." People were like, "What are you talking about?" [Paul laughs]

Carolyn: *I didn't know that, I thought you had to treat them. You mean they just go away by themselves?*

Paul: Oh, yes.

Carolyn: *Well, that was even presented as an option by my—*

Paul: I know, right, it wasn't, was it?

Carolyn: *No. My son's pediatrician, I mean, she prescribed—*

Paul: Everybody does it, and everybody did it, and I think everybody still does it. The benefit is not zero using antibiotics, but it's very small. And the way that we have essentially complicated the biosphere is huge. We've made a lot of resistant organisms. We've made it a lot harder to treat the real serious illnesses because we're using antibiotics for trivial stuff. It got to be hard for me to say, I would treat them that

they wanted to, but it was like, "Have you thought maybe we don't really need to treat this?" And they acted like, "Excuse me? But we treated the one last year." I'd say, "Yeah, but new data."

Carolyn: *Wow, interesting. When you left it, and went into the behavior health, was that mostly you were hoping to bring mindfulness to —*

Paul: I was hoping to bring mindfulness, but also wanted to do good by people who were probably being neglected; families of kids with autism spectrum disorders in particular but also other mental illnesses. It was really something where, oh my goodness, I would say my main practice for my last ten years in developmental behavioral pediatrics was making parents feel that this wasn't their fault. That was what I did **all** the time. The pain of the guilt that people have for their kids having a mental illness or autism was huge. It was just huge. Some people connected with that and some didn't, but that was one of those things that I spent a lot of time with.

The medication part of it was quite easy, quite frankly. They would come to me for meds, too. I did get to do a little bit of mindfulness with people. I did get to do some mindfulness with kids.

Carolyn: *Is there one of the mindfulness trainings or a particular sutra that you feel has had the most impact on you?*

Paul: Probably the sutra on the eight realizations of the great beings. On your list of questions—interestingly, and I'm not saying I have an answer to this one either—is there a Buddhist belief that you have a problem with? And I'm not saying I have a problem with it except that it contradicts itself. The sutra on the eight realizations of the great beings is there's a lot of difficulties going on here, our best bet is to accept it. For example, one of the things that goes on with the sutra on the eight realizations of the great beings is the idea that human mind is always searching and is never satisfied. It doesn't say, "The human mind is always searching, it isn't satisfied until you practice,

then it will be satisfied." No. It says it's never satisfied. I said, "Well, that's a relief! I can give up trying to satisfy it. I accept that it's not satisfied, that's much better!"

The real problem I have with that is we have a lot of positive experiences, reinforcement experiences. The one of which is most prevalent is loving kindness practice. We have loving kindness we say to your friend or your teacher or even your enemy, may you be filled with loving kindness, may you be well, may you be peaceful, may you be happy. What about acceptance? I mean, shouldn't we be saying to the person, "Wherever you are, please be comfortable with it", as opposed to trying to elevate where they are into something else.

That's a conflict, I think, between two very common things that Buddhists talk about. For myself personally, I like more of the acceptance. I don't try to talk myself out of pain, I really don't. I don't try to talk myself out of discomfort or suffering except to just observe it deeply. Just observe it deeply is all I really need to do.

Carolyn: *Interesting. Is there any other Buddhist belief or something that you have trouble understanding, or had trouble and have more of an understanding now with?*

Paul: Oh, yeah, I think everybody has a problem with idea of no self, right? Everybody's got that. I remember when I was first starting to learn this, I was the same way. I'd say, "Well, this is ridiculous. Of course, I have a self." You know?

Otherwise, I could go to the IRS every April and say, "Hey, you can't tax me, I don't have a self." I don't think that would work because they would throw you in jail and say, "Well, you're not really in jail then, are you?" [Carolyn laughs] But as time has gone on, mostly just with practice, it is as real to me as sunrise. The idea and the concept that I do not have a self is not only very much a part of what I do, it's also a great comfort to me. Really a great comfort to me. I am much more outward.

It's why I'm doing this interview, I want people to hear this and see this. Even though

you're selfing me, you're selfing me. The idea that we really are just all connected that way, is just such a wonderful thing. It just takes practice. I don't think you can read a lot of sutras. You can read the diamond sutra, which talks about this all the time. You could read the heart sutra, which talks about this as well. They are okay things to read, but it's just practice. You practice and you practice and you practice.

I like to say that my practice has been, the first stage was probably what people would call emotional regulation. Emotional regulation, that's probably where I started. I wanted resiliency, I wanted to be able to deal with these difficult emotions, with this panic. But also low level anxiety I had in my regular day. I was an anxious person, besides having the panic disorder. I got that under control. Right around like 1995-96, I had been practicing for six or seven years, the panic attacks had really essentially almost all gone away. I said my last one was in '98. My regular day to day activity, I was much calmer. I said, "Okay, well, that's great. I did what I had to do. I think I just need now to practice for maintenance. I'm just going to practice. I don't care if I get anywhere. As a matter of fact, I'm just happy just staying where I am. I don't care, I'm just going to practice."

That's when it got—boy, that's when it got—I would just sort of say, "You know, I'm just gonna sit, and pay attention to what I eat, pay attention to how I walk, pay attention when I talk to people, and do all that sort of, but I don't care if I get anywhere, I don't really want to get anywhere." That's when all these great teachings that they've been talking about, the idea of interbeing, and no self, and nirvana, they all became really a fabric of what you're doing. The more I let go, the more that would—Yes and, of course, everybody had been telling me since I started practice, "Let go, let go." I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." But, I really need to get this done. I got it done and then I just let go and without any expectation that things would improve. Because I was pretty happy then and things just improved. Things just improved.

That's been the most amazing thing for me. This practice of kind of no practice. This sort of goalless practice. It's one of the three—there's three things that go along together in Buddhism—three dharma seals. The last dharma seal is called aimlessness, which people have a hard time with, which is you do the practice without any goal. That's what aimlessness is. Just do it! You don't have to come up with a reason why, you don't have to have an expectation, you just do it. That's what aimlessness is.

I don't know anybody who can start with aimlessness. People come in—that's one of those things that we've had debates with—that people come in and they say they've read somewhere that you should practice without wanting to practice, you should just practice. I say, "Who's going to do that?" People come in because they're anxious, and they're upset, and they have a dharma crisis of some sort. They're having difficulties with their families, they're having difficulties with their work places. They're not there to just kind of let everything go! They've got to work on these things. Yes, work on those things.

Once you've worked on those things, if you continue to practice: Wow, that was fabulous! And, if I can say, it's available to everybody! I think it really is. It's available to everybody. Just keep practicing, it'll work!

Carolyn: *Yeah, I think it's hard to come in without having goals. I mean, I don't know that anyone's ever come to the sangha and said, "My life is just going so great I thought I'd stop in."*

Paul: That's right. [Paul laughs]

Carolyn: *They don't say that.*

Paul: Everything is going well, I thought I'd do this other thing. Really, right, yeah, exactly.

Carolyn: *It seems like almost a prerequisite to come, wanting something different, getting some feeling that you're succeeding with getting some kind of emotional regulation or something before you can begin to let go of those kinds of goals, right?*

Paul: Well, that's my experience. I will say that I've also heard that from other people. I

don't want to universalize it too much, but that's definitely my experience. I came in goal oriented. I want to handle this very bad thing in my life, this panic disorder and this anxiety. I want to handle this, this is why I'm here. Like I say, maybe if I had been a little bit more goalless, it might have happened sooner, I don't know. But the whole concept that you would come in for no particular reason is just kind of silly.

I really rail against people who say, especially when they come into the Mindfulness Center for the first time, and they hear somebody from a reading or something say, "Well you should just practice without having any real goals." Like, what? [Paul laughs] I could be out learning French, at least I'll get somewhere. This thing about doing something with no goals. So, yeah, you do need to have goals to begin with.

Carolyn: *I've heard both that you should not have the goals, but also I've heard the saying "practice like your hair's on fire." How do you reconcile that?*

Paul: Yeah, I don't think you reconcile it. I think whatever works best for you. I think absolutely practicing like your hair's on fire is a great idea for a lot of people, but not everybody.

All these ideas that happened to me later on with my practice, with all this sort of acceptance and stuff, that's also a great practice, too. When you're ready for it, when you're ready for it. Again, back to this, I really believe that everybody can do it. And I **really** believe that you can do this without anybody—You need other people. The sangha is really important. But you don't need a teacher. You really don't need a teacher. The sangha could be your teacher, I really think that. As a matter of fact, I think I have seen more people have interference with their progress by being too attached to a teacher. I certainly don't want anybody when I'm teaching them to be attached to me.

Carolyn: *Certainly we know of other types of Buddhism where they say you have to have a*

teacher.

Paul: I know, right. I think they're wrong about that. Or they must be really, really skilled teachers. Because some people come to me and they say, "What should I do for practice?" And I want to say, "Well, here's your difficulties, why don't you try this, this and this. See how it goes, let me know." But I've never had the idea of like, "I know what's good for you, this is what you should do." People will do that, they'll say, "You need to do loving kindness for 20 minutes every day, then you need to do 10 minutes of tonglen, then you need to do 15 minutes of walking meditation, then you need to do 10 minutes of regular samata, you need to do that every single day. Do that." There are people who tell people that. I can't tell people that.

One of the things that I've found—which is really interesting to me as a pediatrician, I don't know if anybody else would get this so much—I got this from one of my students and it worked out really well. We all talk about people having these implicit memories that feel real bad. During my pediatric career—and your career as a parent, I'm sure—people talk about using time outs all the time. Some people did, some people didn't. I do know that many people, and they didn't get called on this too much, were relatively abusive with it. They got really ticked off at their kid, they'd make their kid, like a five year old, do a time out for 45 minutes or something. Horrible, horrible. And they would probably get an implicit memory about just sitting alone quietly someplace and how bad that felt. Come to the Mindfulness Center, what shall you do? Well, I want you to sit here quietly.

I realized after a while, there are a lot of people who probably were into that coercive situation with time outs that I was giving them the exact wrong thing to do. That was the exact wrong thing to do! So I fully embrace anybody doing whatever they want to do.

One of my favorite Q&As from Thay—this was about 2012 or so, 2013, fairly close to when he was having his stroke—somebody asked him during a Q&A, "Thay, I've really tried, I really

tried, I just can't do sitting meditation. I tried all kinds of methods, and cushions, and I just I really want to do it and it just doesn't work for me." Thay said, "Then don't do it." Then I thought they're going to kick him right out of the Zen master club. They're going to find out that he said this thing. He mentioned, of course, there are many, many ways to be mindful; you could lie down for your meditation, you could do walking meditation, you could do all kinds of things. Don't do sitting meditation if you can't do it. Which I thought was astonishing, to hear a Zen master actually say that. I believe that, too.

Carolyn: *In relation to that, it would be hard for somebody to start out being mindful in everyday life like you do without having some kind of meditation practice.*

Paul: Yes, right. I like to consider it sort of like doing—well, I'll use a sports analogy, I shouldn't do that too much, but—batting practice. You could say, "I know how to hit a baseball, I'm going to hit a baseball." But if the only time you go out and do it is during a regular game, you're not going to do it so well. Because you need a batting practice, you need to sit at a time and actually do the exercise when you're not actually involved with that. So yes, doing some sort of a mindfulness practice that's not necessarily related, especially to emotional regulation, is really valuable. And for the person who can't do sitting meditation, I would suggest they take up a body related thing like yoga, or lie down, or do walking meditation. Walking meditation is a wonderful thing. Walking meditation is just terrific.

Carolyn: *It seems like you've dedicated your life to spreading this message.*

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Carolyn: *What do you think Buddhism offers these immense problems we're having in the world with racism, and inequality, and poverty and other forms of—*

Paul: Yeah, right. A lot of that, quite frankly, is selfing.

Carolyn: *Selfing.*

Paul: It's selfing. It's wanting to be worried

about what is going to happen to me. What's happening to me, as opposed to what's happening to us. Or seeing the differences; so much of the racism is seeing the differences. I realize at the level where most people are, they should be dealing more with the emotional regulation part. What do you do when you're angry, what do you do when you're scared, how do you help connect with other people, reach out? I don't know that other people are doing that and it really saddens me that we can't reach those people.

Three times in my life—and it wasn't that I initiated it, they were initiated by other people in the police department—somebody in the police department, not an officer, said, "We think we could use mindfulness in the police, would you help? I said, "Sure, just tell me what to do. I'll be happy to come any time to do it." Then it never happened. I would still do it, I would love to be able to do this. One of the problems that mindfulness has is that it seems to be religious and people don't want to grapple with.

One of the problems that Tracy Johnson—do you remember Tracy Johnson?—had a problem with, was she loved her mindfulness practice but the Baptist preachers didn't think that was such a great idea, because it is this other thing.

Now the Greeks developed Buddhism. They developed Buddhism and they just called it a philosophy. It's not exactly one to one, but it's very close, including talking about mindfulness. It's called Stoicism. The Stoics are Buddhist. If you look at Stoic philosophy, it is almost identical to Buddhist philosophy.

Carolyn: Really?

Paul: But it's not a religion in the Greek, it was just a philosophy. And so everybody could be—they could do the gods, or they could do Christianity, and do whatever they wanted to, and for six centuries that's the way it was. So Stoics were there, they thought it was a philosophy. In the East, it was a religion. Because it has those trappings, we have problems.

Carolyn: So you're saying that most of the problems that we're experiencing at the root is too much selfing.

Paul: Yes.

Carolyn: Which leads to an us/them thing when you perceive someone else as the other. And that would be at a small level within a family—

Paul: Yeah, oh sure, absolutely.

Carolyn: Domestic violence, as well as between groups, between countries.

Paul: The political parties are just crazy with each other. Talk about selfing, oh my gosh. I really, really want to resist Trump bashing. I really, really want to resist all that stuff because I realize that it's just increasing my particular selfing as a liberal. It just kind of does that. It doesn't help me connect to these people that are suffering who are conservative. We often live in those echo chambers and I don't want to do that. I really don't want to do that.

Carolyn: It can be hard, though.

Paul: It's very hard, yeah. We, for whatever reason—and this was part of our class that we did—we do realize that it's kind of been much worse than it was, say, 1960 or so. It's really much worse, the party thing. I don't know what the answer is, except just to kind of do it as one person at a time, kind of do it that way.

Carolyn: That's why you're doing so much in terms of having a lot of classes and stuff.

Paul: Sure.

Carolyn: Do you have any advice for me or other people?

Paul: Just keep practicing. [Paul laughs] You know, when I say that, that's it. I don't want to tell you which kind of practice you should be doing. For example, you have an intense yoga practice. That's **absolutely** a wonderful thing. That's really a wonderful thing. All of those kinds of things that we have—for example, like versus dislike—they're all body related. Can I get a little bit neuroscience geeky here?

Carolyn: Oh, yes. That's one of your things.

Paul: Yeah, and that's another thing. So I'm teaching this dharma. I'm so fortunate that I'm a physician and I understand what these people

are talking about. And I can put it into a dharma context. You know, some of the stuff that is really old stuff that they talk about that is related to mental formations and stuff like that, they are so right on with what modern neuroscience says, it's scary. Almost like I wonder if the Buddha was really an alien and he had an MRI scanner in his little spaceship somewhere. [Paul laughs] Because it's just really crazy.

An area of your brain—which is my favorite area of the brain—called the insula, is the area that is involved with like versus dislike. Very quickly, because like versus dislike is something that happens very quickly, a hundred milliseconds. The insula is also the area where you gain body awareness. So I lift up my arm. The fact that I know that my arm is lifted up, it's all in my insula, that's the part of my brain that's doing that. It's also the part of the brain that's like and dislike. I think there's a real cross wiring there and there's really an embodiment.

The body is really the most important part of the four foundations of mindfulness, I think. I think people who do things like yoga, tai chi, pilates, etc., **if they're doing it well**, if they're really paying attention, they're doing enormous things for that idea of like versus dislike. They're doing an enormous practice for compassion, even though it's not directly a compassion practice. I really highly believe in that.

I do my own little 15 minute kind of stretch yoga thing. There it is, that's all I do, but I am aware of my body when I do other kinds of workout stuff. During the pandemic I got to do a **lot** of walking meditation. Couldn't go to the WAC [Wisconsin Athletic Club]. For exercise, I'll take a two mile walk, do a walking meditation. That's really something.

So there's lots and lots of ways to kind of do this. We should be able to find our own. I guess that's the other thing I'm going to say, I'm certainly not smart enough to figure out what any individual person wants to do. Maybe there are teachers who are that way, but I'm not. So that's why there are 50 practices in my

intravaganza, there's 50 practices to do.

Carolyn: *Related to that, do you think Buddhism is for everybody?*

Paul: I think mindfulness is for everybody. And I think if you're ready to go, if you actually do the mindfulness part and get yourself resiliency and emotional regulation, then I think working on selfing is also for everybody. However that is. Because like I said, I think, if we start doing this so that we know that we're a super-organism and we're all connected, then, oh, there's great hope for the world. There's great hope for the human race.

If we continue to be tribal, if we continue to see others who are different from us as enemies, something bad's gonna happen. Eco-catastrophe, nuclear war, you name it, so many bad things can happen. It all starts with seeing people as other. I guess what I'm really also saying is, I don't have a lot of confidence that you can intellectually get there. I don't think you can read about "other" as much as practice, then "other" becomes more reasonable.

I mean, I never thought, I certainly wouldn't have said this about George W. Bush, but when I sit on my cushion I see Donald Trump as my brother. I see him as he is somebody who has desires to be happy and avoid suffering just like I do. He's not different that way at all. He has anger, I have anger, it's the same sort of anger. He may have more than I do, but still it's the same thing, it's the same thing.

What I would hope is if somebody like Donald Trump was able to see self in other, wouldn't that be wonderful? That might be other people who kind of go along those lines. I don't know, we'll see.

Carolyn: *Do you mean that at the time that George Bush was president you had not—*

Paul: I had a harder time seeing him as my brother, yes.

Carolyn: *Because you weren't evolved as much in your practice?*

Paul: Yeah, I think so.

Carolyn: *Because that's a hard one.*

Paul: George Bush, you know, that was one of

those things, on Saturday Night Live or something. I think it was some show like that if it wasn't Saturday Night Live, after Trump got elected, they had somebody come on playing George Bush and say, "See, I don't look so bad now, do I?" [Carolyn laughs]

Carolyn: *Exactly. Yeah, when George Bush is criticizing stuff Trump is doing, you know that it's going even so much farther to the right.*

Paul: Yeah.

Carolyn: *Is there anything you'd like to add?*

Paul: I don't think so. I've been doing this for two hours, oh my goodness.

Well, I guess the one thing I'd like to add is this is my passion and I'm available to anybody. I want to do stuff, I want to teach. I've been given so many gifts. Oh, I guess another thing I want to say is all of the way I am right now—I couldn't say it's impossible, that I couldn't have gotten it another way—but I absolutely am better off because Jane is in my life. I mean I really couldn't do this without Jane being in my life. She is my happiness coach.

Carolyn: *How long have you been together?*

Paul: We've been together 11 years—no, I got to get this right, if I don't get this right—13 years.

Carolyn: *[Carolyn laughs] You're being recorded here.*

Paul: Yeah, I'm being recorded. 13 years, yeah, I can't get that wrong. If she looks to the recording and she says, "You said we were only together 11 years." 13 years. We've had our ups and downs, of course. She came into my life sort of accidentally, but it has worked out very, very well. She makes it easy for me to do this practice. Jane's always been really supportive of all this sort of stuff and a practitioner herself, so it really helps.

Carolyn: *Is that how you would say she helps the most is to support you in your practice?*

Paul: Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah, and she'll call me on my stuff, too. [Paul laughs] You're into this mindfulness, so why are you doing that? I have to sort of think about this, you know? [Carolyn laughs] She's been a great support that way.

Carolyn: *That's great!*

Paul: And again, luck! I've mentioned everything in this thing, I've just been unbelievably lucky. **Unbelievably lucky** to be in this particular position right here, June 18, 2020. Actually, I don't think that will change. If I had a bad diagnosis tomorrow, really horrible painful illness, I still think I'd be happy. I really do. I don't know for sure, but I still do. The only thing that would really be bad for me, I think, would be truly painful, that I might have a hard time with, is something happening to my kids. But anything else, certainly anything that happens to me personally. Gosh, I mean, how can I complain? Like, I'd be the most ungrateful person.

There is a good poem that Thay wrote. I think it's called Our True Heritage. And maybe you want to end with this because this is good. It goes like this, in the middle of the poem he says, "You, the richest person on earth. Stop being the destitute child." Stop. I mean, we all have this incredible precious human birth. So often we're moping around like we've been given this snail birth. I don't know, maybe snails are happy, I shouldn't say that. They might be just perfectly happy.

This is the gift of the Buddha, this is the **absolute** gift of Thich Nhat Hanh, who gives the best I could know about anybody who took these Eastern teachings and brought it to the West.

Carolyn: *Well, I thank you very much for your time, Paul. I really thank you for all you've done for the Mindfulness Center and spreading the word. Thanks, I'm going to stop the recording now. Thank you.*

Paul: Thanks, Carolyn, that's wonderful.