

**Author:** Daniel Wolff

**Title:**

**About the Author:** Daniel Wolff 9/9/08 Ethnography project proposal  
Who: The Clear Sky Zen Group  
What: The group is composed of students and residents from the Champaign-Urbana area from varying Buddhist traditions. The group meets and practices mediation in a Zen style. There are also tea ceremonies held after meditation in order for the group members to meet one another.  
Where and When: The group meets every Wednesday at the McKinley foundation at 809 S 5th street from 6:30 to 8:30 pm. The group also has a webpage, which is: <http://www.clearskyzen.org/index.htm>  
Why: I have always been interested in the religions of Zen and Buddhism. I would love to learn how to meditate properly, and would certainly love to meet individuals who are involved strongly with the practices derived from the two religions.

**Keywords:**

**Abstract:**

Daniel Wolff

9/22/08

English Rhetoric 105

John Grisowld

Annotated Bibliography

Brown, Anna. "The Gifts of Zen Buddhism : An Interview With Robert

E. Kennedy. (Interview)." America 14 Oct. 2000. This article is an interview with Robert E. Kennedy, and American Catholic priest, as well as a Zen Master. Anna Brown interviews Kennedy on the basics of Zen, how Zen compares to Christianity, and why he chose to practice both religions. The article was published in October of 2000 in "America" magazine. The magazine has a history dating back to 1909, when the Jesuits of America decided to publish a magazine focusing mainly on religious views, opinions, and commentary, but also include reports of news, arts, etc. The magazine's audience is can be both a layperson as well as a religious professional. This article sums up everything I could possibly need for my report. For one, it gives me access to tons of wonderful quotes from a man who is both educated in Western and Eastern philosophy. Also, the article shows how two seemingly different religions both stem from a very similar teaching. And finally, the article is simply informative of how one can study, and live a Zen way of life. I hope to quote Kennedy throughout my paper, and possibly refer this article to the members of the Clear Sky Zen Organization. By referring this article to the members of my sub-culture they may evaluate their own insights and opinions in comparison to Kennedy's. This may offer them the ability to give me more thorough, direct, and thought-out answers to my interview questions. Still on the subject of interviews, this article gives great interview questions such as "What is "enlightened" living?" and, "What does it mean to study Zen?"

Hutchinson, Joseph. "A tangibly intangible journey: experiential learning via Zen philosophy & general semantics." ETC.: A Review of General Semantics July 2006. This article gives great definitions of the basic practices and philosophies of Zen Buddhism. Some of the defined practices include, Experiential learning, Metaphorical Pathways, and Haiku. The article will allow me to see the differences between Buddhism and Zen. The article is valid due to its publishing in a well-respected magazine targeted towards academics. All of the articles are peer reviewed, and all somehow relate to the study of General Semantics.

Roy, David L. "Awareness bound and unbound: realizing the nature of attention." Philosophy East and West Apr. 2008. This article looks deeply into the Buddha's ancient words attempting to gain insight from them. Various passages from ancient texts are quoted. A relatively skeptical analysis, looking to point out contradictions in the teaching, but Roy keeps an open mind and is willing to look beyond his own biases. This article is valid due to its wide variety of quoted material and its being published in Philosophy East and West. This magazine is dedicated to informing western readers of Eastern philosophies and practices. The information in this article will give

great background history of Buddhist teachings, along with many quotes said by Buddha himself.

Roy, David L. "Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Reorienting Global Interdependence. (Book review)." *Philosophy East and West* Jan. 2008. This article, also by David L. Roy gives an overview on a series of books by Peter D. Hershock. These books discuss how to become enlightened in the modern age, and consider ways of applying the Buddha's teachings to contemporary issues, especially technology. This article is valid due to its being published in *Philosophy East and West*. This magazine is dedicated to informing Western readers of Eastern philosophies and practices, while relating them to Western ideals. The information in this article provides great insights on how Buddhism can and is still applied to modern lifestyles.

Schaeffer, Pamela. "So ancient and so new. (personal account of attending a Zen Buddhist sitting; and other Catholics who have been involved in Zen meditation)." *National Catholic Reporter* 3 Dec. 1999. This article is a firsthand account of a catholic woman participating in a Zen meditation ceremony. She gives details of what it felt like to meditate for the first time, how the meditation ceremony was similar and different from catholic practices, and finally describes why Buddhism is becoming increasingly popular in Christian culture. This article is published in a well-known weekly magazine providing opinions and analysis of various religious viewpoints and practices. This article will help me distinguish between Eastern and Western philosophies, understand more deeply the meditation ceremony I participate in, and hopefully allow me to see possibly why the members of the Clear Sky Zen Organization chose Zen Buddhism over other religious faiths.

Web Based Research:

Works Cited

Biema, David V., and Jean Mcdowell. "Buddhism in America." *TIME*. 13 Oct. 1997. 28 Sept. 2008 . This site is simple in that it provides a good article on how Buddhism has spread to America and how it has affected the pop-culture in general. The article is a great source of information and has a lot of great quotes to possibly use in my final paper. The site is of course valid, because it was originally and article in *TIME* magazine.

Boeree, George. "The History of Buddhism." *An Introduction to Buddhism*. 1999. Shippensburg University. 25 Sept. 2008 . This site has all the information one could wish to know about the basics of Buddhism ranging from the life of Siddhartha Guatama, to the basics of Buddhist meditation. The site contains a table of contents with

links to various passages about different aspects of Buddhist culture. The site was published by George Boeree, and is labeled ".edu." He is from Shippensburg university.

Buddhanet.net. 1992. 29 Sept. 2008 . This site is a wonderful resource to find just about anything you could want concerning Buddhism. To start out, the site offers a Buddhist studies tab, which gives everything ranging from meditation guides, studies for schools, texts and scriptures, to the history and culture of Buddhism. Another tab is entitled "world Buddhist direcotry" This tab gives links to all the countries where Buddhism is practiced. When one clicks on a country, (America for example) one finds what seems to be a directory of all Buddhist temples, monasteries, and organizations the entire country has to offer. The next tab is entitled Buddhazine Magazine. This is Buddhanet's own online magazine. his magazine has wonderful articles about women in Buddhism, art and Buddhism, it even has a kids page. I'm not sure how often the magazine is updated however. As if the website couldn't get any better, the next tab is entitled "Book Library" and within this tab lies an entire library of Buddhist texts by ancient and contemporary authors. What's even more incredible is that you can access most of these texts through downloading them rather than by going to a library. The last tab on the page is entitled "File Library/Resources" this section displays a huge selection of multimedia downloads that one can view right on their computer. There are movies, articles, audio files, etc. The material covered ranges from Buddhist artwork to Zen Studies. The website also offers a "Google" search tab, so one can find what they are looking for easily and efficiently. The site is copyrighted and has a lot of contact information available. There are no specific authors listed for the site, but I believe there are authors listed for various articles on the webpage.

"Buddhism and Christianity." Buddhist Tourism. 2007. 29 Sept. 2008 . I would use this site for the articles written on the comparisons between Buddhism and other religions (especially christianity). The site also gives information on Buddhist basics, countries, temples, festivals, etc. It is, in essence, a tour guide on the world of Buddhism. The site seems valid due to its professional layout, plethora of information, and copyright date.

Crabtree, Vexen. "Criticism of Buddhism." Bane of Monotheism. 14 Nov. 2004. 28 Sept. 2008 . This site gives criticism to the religion of Buddhism, (and all other major religions for that matter). The site makes some good points and covers all major aspects of most religions, but the points seem to be of personal opinion and are rarely back up with creditable evidence. Im not entirely sure this site is valid, but it may contain some quotes, which i'd be very hesitant in

using.

Lewis, G. R. "Buddhism in America." Buddhist Faith Fellowship of Connecticut. 28 Sept. 2008 . This site is a good source of information discussing the philosophies and practices of Buddhism, but I would mainly use the site for its section on Buddhism in America. This section gives a brief history and possible causes for why Buddhism has been steadily growing in popularity in America. The site seems valid due to its listing of page authors and also gives good contact information.

Sotozen-net. 25 Sept. 2008 . This site is a wonderfully organized source of information concerning Soto Zen Buddhism. The site includes history, teachings, meditations, and even current news. Clear Sky Zen Organization practices Soto Zen, and I believe its important to get all the information I can about this particular branch of the practice. The site does not list an author or copyright date, but I emailed the the site about this information and hopefully they will respond.

"Speaking for the Buddha? Buddhism and the media." Institute of East Asian Studies. 2005. Berkeley University. 29 Sept. 2008 . This site has a very lengthy article speaking about Buddhism in the media. The article touches on everything from Ipods to television and so on and has quotes from various speakers. The site is run by Berkeley University and has other information about Buddhism and East Asian cultures. The site is valid given its ".edu" reading and is also sponsored by a respectable university.

"Zen Buddhism." Matsubayashi Ryu Karate- Sydney. 25 Sept. 2008 . This site is mainly advertising karate in Australia, but contains a link that has great information about Zen Buddhism. It gives a brief history, basics of meditation, koans, etc. There is no author listed for the site, so I am a bit skeptical of its validity. The information is plentiful however, and I will compare it to other sources on the internet.

#### **Initial Exercises:**

Daniel Wolff  
10/11/08  
Interview transcription

I interviewed the president of the Clear Sky Zen Organization, Holly Holmes. She is going for a doctorate in musicology and is also a jazz vocal performer. She is twenty-three years old and is not currently practicing any specific religion.

Daniel Wolff: First question, what is your name, and how do you spell it?

Holly Holmes: (laughs) Holly Holmes, H-O-L-L-Y H-O-L-M-E-S.

Q: What is your title in and out of Clear Sky Zen Organization (CSZO)?

A: I guess I have many titles...I'm a wife, I'm a voice teacher at the Central Conservatory of Illinois, but within CSZO I am President.

Q: How long have you been affiliated with CSZO?

A: Um...three years, well this is my third year. So, this is my second year of being President, and my first year I was a member.

Q: How did you become President?

A: Our President moved out of town and because I was always good at organizing things I think I was more or less voted to be the next President.

Q: So you are President basically for organizational purposes?

A: yes, definitely more for organizational purposes than for philosophical or spiritual purposes. We don't like to have a defined leader of the group and we try to make it a group more on equal footing. But some people have just had...various or longer experiences than others so they may have more advice to give, but you know someone who has been meditating for hardly any time at all may have just as many insights as someone who has been meditating for a long time, so for that reason we don't have a specified leader of the group.

Q: What made you decide to join CSZO? Have you been affiliated with groups that were similar beforehand?

A: I had been taking a yoga class when I was living in Michigan. I did that for about a year, and that was of interest to me as a musician to try to find the most relaxed positions for singing. I think that was really important for me at that time, but it was also great for learning different approaches to breathing. Especially as a singer, breathing is like...you know you have to breathe correctly. That's kind of the foundation to singing anyway. But um...it was during that year of the class where it was sort of introduced to me where breathing...for me had always been the foundation for singing but it could also be a foundation for just attaining different states of consciousness and

meditation in particular. So when I moved here, I was kind of doing yoga on my own at that point, and I didn't feel like I necessarily wanted to do that in a group situation anymore but I hadn't had that many experiences with meditation even though I had tried a little bit on my own just from the small things that they would say at the end of yoga classes. Um, but really it was because a friend of mine was already a member and encouraged me to come because of a few conversations we had had about meditation specifically what it had done for him as a musician.

Q: So a lot if it has a musical basis.

A: Mhm. And we both, in that conversation I had talked about, talked about feeling like even though we had never studied meditation nor had consciously tried meditation that much, people in their lives have already experiences somewhat like a meditative state. Like we talked about, when your really...in the moment and you really focus while your playing music it feels like a different state of consciousness and could be considered maybe a meditative state. And so, for us it was a particular interest to practice meditation on its own and see how that could influence like focus when your practicing and you know...other issues of music.

Q: I myself am a musician and I know exactly what you're talking about. When you're really focused on your music, absolutely nothing that isn't music comes into your field of consciousness.

A: Yeah, I'm sure acting is the same idea.

Q: Yes, pretty similar. You mentioned the present moment. Like, when you get into that higher state of consciousness you're in the present moment. What is it about the present moment that you think is worth achieving? What is in the present moment as opposed to the normal state of consciousness we all live in?

A: Well, I think what the Buddhist would say is that everything else is an illusion because...if you're thinking in the past it's not a direct experience anymore.

Q: You're not actually in the past...you just thinking of the past in the present moment...

A: yes, so you're attributing maybe judgment to that past experience, and if you're thinking of the future then your playing out different possibilities so neither of them are direct experiences. So I think the present moment is an opportunity to experience something directly and then to see what your relationship is to that direct

experience. And so, part of it is also trying to take like the things that you would normally use to make judgment on past experiences or wonder about future experiences is almost like taking that ego kind of out of the moment...and just experiencing the moment as it is without trying to add something extra to it. And I think that through time with all the different cultural experiences we have, I think all the layers we have...were able to peel those away because we don't do that very often. Our present moment is always overlaid with all of these other issues.

Q: Do you think it's helped you as a musician like since you've started meditating?

A: I do. I think I still have a long ways to go, but yeah, I've been more aware of thought patterns that I have during practicing that I'm trying t break myself of and that's a huge thing because a lot of people practice very very differently than they actually perform... which can be good, it depends on how you're structuring it but I don't think I have those same thought patterns during performance so why do I let them persist during practice.

Q: So, do you consider yourself a Buddhist?

A: I don't tend to consider myself a Buddhist probably because... because uh...less of how I actually feel about being called a Buddhist, I think to myself that would be fine but I feel that there's such a misunderstanding I think with people in general. A lot of people I think don't really know what Buddhism is so...I don't know I find if I pronounce myself as a certain kind of thing I would just get impatient having to explain what it is to someone else which is probably very "un-Zen" of me to be impatient while trying to explain something to someone else. But I think the other thing is also I like to read about other different kind of philosophies. Mostly Taoism, which I think, has a lot of parallels. So I think that, I'm not really concerned about what I label myself enough to have chosen one name that covers everything I would believe in.

Q: So you would say that you don't define yourself within the bounds of one religion.

A: Yes, exactly, but I think that I enjoy just drawing as much from it as I can.

Q: Were you raised any particular religion?

A: I was briefly raised as a Presbyterian, but my Dad stopped going to church when I was maybe three, maybe four and I have two older

siblings and my mom just got tired of trying to take the three of us. And so, she wanted to keep going but she just got real fed up with us...I mean to deal with us (laughs). Not that we were a big problem or anything but I think she just got tired of it and didn't really want to go by herself anymore. So I honestly don't really remember anything. My parents never talked about religion at home, ever. So, I mean I wasn't taught anything.

Q: That's kind of nice in a way...

A: Well, I like it because I really had a clean slate and I noticed a lot as a kid how many people assumed just because I am white, that I must be Christian as well. And that really bothered me after a while. I was like, how come you didn't look at me and wonder if I was Jewish. I mean like, that's perfectly possible...or anything else really. Nowadays you can't guess what someone is by their appearance. I think that those experiences being really young actually turned me off more to Christianity because I thought it was so bound up with assumption, and a lot of people would say to me when I was a kid, not realizing that I didn't consider myself a Christian, and that if you don't...usually they were saying it in the context of if you're not Christian...but if you don't have religion you don't have any basis for ethics or moral values. I thought, you know most people are in a family structure when they're growing up and I'm pretty sure that they learned ethics and moral values through interacting with the people around them and not through religion alone. And so, you know it pushed me further and further away from the idea of Christianity because I hadn't been brought up by it but I was surrounded by it and I would see kind of the...preconceptions that a lot of people had that I didn't have because I wasn't taught anything (laughs). And so, it certainly didn't make me want to ever you know, go back to our church and learn anything about it because everything about it seemed stuck in one idea of what religion was. So kind of stayed away from spiritual and philosophical ideas for a long time mostly because of that experience when I was younger. And I remember being really rebellious too with um the pledge of allegiance, that I wouldn't say it...

Q: Under God...

A: Because it had that in it. I said, well you know, our country applies to everyone and I don't believe in God, you know, does that mean I'm not an American? I definitely am...so that's not fair to include that (laughs).

Q: When did you actually start finding interest in different philosophical ideas, or religions, or spiritual practices since...it seems

like you were so against the idea and these people who were telling you what religion was?

A: well I was necessarily against religion itself it was just the people or like the ideas of worshipping together being the only way. Like one of my favorite lyrics from a tune is from this sting tune and he says... o gosh I'm going to have to stop and think of it for a second..."men go crazy in congregations, they only get better one by one." It's perfect; it totally sums up my childhood I think. I felt like if people would stop relying on someone else to tell them what their religion tells them their supposed to be and they should actually just study on their own and sit and think about it they may actually have a new insight what teachings or books or you know things say. So, I think that's why meditation eventually appealed to me because it was in a group setting so you have some sort of camaraderie but you also have those really reflective moments where all you have to do, you have no other responsibilities, you don't have to dress up and look nice like you would for church or wherever, you don't have these other things you have a responsibility towards, you simply have your moment where you sit there and think...or not think. And I think that I first became interested but didn't really do anything about it in high school, I had a philosophy class in high school and we were supposed to cover all of the major religions slash philosophies and it included Taoism and Buddhism and both sections in that class really appealed to me. What was also humorous to me about that class, I find it funny now, but I was kind of angry then, um the teacher came down on me for not knowing about Christianity

Q: You specifically?

A: Me specifically, like in front of the rest of the class, and there were people in our class who weren't Christian. We had a lot of immigrants in or town from Laos and Cambodia that were fleeing and trying to find a peaceful place to live and came to our town. I think there were a few Jewish people in our class and everyone else besides that I think was Christian, Catholic, or Roman Catholics, couple of Fundamentalist Christians, it was very diverse. I remember asking several questions because I was excited to get to the Christian section cause I felt like, I am surrounded by all these Christians and I haven't read the bible, and I don't know a lot of things that...you know there's always Christian references in literature, plays, movies that sometimes I feel a little left out and I don't necessarily know the reference. There was one [the teacher] thought should have been obvious because it was always in literature and I raised my hand and I said, "you know I don't know what that reference is." He just like... he basically told me I was ridiculous and like I should have picked this up through living in the culture, because its primarily Christian

around me, and how could I not get this reference. And I was like " You know you're not ripping on any of the monk kinds sitting next to me or the Jews. Of course the Jews both knew what the reference was, so I was like great, I'm the only one that didn't get it but it was just so interesting to me that someone who would put together a class like that would um would want to give such equal times to all religions would then be so closed minded to someone who had grown up outside the dominant you know, religion was. The pushed me even more towards investigating Buddhism and Taoism and particularly not investing it in Christianity which maybe you know that kind of comment from him should have pushed me to actually learning a little bit more about Christianity but it was not very inspiring at all.

Q: I can understand that...so a lot of practices in meditation especially in the Buddhist philosophy is to attain enlightenment. So one, are you trying to achieve enlightenment? And two, what does it mean to you, what does it mean just technically. In other words, what does it mean to be enlightened?

A: Well, it's funny, there's a little game of semantics I think around the whole concept of enlightenment anyway. Our particular lineage of Soto-Zen Buddhism refers more to everyone already being enlightened so it's less about attaining this thing that you don't have, but more about finding the enlightenment that you already do have. And so it's just kind of experiencing something that you already have and probably have already experienced, but in a very obvious and more direct way. So for me if you...yeah if you phrase it that way, I mean technically yes, I am hoping to attain enlightenment, but even putting it that way is a little wrong I would still say, I don't know... I'm on the path to enlightenment, cause I feel like...I think for like a Zen monk they're looking to permanently be in this state of enlightenment, and for me I'm a little bit doubtful of how feasible that is when you're not a monk (laughs) and you're living in the modern world not on a mountain side. You have fewer responsibilities, of course there's always going to be responsibilities... getting food, finding food, preparing food, cleaning yourself and all those kind of things. I think compared to my schedule the number of different people I'm expected to interact with and given day, it's different than I think how the teachings were originally written because I think they were mostly written for people who were dedicating their lives to studying, meditation and nothing else. So how do we take these teachings and make them work in a modern world? So yeah, I do think about the attainment of enlightenment but I'm still undecided as to whether its something that I'm going to be able to maintain in every single moment or whether its going to be something that I can call upon in certain parts of my day to fall back

on. Um, I'm not sure, but I do feel like I've definitely experienced moments of enlightenment so it's more about trying to make them more consistent.

Q: When you say you've experienced these moments of enlightenment, what is it like?

A: it's certainly similar to the idea we were talking about of being in the "zone feeling like everything else drops away.

Q: So is it that the world itself seems to become, and when I say "the world" I mean your daily interactions, your problems, your concerns, about the past and future, does that seem to fade away?

A: Yeah, id say my expectations is that um things weren't there anymore, that is really how I felt, it was more like, that stuff is like still there but not occupying 99% of my concern. It's still there but it's almost like, disconnected from you, you know. It's a part of you but not the part of you, not all of your conscious thought.

Q: So do you feel more or less...alive in that state of dropping away from what you consider to be your life?

A: I cant say more alive, but more aware.

Q: A couple technical questions, what is the name of the altar that you bow to with the Buddha statue and the incense and the flower? Is there a name for it?

A: Probably but I don't know it (laughs).

Q: is there significance to the candle or the incense?

A: I don't know of a specific significance other than that its just tradition. It developed in a time where we didn't have electricity so I think the candle could have been very deliberate as simply having a source of light, but I think candles seem soothing in some way. They seem to have an image of calmness and consistency. And the incense is just another way to...I think we live in a very sight-dominated society and it's just another way to make us use all five senses instead of ignoring a lot of our senses we choose not to use.

Q: What is the name of hand position you use while meditating?

A: that hand position is the cosmic mudra. Obviously that's not a Japanese word and that word originated in the Buddhism that came out of Thailand and India, but um, it has to deal with Chakras, you

know the different power centers of the body, and that one in particular is somewhere around the belly button and talk about centeredness which is obviously something you're trying to achieve in the form and posture of seated meditation. The circle shape of the hand position is also an important thing in just feeling a non-stop connection of the body, so it's kind of a symbolic shape that way.

Q: Why do Buddhists bow?

A: A lot of people that come from other religions that have bowing and kneeling in it a lot if it seems to me and I don't really know this accurately, its paying tribute to something higher than yourself. In Buddhism you could think of it similarly, but its not as much paying tribute to the Buddha as it is an acknowledgement that you are part of something bigger and the bowing is sort of symbolic of that, that you're not the greatest. There's always going to be something larger than just you, so it's not necessarily the Buddha, some people just use it as a moment to acknowledge the idea of the Buddha and his teachings that's a common thing, but its not like bowing to the Buddha. It's more of your willingness to give up your ego.

Q: You used the term "ego," what do you mean by that?

A: I would say ego is something where you're putting yourself before anything else.

Q: So when you're in ego, you're putting yourself before anyone else. It's a type of self-centeredness in a way.

A: yes, so then bowing would be giving up your concern for self-centeredness and letting that go.

Q: How has Buddhism changed you as a person, how has that helped you grow, how has that changed your life basically?

A: Wow, I think I guess one of the first things would be, uh, there's so many ways that you can cheat yourself, like you know when you're first sitting, there's a lot of mind games that happen, it's like your making deals with yourself, you're thinking "if I sit for another five minutes, I will reward myself." I think getting through my first year of meditation there was a lot of like, realizing little things I was doing that was similar to that, like thought patters of making deals with oneself, that you become conscious of. And so, I think you become more honest with yourself in your own evaluation of like if you set out on a goal, I feel like I've become more honest of whether I've attained that goal or not (laughs) cause I'm just more conscious of the thought patterns that had been going on in my own head that I

had been less aware of. Um, and then uh, I think it was really meaningful for me to experience that, but it was also trying to apply the practice, and some of the principles of meditation into relationships in my life. Like um, what does it really mean to listen to someone else? Like when you have a conversation, it's hard to listen to someone and think of the next thing you're going to say. Already that's two things that you're doing simultaneously. And, in meditation you're trying to just do one thing, and how to do you apply that to, you know, conversations and communication between anyone in your life, it could be a professor, boy friend, girlfriend, spouse. It's like a new kind of level of listening for me I kind of feel like opened up just in trying to shut off that whole inner monologue of "what's the next thing I'm going to say to keep this conversation going?" A lot of different things...I used to hate standing in lines at the grocery store or post office, now I feel like I have those moments to relax cause there's nothing else expected of me, all I can do is stand in this line, all I can do is sit at the bus stop, so great. I'm just gonna sit at the bus stop, this is fantastic and it's funny cause I've always felt that way about traveling, I mean I love driving in the car even if its for a trip I don't want to take I will love driving in the car because nothing is expected of me. I can't write a paper while I'm driving...you can't do that, so it's great.

Q: So you think your going to stick with this or is there a next step?

A: um, I don't know, I've done a little research on other styles of meditation, um that I am sort of interested to try. There's one that was inspired my transcendental meditation, I really don't know that much about it honestly but um, there's actually a style that's in opposition to transcendental meditation, and the reason this person didn't like transcendental meditation was because um, they felt it was elitist because the teacher of it charged four thousand dollars to learn it, and you have to commit to several months. They thought that you know, does that mean that the poor of the world of the world aren't worthy of learning transcendental meditation because they don't have the money? Like is that really ethical for a spiritual practice? Yeah so, this guy I guess had been studying transcendental meditation for five or six years, and was a big believer of it but began to see the weaknesses of it that, you know, there were plenty of people in the world who couldn't afford to do that. So he kind of established his own kind of school of meditation, I guess. I don't remember what it's called but um, there's a very specific method in the beginning that's different from other styles of meditation and of course you have to pay for this too, so I'm interested to see how different it is from the meditation I already know but I think its only...you download this booklet and there are a few CD's, and every day and every evening you sit for thirty minutes based on the principles they try to teach

you, and I'm thinking I might do this, it's pretty inexpensive, it's like less than fifty dollars or something. So, I'm interested in investigating different approaches to meditation you know, and see how it compares to what I already do and see if it's more or less successful. You know, if its beneficial I could bring it into the practice we already have.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to share?

A: Something that fascinates me about the lineage of Buddhism itself, and maybe this is where my cynicism comes in a little bit is that the tradition of it is passed down from teacher to student, but part of me feels like only you could know yourself, if your at an enlightened stage, and I find it fascinating that Buddhism is based on this handing down and having someone telling you you've reached enlightenment, but I feel like, "How does someone else know?" I'm just fascinated by that aspect and I'd like to see if I could read more about that, I'm not sure where I would go to specifically read more about that.

Q: Well thank you Holly for giving allowing me to interview you.

A: You're very welcome. Thank you.

Daniel Wolff

10/14/08

Condensed Interview

[My name is] Holly Holmes, [and] within Clear Sky Zen Organization (CSZO) I am President. [I am President] definitely more for organizational purposes than for philosophical or spiritual purposes. We don't like to have a defined leader of the group and we try to make it a group more on equal footing.

I had been taking a yoga class when I was living in Michigan. So when I moved here, I was kind of doing yoga on my own, and I didn't feel like I necessarily wanted to do that in a group situation anymore but I hadn't had that many experiences with meditation... A friend of mine was already a member [of CSZO] and encouraged me to come. We both talked about feeling like even though we had never studied meditation nor had consciously tried meditation that much, [we had] already experienced somewhat like a meditative state.

I think getting through my first year of meditation there was a lot of... thought patters of making deals with oneself that [I became] conscious of. It was also trying to apply the practice, and some of the principles of meditation into relationships in my life. When you have a

conversation, it's hard to listen to someone and think of the next thing you're going to say. And, in meditation you're trying to just do one thing, and... you apply that to...conversations and communication between anyone in your life.

I don't tend to consider myself a Buddhist probably because...less of how I actually feel about being called a Buddhist...but I feel that there's such a misunderstanding... with people in general. But I think the other thing is also I like to read about other different kind of philosophies. I was briefly raised as a Presbyterian, but my Dad stopped going to church when I was maybe three, maybe four... I have two older siblings and my mom just got tired of trying to take the three of us. I noticed a lot as a kid how many people assumed just because I am white, that I must be Christian... And that really bothered me after a while. I think that those experiences... actually turned me off more to Christianity because I thought it was so bound up with assumption... and that if you don't [consider yourself to be a Christian]... you don't have any basis for ethics or moral values.

I wasn't necessarily against religion itself, it was just the people or like the ideas of worshipping together being the only way. So, I think that's why meditation eventually appealed to me because it was in a group setting so you have some sort of camaraderie but you also have those really reflective moments where all you have to do...[is] have your moment where you sit there and think...or not think.

I am hoping to attain enlightenment, but even putting it that way is a little wrong. I would still say... I'm on the path to enlightenment. I'm a little bit doubtful of how feasible [enlightenment] is when you're not a monk and you're living in the modern world not on a mountainside. [B]ut I do feel like I've definitely experienced moments of enlightenment so it's more about trying to make them more consistent.

**Question:**

Daniel Wolff

9/11/08

English Rhetoric 105

John Griswold

Different Roots, Same Tree

Upon discovering The Clear Sky Zen Organization, I knew I had hit the jackpot. The group focuses on the deepening of awareness and compassion within ourselves through practicing the art of meditation in a predominantly Zen style. I was astounded at how different the ideals of this group were in comparison to community in which I had grown up. I have always held a slight resentment toward my hometown and its way of living, and found this to be a great opportunity to explore a lifestyle backed by the ideas of love, peace,

and happiness, rather than the ideas of money, greed, and hatred. In other words, I decided to research this organization with the hope that my preconceived notions about how humans live and interact would change, and I would finally be immersed in sub-culture that contradicted the negative dynamics of my hometown, and refuted the ideals behind my upbringing.

I grew up in a modestly large home in Northbrook, Illinois, a suburb about forty minutes north of Chicago. My house was located in the northwest corner of town, and was a stones throw away from a large forest preserve. The house itself was beautifully decorated (thanks to my mother) and had everything from a grand piano in the living room, to a 50" LCD TV in the family room. I had a very privileged upbringing, with an abundance of material possessions, two loving parents, and a younger brother named Brandon. To anyone, It certainly would seem like I had it all, but if one saw beyond the plush couches, computers, adorable family photos, and priceless China, my life was shockingly different than it appeared.

To begin with, my house was always very loud. One parent or the other was always yelling, or on the verge of doing so. Daily, I would wake up to the shrill screams of my mother, yelling out of pure rage and fear about the loss of some insignificant object, or blowing some unimportant event out of proportion. Even in the relatively calm moments, there was always a strong undercurrent of tension. This constant, unneeded stress, made it nearly impossible to relax within the walls of my home, and forced my family to indulge in our material wealth as means of escape rather than use our possessions for entertainment or convenience. I particularly indulged in the guitar and the acts of writing and drawing. Even to this day, I still look at those activities as a way to shut myself out from others, and listen to my thoughts. Now, do not get me wrong, I love my family with all of my heart, I'm just recalling the events of my youth as I had witnessed them, nothing more.

The town of Northbrook held roughly 30,000 residents. Most of these residents were wealthy, white, Jewish, and raising families. My family dynamics were not uncommon in my town; in fact, I would go as far as to say that my family situation was considered "normal." I found the main problem to be simply that the people of Northbrook had more wealth than they knew what to do with, and instead of working out their problems by interacting with each other, they threw money at the things that made them uncomfortable hoping for a quick fix. The failures of family relationships in Northbrook created great dissonance between all those who inhabited the town. It seemed everyone wished for everyone else to fail, so they could find a reason to gloat about their seemingly paltry existences. One could never feel truly comfortable around others Northbrook, and from this realization, I felt the need to think about the dynamics between people. These thoughts grew into a love for philosophy, psychology,

and sociology.

Most residents of my town looked for salvation in one of Northbrook's many Synagogues. I, myself attended Hebrew school for five years, topping it all off with a Bar Mitzvah. I did not particularly enjoy my schooling in Torah, but I found a deep love and reverence for Jewish culture. I think this may be because my entire family would always gather for the Jewish high holidays, eat and drink a whole lot, and for a few days, truly love one another.

I went to Glenbrook North High School, which is in my opinion, one of the most competitive schools in the country. True, the school is loaded with opportunities of all sorts (clubs, sports teams, etc.) but this created an environment of stress, anger, and hatred towards others. It seemed that most students were so blinded by the need to win and succeed that they ended up hurting those around them in the process. Cliques were very strong at my school, and one could always recite which person belonged to which group.

I never really fit in at GBN, and it was because of this that I actually saw myself drifting away from the mainstream of society. I began to feel separated from all of the things that were considered to be important in my community. Some of these things were success, material wealth, popularity, etc. I began retreating into the forest by my home, and began to search for something much deeper than what my community lived for; I began to search for peace.

I crudely taught myself how to meditate, and practiced deep in the woods near dusk. I began working at a teashop to learn the culture behind a drink that was used often in eastern religions as an aid to attaining enlightenment. I bought spiritual texts by contemporary teachers, who gave explanations of a better way of living life. Soon enough, I left home for the University of Illinois, and found the Clear Sky Zen Organization online. I have yet to meet with them, but I believe will help me transform my view of humanity, and help me find the deeper meaning to my life that I am looking for.

When I meet with this organization for the first time, I pray that I can relate to them on some level considering my drastically different upbringing. I have never really been exposed to Buddhism or Zen in Northbrook, but I am vaguely aware of the story of Siddhartha Gautama, and his quest for enlightenment. I know that after meditating under a fig tree for a long period of time, he found the root of suffering, which apparently lies in "want." He began the religion of Buddhism and it soon spread around the world. I know next to nothing about Zen other than its roots lie in Buddhism, and that it focuses on finding your true self. Both religions are avid practitioners of meditation and claim that it is the path to awakening. I feel like the environment of this organization will be completely different than any that I am used to. While I am usually exposed to an environment rooted in wealth, competition, and dissonance in relationships, I feel like this community will be much calmer, and

welcoming. I'm not quite sure what types of backgrounds the members will have come from, but I am interested to see how their views on life, clothes, food, music, and so on, are different or similar to my own. I'm relieved to know that I will at least be able to talk about tea with the members of this group, considering I have a plethora of knowledge surrounding the culture and variety of the drink.

I'm sure I will have a hard time adjusting to the meditation ceremony, and especially understanding the language that goes along with it. I am thankful to know they hold beginners classes. Also, the act of meditation requires a great deal of patience and concentration, and although I am slightly practiced in this ancient exercise, I am still used to being surrounded by a busy world, that doesn't usually stay in the same place for very long.

By spending time with this organization, I know I will learn so many useful, and fulfilling skills. On the surface level, I will know what it is like to live life in another sub-culture, and will hopefully begin to see how deep the world "culture" really is. I will see new types of clothing, learn the history of various religions from halfway round the globe, drink an ancient beverage that has been enjoyed by the greatest of Zen masters and Buddhist monks, and so on. From seeing this I hopefully will derive a more holistic view of the world. I will also learn how to meditate properly, which will deepen my love for spirituality, and bring me to a new level of peace and understanding within myself. I know the experience with The Clear Sky Zen organization will teach me to open my eyes to the infinitely many ways that people around the world choose to live their lives, and I will know deeper the peace I am searching for, and how to attain it.

PS: I consider a life void of many material possessions and wealth to be virtuous simply because it allows one to explore their own existence, or consciousness. When one is consumed by money or goods, an identity develops around these things, causing one to constantly feel as if they do not "have enough." This constant underlying sense of lack, leads to a great amount of suffering, and casts the illusion that great wealth and an abundance of possessions are needed in order to be happy. In reality however, happiness cannot be gained, it can only be felt and realized through the examining of one's own consciousness in the moment. And this of course, requires no fortune whatsoever.

**Plan:**

Daniel Wolff

9/18/08

Patience

The first thing I noticed was just how completely silent the room was as I entered. All the objects in the room sat completely motionless

and covered in dust. It was as if nobody had entered the room for at least twenty years. My mind took one look at the room, and decided that it simply was not exciting enough to pay attention to. I fought this urge for several minutes and when my wall of judgment finally collapsed, I realized just how profound every object in the room was, and how each contributed its share of importance to how this room had been chosen as the meeting place for Clear Sky Zen Organization.

Tall windows were at each corner of the room, accompanied by an even larger bay window on the back wall. A wooden frame surrounded each window, and upon the wood, a layer of chipped black paint. The windowpanes were dusty, and distorted light as it passed into the room, creating eerie luminary displays upon the carpet. The drapes had been pulled and sat sill on the edge of the windows, waiting to perform their duty as the conservers of privacy. The drapes were frayed at the ends, and had dull shades red, blue, and yellow stripes running their length. I crossed the room and ran my hand across the seemingly ancient fabric. The texture reminded me of an itchy Christmas sweater.

I took a seat upon one of the four couches present in the room. A gray cloud of dust exploded from the seat cushion I chose to unload my weight upon it. I coughed and sputtered, flailing my arms in front of me to clear the air. When my near-death experience had finally concluded, I gazed at the couch I was sitting on, noticing that it, like every other couch in the room had the ability to become a rollout bed. The cushions themselves all had various designs ranging from red roses, to blue polka dots. I couldn't help but chuckle at how each of the sofa's unique designs perfectly clashed with one another, creating a sea of faded colored chaos.

There were three different tables placed at various places around the room. All of these tables were the same make and model, and seemed to be thrown into the room for storage purposes. All were wooden with four skinny legs protruding from each corner. I ran my hand across the top of one of the tables, it felt rough and forgotten, but gave the impression that at one point it had been sleek and attractive.

One of these tables was placed right in front of the bay window, and was aglow with the fading rays of the evening sun. Upon this table lay a small yellow and black tapestry. Rearing elephants danced in patters all along the cloth adding an air of eastern culture, and subtle mysticism to the room. Upon the tapestry, a tea candle lay undisturbed in a small blue vase with an opening at the top the size of a quarter. Three matches lay scattered across the table, one of their ends, charred and gray from previous use. Watching over the peculiar display was a tiny detailed statue of Buddha, sitting peacefully atop and stone.

My eyes wandered to the carpet where I found two television sets

facing one another, as if competing for who would get to tell the evening news. One of the televisions was plugged in; the other was left dead without electricity. Someone had previously traced a picture in the dust covering the screen of the deceased TV. The picture, strangely enough, was of a radio.

Resting lonely in the corner was a small white shoebox with a slit on top. I gazed into the small crack and found what seemed to be an endless black abyss. I pulled my eyes out of the dark infinity to find the word, "donations" hastily scrawled on the box's left side.

At that moment, three people entered the room. Needless to say, I was startled, but quickly regained my composure to introduce myself. Their names were Holly, Evelyn, and Aymen. Holly is the president of the Clear Sky Zen Organization, and she was surprised I had shown up so early. I chuckled and offered to help her move the load she was carrying in her arms, for it seemed to be weighing her down. She smiled and politely refused stating that each item had to be placed in a very specific location.

I retired to my original couch (not as much dust this time around) and watched as the three of them worked in unison to assemble the area in which the service would take place. To my surprise, all of them were white, and were clad in everyday American clothing. Holly and Evelyn were wearing dark flowing summer dresses, and Aymen was dressed in a pair of navy blue jeans, accompanied by a charcoal colored dress shirt.

I examined their faces. They were lined with exhaustion, and what seemed to be loneliness. Their eyes were sullen, and swollen with purple bags beneath. Their lips pursed with tension and pent up emotion. Everything about them seemed slightly discontent, but they also emanated a light of hope, possibly stemming from their connection with Buddhism and Zen teachings.

The ceremony grounds had finally been set up. On the carpet lay three black rectangular mats in triangular formation. Atop each mat was a blue circular pillow. Under each mat was a book of prayers and chants, and on the left of each mat was a small bell with a red handle, and a golden tassel.

Before the ceremony began, I wanted to find an object in the room that really tied the look, and feel of the room all together. My eyes darted frantically around the room catching glimpses of the windows, tables, televisions, carpet, but nothing seemed to truly encompass the "feel" of the moment. Suddenly, my eyes landed on decrepit painting that hung above the couch opposite myself. The painting was framed very simply, and contained no color except for various shades of brown. The painting depicted an old man garbed in a long robe. His face was sunken and solemn with age. He was standing over another man, presumably much younger, clothed in very similar attire. The younger man had a scraggly beard, and look of anger and despondency upon his face. He was holding his hands up to the old

man in a gesture of frustration, but the old man is simply looking down, and seems to be shaking his head. I would title this painting, "Patience."

All the artifacts in the room suddenly seemed to fall together neatly, like pieces in a puzzle. The tone of the room manifested as one of frustration and suffering indicated by the heaviness surrounding the members of the Clear Sky Zen Organization. Furthermore, the tone was one of age and abandonment as revealed by the outdated furniture covered in dust. But for some reason, the combination of all these seemingly negative feelings, constructed a feeling of hope, a tone that all religions attempt to convey. I wondered how one could feel hope in the midst of such suffering, and a picture of the Buddha appeared in my head, along with the old man from the painting. Both were looking down at me with their worldly wisdom, and knowledge of all humans' inner conflicts. Simultaneously, they nodded, and recited these words over and over again. "Patience, patience, patience."

**Data:**

Day 1 9/17/08

Holly Homes: President of Clear Sky Zen Organization

Data:

pile of black stacked chairs next to a large piece of writing paper on large pad. Various tall windows about the room with black wood framing, paint is chipped. Drapes pulled on all windows, sunlight is let into the room. The drapes are frayed, beige, pink, yellow, red, blue, all very dull colors. Old furnace in front of bay window, brown, rust, covered in dust, looks like it hasn't been used for years. four couches around room, look straight out of 70's. different patterns on each couch, polka-dots, stripes, roses, also very dusty. Two smaller pillows lie on each couch, matching couches design. Soft, welcoming, when one sits on them, a bit itchy. give a sense of home-warmth. One couch has white dots with blue cloth, bottom has fallen in. Rests in front of a fire place, old with bricks surrounding the mouth of the fireplace. Black sooty screen lays in front of fireplace. A small shelf above fireplace, painted white, has a painting. Old man bent over a younger man. Younger man has hand in gesture of desperation, face twisted in frustration. Old man, eyes closed, wearing an old brown robe, is telling him to be "Patient" This is the essence of the room. Simply framed, with just wood. Three tables around the room, all same-make and model, brown with four skinny legs. One sits in front of the couch which is in front of the bay window. On it is a yellow tapestry with black elephants dancing around the cloth. Atop this table there are matches and a matchbox, small tea candle in a blue candle-holder device of sorts. A small buddha statue made of plastic. A small rusty dirty dish made for incense. two unlit incense sticks lay beside dish. Two oddly placed television sets, one plugged in, the

other not. covered in dust, unplugged television has dust painting of radio on its screen. Donation box, cut out of black construction paper. Looks empty. room smells of old people, dust, dry taste and feel, forgotten tone, with much prestige.

People:

Holly and Evelyn and Aymen enter the room. Referred to as H, E, and A respectively. H is wearing a long pink dress with a black sweater. Her hair is very light brown with touches of blonde. she is about 23 years old. she goes to UIUC. She looks tired, there are bags under eyes. comes in carrying a box of mat's pillows and books. She is having a hard time carrying these things. She looks lonely, but has hope in her eyes. holly is married.

E is wearing a dark green skirt with a black sweater. her hair is jet black, face is long, and lines around the mouth, her eyes are a faded hazel. she is wearing black Crocs and too is about 23. She is a TA at the university, not sure what class. She is also tired looking, bags under her eyes, her body is chunky, but not fat, she looks lonely as well.

A is wearing a dark charcoal cotton shirt, fits tightly, he had jet black dress pants, comes in carrying a bike helmet. has red hair, a beard, and glasses. looks stressed out and discontent but forces a smile onto his face, not sure of age, has kids, lives in Urbana, He hasn't attended the meetings in a while. also looks very tired

all remove shoes and put in corner of room, they seem eager to begin.

Feelings:

I feel anxious, the warm is very hot, I am sweating, feel uncomfortable, slightly unwanted, trying to remain out of the way. A doesn't seem to approve of my presence, probably looking too deeply into it, they all seem so lonely and separated, possibly just tired. I wonder why they choose Buddhism and to practice at this location at this time with these people. Holly is too young to be married, their vibe is stressed and anxious, I feel it. They seem nice overall, but are all older than i am. I feel slightly intimidated, and ignorant of my surroundings. My mind wanders away from the situation slightly as the ceremony begins. I try to be comfortable, but cannot seem to be. i accept that. and continue writing.

Ceremony:

Black mats laid out on the ground in triangular formation, blue circular pillows are laid out on the mats, and fluorescent lights are shut off, replaced with dimmer lighting from lamps, gives a warm

feel.

All gather in corner to start the ceremony, bow to the room as they enter, all are silent. They all approach their respective mats. There are bells by each of the mats , with red handles, and gold tassels. There are large thin prayer books under each mat. They pick up books, and chant words such as " suffering, wisdom, Buddha, enlightenment, etc. " in a poetic fashion. Two of these prayers. There are ringing of bells before, during, and after each prayer is sung. some words are in another language. there is a beauty to the chanting

Feelings:

I wish to participate, I am mesmerized and enthralled I suddenly don't feel so unwelcome, I feel I am indirectly a part of something. I try to remain quiet and not disturb them.

Ceremony: They face the altar and bow to Buddha twice, lift their hands hands above their heads as they bow. as if scooping water. Candles are lit at altar, incense is lit as well, all done by H, H bows before Buddha and all return sitting to their mats, they begin to meditate, facing away from one another, the room is silent, and still, they are motionless

Feelings:

what are they searching for? where do they go when they meditate? I wonder if any of them will ever reach enlightenment. I feel glad to be witnessing this. Smell of incense is slowly overtaking the smell of old people and dust. it is much more relaxing and fits the mood a lot more. hands are focused near lower belly, center of energy. i try to appreciate the present moment with them.

Ceremony:

H rings bell twice, first meditation ceremony is over. they get up and bow to one another, H takes wooden clapper and claps it, they all begin to walk around the room in a circle, their eyes are open, they are completely concentrated they walk slowly, each step is measured. they look tired and determined as they do this. this is walking meditation. they are concentrating on everything possible it seems.

Feelings:

It is eerie to watch them walk in circles staring blankly ahead. they are so quiet and so determined in their paths, they remind me of ghosts i feel a bit in the way, what are they feeling.

Ceremony:

walking slowly goes on for about five minutes, H uses clapper again, all speed up to a brisk walking pace, keeping hands in same place,

just as concentrated, everything is the same except they are walking faster. People talk and laugh loudly outside, They seem undisturbed in their practices. cars zoom by, it has turned to night.

Feelings:

there is a strange energy about the room it seems as if it has been released from each of them I wonder if walking meditation is the way of integrating meditation into everyday life.

Ceremony:

H uses the clapper again, all sit on their pads and return to sitting meditation. I watch A. His cell phone goes off accidentally , he bows, turns off the phone, and returns to meditating, he seems perturbed by the disturbance. He is most tired out of all it seems.

after about five minutes H begins to read a passage aloud from a book. don't know title, talks about how to achieve enlightenment, spoken from Zen masters. soothing passage, all continue to meditate as she reads. they are quiet, H reads very slowly, she does not slip up once in her reading, she is a good reader. enlightenment is a slow process passage states. passage ends, they all continue to meditate silently for another five minutes then they awaken when H rings bell. Ceremony is concluded.

Feelings:

I was a bit bored and uncomfortable near the end of the ceremony . I still enjoyed the proceedings very much, I want to participate next time, I hope I will understand it more fully when I do. I feel anxious to leave the room. I cannot stay for tea. I have play practice. I thank them.

Day 2

Ceremony: The group practices Soto Zen originating in Japan.

I learned some meditation positions, I drew a diagram of them in my spiral notebook.

New member today, Alexandro, (Not sure how to spell his name). He is originally fro venezuela, does not practice Buddhism, interested in the meditation aspect of the club, brown shirt, cotton, black pants, works on campus, some kind of research assistant in a technological institute. He is pretty shy and out of the way. he seems nice and very intelligent.

Eric is also present, he is already a member of Clear Sky Zen Organization. He looks american, he has a beard, is wearing a muted green T-shirt, with khaki shorts. He is a bit awkward in the way he

makes conversation, but he is the most lively of all the group members i have met so far.

Holly is present as she always is, she's wearing a skin tight brown shirt with dark blue jeans. The fashion sense of the room seemed to give off an earthy tone. She gives Alexandro the rundown on how the group practices, how the ceremony works, and what-not. Alexandro seems relatively timid in his ways of approaching meditation, but at the same time, this could be confused with a sense of confidence that is just not outwardly spoken. No way to really judge that.

Feelings:

I feel much more welcome this week, I can talk with Holly a little bit easier, and Eric, although awkward, is a very friendly person who is trying to be interested in the lives of those around him. I am very interested in Alexandro, I really want to know what makes this guy tick, whys he so quiet, it almost unnerves me. Regardless, I am ready to watch the ceremony take place. I am very tired right now, I feel I may doze off during the ceremony.

Ceremony:

Everyone walks in and bows as last time. Eric rings bell, all bow THREE times to the buddha altar, (what is the name of that???) Alexandro is trying to follow along but seems a little hesitant in his abilities. They begin to chant from their prayer books, (I NEED to get copy of their prayers) "form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form" and so on. Eric rings bell at an ever increasing speed as chanting ends. They all bow 3 times to the Buddha. Holly approaches the altar and lights some incense, it is a very rustic smell, comparable to the smell of firewood. Holly also lights a candle on the altar.

They all begin to meditate, eric is in full-lotus position, Alexandro is sitting cross-legged, as is holly, holly had knee surgery and cannot do full-lotus position. Fluorescent lights are left on tonight, no mood-lighting. hands focused around stomach region, again. all eyes are open tonight, they seem to be focusing on a spot or nothing at all, I'm not sure.

Feelings:

I'd really like to be participating again, rather than just sitting here, I hate to say it, but it gets boring as I sit here watching and doing nothing. I try to meditate while taking notes, but that is a little bit difficult. next week I will participate. I wonder what Alexandro feels right now, being the new guy and all. I wonder what the hand position is called. I feel a bit ancy, very very tired. Im watching them so silently, curious about what's going on in their worlds, notice

another painting of an old rabbi on the right wall, opposite the fireplace, its a pretty depressing painting, rabbi looks old worn, wise? I wonder if they can feel my negative energy I seem to constantly be spilling into the world. My head hurts, are they thinking at all? I think too much?

Ceremony:

Bell rings to end sitting meditation session. They all stretch and looked relieved, even a bit relaxed. buddha watches mysteriously from his mat. Holly hits clapper and they begin to do walking meditation, hands are cupped. all are very concentrated, walk around room slowly in a circle, this goes on for about five minutes, they then hear the clapper, and speed up. Holly leaves the room for a minute and Alexandro is confused and Eric tells him to continue walking in a circle even without Holly in the room. Holly always seems to leave during this part, I wonder why, maybe its her knee thats hurting, I'm afraid to ask her that. Holly returns, she uses clapper one last time and they all return to their mats and begin to meditate again.

Soon Holly begins to read from the same book she read from the previous week, (TITLE AND AUTHOR) The reading is about how spirituality is not idealistic and not to be attained in the future at some other place. We must practice and practice until we understand enlightenment. We burn away unconsciousness. Not quite sure what it means, we are interrupted by loud motorcycles on the street, they are obnoxious, but still part of the moment. They begin silently meditating.

Feelings:

I'm so tired, I am dozing off unfortunately. The room actually feels peaceful, Radiohead is in my head. I space out for a while.

Ceremony: Bell rings, they chant for a while from memory, Alexandro picks up prayer book to know words, he cant find it in time. The prayer ends, and they bow. They sit quietly for a while, they look ponderous, rather peaceful, and then the bell rings rapidly, the service is over with three more floor bows to Buddha. Time for tea. Orange Chai!

Day 3 10/1/08

Today decided that I would participate during the ceremony instead of just observing. Obviously I did not take notes during the ceremony, so this reflection is simply from memory, mostly involves the feelings I had during the ceremony. Therefore, for this entry, my usual "Ceremony" and "Feelings" sections will become one.

I walked into the room, and was there before Holly as usual. I met some new people, a man and a woman, presumably husband and wife, but they could have been just good friends. The mans name was Jason, I cannot remember the woman's name. Jason was wearing blue jeans and I believe a black shirt of some sort, could have possibly been just a black cotton T-shirt, or could have been more formal. He was balding and decided o have his head, he had small beady eyes, his head was oval. Jason had quite a bit to say, he had already participated in a Yoga class, and was looking for a class that would satisfy his needs more fully, he never specified those needs to me.

The woman was wearing a gray fleece sweatshirt with black sweatpants. her matted brown hair was tied back into a bun. bags under her eyes, she was still relatively happy however, looks like shed done quite a bit in her life, or traveled at least a good amount, of course this is a drastic conclusion I am basing on simply the look she had on her face. She was a bit quieter, but from time to time , asserted her voice into the conversation held between Jason and I. Her voice was smooth, and yet it was beaten, it was tender.

Holly came in and gave the two newbies the run down on the meditation that the group does. I was very aware of what she was going to say, and so I listened politely while they learned the guidelines to sitting, and to the ceremony, and so on.

Soon it was time to begin, Alexandro and Aymen showed up at the last minute, and we had to go get more mats, I was impatient and wishing for the ceremony to start, I was so not zen. But thats alright because soon the mats showed up and I got a nice mat all to myself right next to the altar with little buddha sitting on top watching over me. We all bowed and proceeded to our mats. The fluorescent lights were loud and obnoxious and hurt ones eyes, so I decided to ignore them while secretly wishing that the mood lights would be turned on, Barry white anyone?

So I get to my mat and bow, three times, by getting on my knees and giving up my "ego" as Holly would say I felt very strange bowing, I wondered why people bowed all over the world, how the culture of bowing to a higher power became a custom in many religions around the globe. At the same time, as much as I hate to admit it, it felt really wonderful to bow, and this was hard for me to accept because of all my years as a jew, and as a an america, bowing has been seen as a practice that is to be looked down upon with great disdain. But god, i felt like I was sacrificing myself, that at least for that moment it just didn't matter who the hell i was or what i did or my pathetic petty problems that really mattered to nobody at all. I was finally just

a fragment of the universe rather than thinking that I am the whole universe. I loved it, I loved bowing.

So we got back up and the group began chanting, my mat was unfortunately not given a special "zen sitting" book complete with photo-copied prayers and chants, bound together by a three hole punch system. it looked very holy. Regardless I sat as the rest of the group said, or attempted to say the chants in unison. I was trying to pay attention, but I simply spaced out, was thinking most likely about Radiohead or Sonic Youth as I tend to do all too often.

The chanting ended after a series of repetitions and bell rings, and boy was it crazy! You had to be there... So we started to meditate after bowing once more, remembering that we just don't matter all that much, and how silent the room became very silent and very still. it was slightly awkward at first, humans hate their own silence, humans need too fill up space with noise and colors and bombard you with feelings to signify that their life has a good amount of importance. But nobody spoke up, the room remained quiet and tranquil, and dear god I got a chance to sit and think, and at the same time, not think, it was just lovely. I listened to nothing, I listened to silence, I thought meditative thoughts and tried to destroy my incredibly large and obtrusive ego. I made only small progress, but I felt relaxed, I felt detached from the world, I needed to feel that way, for I had been immersed in the culture of indulgence for simply too long. I needed to know that truly I was not an American, or a Caucasian, or a jew, but simply that I was/am a member of the human race. It was very meaningful, very deep, almost forgotten at times, but always very much a part of me. The meditation allowed me to face moments within myself that were normally very difficult to deal with while in my normal state of consciousness. I felt hate, i felt fear, I felt love, I felt frustration, I felt embarrassment, all the while reliving these memories in my head, like watching a motion picture entitled "My life." I hated these images, but I knew they were popping up for some reason, and I just allowed them to, I let them fly out of their cage, I felt awful, a huge ball of misplaced emotion just rotting in my chest cavity. But I let it be, I let it be.

The bell rung after about twenty minutes or so, I got ready for walking meditation, I stretched on my mat, looking around, everyone was doing the same. Was I stretching to look like everybody else? Most likely, that seems to be the way people function. I stood, and the clapper did its clapping thing, I began to walk, slowly, every step measured by my breath, very small, but very calculated. I had no direction, but I needed to get wherever i was going with extreme accuracy and precision. My mind was surprisingly clear, Iw as relaxed, I did not feel like myself. Myself meaning the character I

choose to play everyday of my life, my personality. I just existed, and was conscious enough to really notice the stillness in the objects around the room. I looked at a chair, a table, they too were motionless, they did not question the flow of life, they did not need a direction, or money, or to go to college, their path was one that simply existed in the present moment.

Just as I was considering leaving my life to pursue being a simple wooden abel, the clapper clapped once again, and we all began to walk briskly around the room. I felt like I was in a zombie film and someone decides to press the fast forward button. We were all silent except for our feet dragging across the carpet, our eyes were hard and staring straight ahead. A line of marching tables. My head began swimming once again. the voice reappeared, I watched it, It rally says some strange things, considering I'm writing out of it at this very moment. At least I wasn't identified with the voice completely.

walking meditation ended with a final clap, and we all returned to our mats, and the second sitting meditation session began. This one was not nearly as effective as the first, my mind was wandering more often, the silence was not as prevalent. I felt rather uncomfortable, my foot fell asleep, dear god did it fall asleep, it was heavy like a lead brick and felt as if no blood was even going to the end of my toes. I wished desperately to leave the room and stomp my foot violently until it awoke from its painful slumber, But I toughed it out. I compared the sleeping of my foot, to the "sleeping" state of our consciousness, and realized that unconsciousness is just as painful to the soul as my sleeping foot is to the body. Then I realized I was thinking too much and continued to meditate.

Holly pulled out her handy dandy book of wisdom that she always seems to read from and read a short passage about not trying to attain enlightenment, and how when we practice meditation, she should simply do nothing at all. It was a bit hazy I thought, but I understood the general concept of what it was trying to say. We all meditated for another few minutes, and then the bell rang. I could finally stomp my poor foot into a bloody pulp, and so I did. We all bowed and bowed and bowed some more and then recited a chant about why and how we will attain the Buddha way. I found it interesting that the religion encourages finding your own path, and being your own light, yet Buddhists are trying to mock the Buddha's spiritual path. The chanting finished and the bells "dinged" with all of their golden glory, and the ceremony concluded. I stretched, watching everyone else do the exact same thing, and then left for play practice. What an interesting night my consciousness has given me I thought. What a strange experience life is...

Day 4 10/8/08

I decided to participate again today, therefore my entry will be as before. That is, my feelings will be intermixed with the dialogue

I am having trouble making new notes every single time. its simply that nothing new ever really happens during these ceremonies, it's usually all the same thing. The same people show up. This week it was Aymen, Holly and Alexandro, and they all usually wear very similar things that they wore the last week

their conversations are usually all the same, about the struggles of daily living , about kids, about various spouses, about their work outside of CSZO. Their lives seem monotonous including attending the CSZO meetings. I cant help but feel a bit of pity for these people. is there an age you reach where you life ceases to be interesting and life seems to just be a monotonous string of events. thats rather depressing, but sadly it seems to be this way

regardless, holly and i are relatively close now since the interview and we converse loosely without much tension. Its nice at least to feel comfortable within the group now. they all seem to recognize me now. its kind of nice. i feel like a part of the CSZO family! huzzah!

so the ceremony started as usual, I got a prayer book this time so I got to say the prayers this time. i fell off beat a few times. its alright though, i got the gist of all the prayers. They made more sense to me as I was reading them. I compared them in my head to other spiritual texts i've read, and surprisingly they were preaching the same ideas. Is that really surprising? I half expected it really. I knew all the wars about religion in the world were ridicualous, considering they were all preaching the same things at their roots.

So we bowed, again and it felt good as it did before. I felt like I was betraying western religions at that point, a little bit of guilt, not gonna lie, but it seemed to make more sense to me. like a lot more sense to me

so we began to meditate. I was very concentrated and stayed relatively present. The mind is a seductive tool of human consciousness, how we all identify with it so closely, when its not us at all! My mind did wander a bit and that was okay I watched it, so i wasn't its slave completely.

we got up, did our walking meditation which i find to be very soothing and helpful. It lets me see the world clearer and in a more peaceful manner. I saw how still everything is when its not obscured by mind

and thought. WE began to sit again, The second session is always a little bit more difficult for me, i tried using the cosmic mudra hand position this time. I didn't like it actually, i found it distracted me too much from what I was trying to accomplish. So i made it through the second sitting, without much mind interference, but more than the first time. Holly did a reading, to be honest, i wasn't at all paying attention to it, i was too concentrated on trying to be in the moment that i didn't hear what she was saying! Oh well, so then the bell rang and we all awoke and stretched.

I wasn't as fulfilled by this attendance as I was by the others, i am running out of new material...

Day 5 10/15/08

I, again, decided to meditate today, I think this will be the last week for a while in which I meditate.

The first thing I noticed as I walked into the room was that there was some glass broken by the bay window. none of it was in the room of course, but the glass was broken on the outside. The hole was about the size of a fist and I was wondering what had caused it. I looked around the area between the two panes of glass and found a rock sitting there peacefully. It wasn't a large rock, it was beige and gray, and looked like something someone could find on the sidewalk. I wonder why it had been thrown, was it on purpose? Did somebody do something wrong.

I don't think the rock had anything to do with CZSO, but it somehow added to the room. The rock through the window definitely said something. I was trying for a while to put my finger on exactly what that was, and I am still having trouble figuring that out. a rock. through the window of a church. ironically ending up in the room of the Buddhist club. Something about that, I think will add to my report, In fact, I think somehow my report IS that... I will try to develop that idea later.

We had someone I'd never seen before join us today. His name was Chris. He was bearded and had glasses wore a yellow tee shirt, had brow hair, dirty socks, and blue jeans. I couldn't tell if he had an accent or not. I want to say that he did... He too, is not Buddhist and enjoys meditation, why, I am not sure exactly. why do they all meditate? I know Holly's reasons, but I have yet to know everyone else's. I think either his friend or his Girlfriend was supposed to join him. She never showed up. He seemed disappointed.

Today was a little strange because we did not chant. Chris did not

want to. I was kind of unhappy about that because I have never actually chanted before, both times before my prayer book was not present. We did not chant, did not stick to tradition, we did simply what would benefit us, contradictory?

So we skipped straight to the meditation part. It was hard getting into the "zone" right away. Because we did not chant it took longer for me to get relaxed. I focused on the inner our first session. I always find it frightening to see what's on the inside of me. You see, my mind is very loud, and constantly working. I have many pent up emotions, and when I meditate, its not always pleasant. I have to look at what I've been afraid to face, that i've been holding in for weeks, months, years, and so on. Its very deep, almost infinite. I usually encounter a lot of just mental noise, you know, the voice in the head, the various noises and sounds, mental movies, thinking about the past, and future. Its really frustrating because when you actually take the time to look within, you realize you've got a long way to go before enlightenment.

The first session ended, and we got up for walking meditation. It was hard for me to concentrate during this session. I was very distracted, by god knows what... I wasn't there. I wasn't conscious.

We sat again. There was no reading tonight b/c Holly had misplaced the book. So decided to concentrate on the physical world this time. I stared at a wire, and outlet cover thing, I don't know the name of it. I was really in awe during this second session of meditation. I saw how silent and still those two objects were. They simply were at peace in a way that I wasn't. They never worried , or were afraid about the past or the future, they were simply here now. I learned a lot just by looking at them. I must be those objects, simply here now, and nowhere else, and have no "self" to deal with.

The session ended, and i felt much more relaxed and aware than when I first entered the room. We all bowed and what not and then I actually had time to stay for tea. I remember the conversation being very patient, calculated, respectable, and really rather enjoyable. I remember I was very moved that there were people in the world who actually found joy in coming together, finding inner peace, and actually trying to communicate with each other in a state of awareness. People who wanted to love one another? I'm not sure but I enjoyed tit very much as I sipped my decaffeinated "Celestial Seasonings" Green tea from a strangely shaped mug with egyptian designs around the edges. This week was very powerful.

Day 6 10/22/08

some new people today, Holly isn't coming, she has a headache or something, or maybe she's just lazy, who the heck knows. I meet a guy named Chris, he's got a shaved head and rectangular frames. He wore green khaki pants, and black sweatshirt and white socks. He has an obnoxious laugh and the stature of a turtle of sorts. He looks a bit pompous, he's a grad student. considers himself to be "everything"

another new guy named Tony. He is Skinny and tall with blonde hair and five o'clock shadow, wears blue shirt, button down, blue jeans, and black socks, he's awkward and talks a lot, doesn't seem to enjoy silence very much. he's very kind though, he's a junior. He is afraid to declare himself "Buddhist" because of the stereotypes that follow being a Buddhist.

The old Chris OC, the bearded one shows up a little while later during a discussion about how being gay in Buddhism isn't really a problem. NC(New Chris) had looked up some information about gay Buddhist organizations and apparently, a few exist in LA. I wondered if Tony and NC were gay, but they soon went on to talk about their fiances and girlfriends and whatnot so I suppose they are straight.

OC is a junior who actually practiced meditation for two years in High school at a Korean Buddhist Organization. He says the ceremonies are very similar, but some of the chants are different. He actually considers himself a Buddhist. the first one I've met in CSZO who openly says so.

a new girl named Tracy shows up at the last minute, she's asian, and carrying a violin. She has a Sprite in her hand, she has never meditated before. NC gives the rundown on how to meditate "still your body first, then still your mind." He told her to let her thoughts go, and a good way to do that was to concentrate on breathing by counting breaths.

I found NC to be a great monitor, possibly even better than Holly, he seems to know the information very well, and enjoys practicing and teaching it.

they chant this time, but only one chant, they don't like chanting all that much. why i'll never know. Prajna Paramita was the chant name, i don't know the spelling exactly.

"may the Buddha way be realized together" is it individual or with a group? I always thought Buddhism was more individual.

they begin to meditate, Tracy looks tense, her mudra is far too low,

she has good posture though. her eyes are closed very tightly. I wonder if she has any idea what she's doing...

NC seems to be muttering something to himself silently, possibly a mantra, i'm not sure.

the culture seems to exist in the ceremony itself, without it, these people would have nothing in common with eachother, their lives are so different, so why do they all feel the need to meditate? Is it the same reason for everyone? is this watered down? Is this Tradition? Is tradition important?

when I am here, I forget who i am. I think that maybe people gather here to forget themselves and their lives. can the culture exist in a group of people who come together to essentially forget themselves and be nobody in particular?

are they religious or spiritual? is there a difference between the two?

I feel connected to Buddhism differently than to Judaism. Buddhism is more personal and being jewish is more community oriented, or family oriented. Is it possible to integrate two religious philosophies into one life? Is it possible to have a personal religion?

ceremony ends

we have tea, and talk about how science and religion are very similar, and wonder why the two can't cooperate. We talk about God and particle accelerators, and how to technology is really our slave. It was a strange talk, but a god one

I didn't have any tea

#### **Discuss:**

Daniel Wolff 10/22/08 Personal religion My head has been throbbing for the last thirty minutes or so, from simply looking over all the materials I've read and collected so far for this project. I've read over field notes, my interview, the "positioning yourself as a researcher" paper, and so on. It's a bit overwhelming to think I have around 20 pages of notes for a club that meets once a week for two hours, but ultimately, I believe all of my jottings will prove useful. Therefore, my question is: how the heck will my mountain of notes and research prove useful!? I figured that since I must suffer in order to find this out, the least I can do is take you, the reader, along with me. Therefore, we shall explore the "so what?" of all my texts in chronological order, and hopefully draw a valid conclusion at the end. Our first assignment was the "Positioning yourself as a Researcher" paper. In this paper we were to discuss our fieldsite, all the

stereotypes we knew about our people, how we thought we were similar to and different from our people, anticipate what would be hard about getting to know them, and then finally predict what we would learn. I wrote a narrative describing my upbringing in Northbrook, Illinois, and how I hoped that spending time with the Clear Sky Zen Organization would give me a deeper understanding and love for life that my hometown did not. I wrote how Northbrook relied on the values of money, greed, and superiority over others, and was hoping that CZSO would rely on the values of love, peace, and happiness. I concluded the essay by stating that I was nervous to meet with my sub-culture for the first time because I thought they would be drastically different than me considering my upbringing and would not be welcoming. The "so what?" of this paper I think lies in my ignorance. I went into this project with almost unrealistically high hopes of how I wanted this club to change my life and my outlook on humanity. After going for a few weeks, I realized that the way I see the world would not change from these people simply because they were very much like myself. A little tired, a little pissed off, sick of religion in general, but somehow felt that there was a better way to live and they hoped to integrate that into their lives. The next paper we were asked to write was the "Artifact analysis/site description" paper. In this essay we were to give an in-depth analysis of the physical aspects of our fieldsite and slowly close in on a particular artifact and describe why that artifact is important to the fieldsite as a whole. I went on for a good two pages talking about how the room was old, dusty, and seemed to contain the furniture that the McKinley Center (a church) did not want and/or did not have room for throughout the rest of the building. Regardless of how old and decrepit the furniture in the room was, I still found much of it very endearing and fitting for the religion of Buddhism. After all, if you look at it in a different light, I would be practicing meditation in a quiet, warm room, with a lot of age and character. I closed in a painting that hangs above the fireplace. It depicts an old man looking down upon a suffering boy. The old man seems to be telling the boy to be patient. The "so what?" of this paper seems to lie in that the image in my head of what I thought the club would be, was drastically different. First off, I definitely wasn't expecting CSZO to meet in a church of all places and second, I expected a proper meditation room of sorts...not a storage facility. On the other hand, that paper/experience allowed me to realize that the image of the world that's in my head, is often very far from the truth. I knew that the members of CSZO were using the campus facilities to the best of their abilities, and functioning remarkably successfully in a Christian dominated society. I did not lose hope in CSZO during this step, (nor have I presently) but my ideas of what my experience would be like changed dramatically. I suppose the next step was taking tons and tons of field notes. Reading over these took forever, but were very

revealing in the end. When first writing these notes, I still had an image in my head (not as much as before) of what I thought this experience was going to be like. I expected to meet people of Buddhist descent who were greatly practiced in the art of meditation. In turn, I actually met people who were from around the Champaign-Urbana area, who were relatively new to meditating, and looked predominantly white. I was very surprised by this and almost disappointed. My sub-culture seemed depleted, watered-down, almost fake. I took great interest in the ceremony however which the group stayed pretty close to every week. There was chanting, bowing, meditation, candle-lighting, etc. I respected how each member played their part, even if they were new. About three weeks in, I decided to participate in the ceremony instead of observe. I loved being a part of the ceremony, especially when I was bowing. The last week of recorded field notes I have, definitely was the most... revealing, for lack of a better word. Unlike previous weeks, the group decided not to chant at the beginning of the ceremony, due to request by a new member. I had mixed feelings about this considering we took the liberty upon ourselves to change an ancient ceremony to suit our own needs, but at the same time, we were allowing ourselves to practice Zen-Buddhism in a different manner. The "so what?" lies deeply entrenched in the idea of tradition and can be related to how people view religion in modern America. The members of CSZO practice an ancient religion, but they do not look the part of the religion, and also agree that they can alter the religious practices to suit personal preferences. Are they really practicing Buddhism? Or, are they simply applying certain aspects of the religion to what would improve their lives? Perhaps the most pivotal point of my research came in my interview with Holly Holmes. We spoke for about twenty minutes about her views on religion, life etc. She says she doesn't consider herself a Buddhist, but is interested in Buddhist, and other religious philosophies. She practices meditation because she thinks it helps her as a musician. She is trying to reach enlightenment, but it is not her main concern, she likes having enlightenment as something to fall back on throughout the day. Holly is the President of CSZO, she is white, was raised Presbyterian briefly, and found that she hated the way people treated religion in general. This interview I think, describes a thesis to my final paper, Holly Holmes is the "so what?" of my experience. In other words, she is the combination of all the themes I've discovered in one person. She doesn't consider herself Buddhist, practices meditation for personal gain, and doesn't find salvation in the mainstream religions of society. Are these things a representation of what religion in America is? To me, it seems watered down, and lacks the backbone of tradition. Buddhist classes are taking place in a church. Meditation is seen as a personal thing for a lot of people, but not personal in a way, which benefits the whole, but personal in a way

that it benefits the self. Is mass religion, (religion that is practiced strictly and in large groups) collapsing? Are people finally rejecting the teachings that have been passed down for thousands of years? Is it possible to have personal religion and still benefit others? These questions are the "so what?" of my paper. Danny Wolff 10/22/08 "So What" summary The "so what" of my paper will lie in the discussion of the evolution of religion in America. I will ask such questions as: is organized religion collapsing and making way for personal religion? Is it necessary for one to follow a specific religion in order to be spiritual? And is religion more or less selfish if it belongs to the individual rather than a group or congregation? I am not quite sure of the answers to these questions, but by spending more time with my sub-culture, I hopefully will be able to find them out.

#### **EUI Links:**

Daniel Wolff 10/28/08 Transcending the congregation, opening the self I did not quite understand why an organization that preaches the values of peace and simplicity was located in such an ominous and foreboding temple. The walls were constructed with red and brown bricks, giving the impression that they had been splattered with blood. Impenetrable walls of thick, emerald green vines erupted from the partition, drunkenly twisting and turning their way upwards finding their birthplace at the foot of a large stained glass mural. One looked upwards and found various arches and spikes caressing or piercing the sky accordingly. I approached the splintered wooden doors of the entryway with a great deal of apprehension, noticing a faded sign just above the frigid stone handle that read: "The McKinley Presbyterian Church and Foundation." It was all a little too much, I thought, for a Buddhist organization. I had spoken with Holly Holmes many times through attending Clear Sky Zen Organization meetings, but didn't really know her until we finally had a chance to eat lunch with one another at Basil Thai Café in Urbana, Illinois. She was clad in a long flowing pink dress accompanied by a black sweater. Her hair was chocolate brown with streaks of caramel blonde and was tied neatly into a bun behind her head. She wore a large toothy smile, which illuminated her almond-shaped hazel eyes. Her skin was milky white. After a polite and slightly awkward exchange of hellos, Holly began giving me the rundown on CSZO. "I guess I have many titles... I'm a wife, I'm a voice teacher at the Central Conservatory of Illinois, but within CSZO I am President." A smirk crept its way across her face, "Definitely more for organizational purposes than for philosophical or spiritual purposes. We don't like to have a defined leader of the group and we try to make it a group more on equal footing." Holly went on to explain that CSZO is an organization that focuses mainly on meditation in a Zen style, but one need not consider themselves Buddhist in order to be a member. I was late. It was my first time attending CSZO and I was late! After rushing through a cluttered lobby, passing a smiley woman behind a desk,

and walking in-between rows and rows of long tables lining consuming the space of what seemed to be a student socializing area, I had finally found the place I was looking for. A small laminated piece of paper marked with red ink read: "Dean Clark Room." I was terribly nervous to enter; hoping the group would welcome my presence despite my tardiness. I shoved my way through the door, and found myself completely and utterly alone... Was I in the right place? I checked my watch over and over again to make sure it really was 6:45pm, and indeed it was. I scanned the room from front to back at least twenty times almost expecting to find someone huddled up in a corner where I couldn't see them. Had I been tricked into some cruel sick joke? I decided my best option was simply to wait for someone, anyone to arrive. I found my way over to a couch on the left side of the room. Covered in dust, and clad in a design that had gone out of style forty years ago, (blue and white polka-dots) the couch gave the impression of being rather forlorn. I threw myself onto its cushions that had the same comfort value as an itchy Christmas sweater, and was immediately overtaken by a fanatical fit of coughing. I had inhaled a large portion of dust that exploded from the seat cushions beneath me and was overtaken by the taste of soot and earth. It was as if the couch was beckoning for me to just leave it alone. After my near-death experience had ended, I resumed a calm reclining position on the sofa, and for the first time began to notice my surroundings. Directly to the left of me, was a large bay window. The panes of glass were frosted with dust, but just transparent enough to allow streaks of fading daylight to illuminate the room; bathing the carpet and far walls with a red-orange aura. Directly beneath the bay window lay a long coiled tube of a furnace, splotches of rust from top to bottom. It had the texture and appearance of a Boa Constrictor's shed flesh. Tiny white stars of lint lazily drifted about the room, giving one the impression they were staring into the endless chasm of space. Various couches, (including my own) congregated about the room, all with unique designs, all obscenely out of style. Looking hard and realizing the sofa's had been interacting with human's since at least the 1970's, I concluded they possessed a considerable and valuable wisdom, that being the knowledge of people and the ways in which they interact. Beside each couch stood identical wooden coffee tables, obviously all produced in the same factory, constructed by the same machines. Drenched in dust, the various planks of wood held together by conveniently placed nails, lay forgotten, dead. Suddenly, my attention was grabbed by a small group of people hastily entering the room single-file. Holly headed the line, followed closely by two strangers, a man and a woman. Holly glanced over at me and immediately apologized for being late. She introduced herself with a slight tone of embarrassment in her voice. The two other unfamiliar people decided to remain unknown, and take to a decrepit couch on the other side of

the room. A few minutes passed, where I hesitantly explained my research to Holly and the others, and to my greatest relief, they seemed welcoming. The female stranger explained that I was not the first student to have conducted research on CSZO. In fact, the groups opening ceremony was posted somewhere on Youtube. I laughed and felt immediately more relaxed. I took to the privacy of my notebook and continued to jot various observations about surrounding area. Holly glanced at me and began peering around the room herself. I like our space... the Dean Clark Room. [It's] a good space for meditation due to its relative quiet and windows, which provide fresh air and natural light. Aesthetically, some problems [are] the clutter of furniture and harsh fluorescent lights after sunset... the group could use a slightly longer room for walking meditation, but overall the space is adequate." I tried to smile but found myself feeling irksome. As if reading my mind Holly continued, "The staff," she jerked her head out the door, presumably hinting towards the smiley woman behind the desk, "is interested in inclusion and exposing their church members to a variety of ideas and philosophies. This provides an ideal atmosphere for our practice." Siddhartha Gautama was born in what is now southern Nepal. His father was king of the country and was told that Siddhartha would become one of two things. "He could become a great king, even an emperor. Or he could become a great sage and savior of humanity," (Boeree 1999). Since his father was already ruler of the country, he was eager for Siddhartha to take heir to his throne. Therefore, Siddhartha was kept inside his kingdom, and was forbidden to see old age, death or sickness, lest he take up a religious life. As Siddhartha grew older however, he grew ever more eager to leave his palace and see the world. Soon Siddhartha was exposed to the sadness and horrors of the world, and decided he must give up his ignorance and find out the root of human suffering. After years of various spiritual practices, including ascetic practices, Siddhartha felt he had made little or no progress. At this point he sat down under a fig tree and wait "as long as it takes for the answers to the problem of suffering to come," (Boeree 1999). After many days of meditation Siddhartha had finally found the end to suffering, and reached a state of enlightenment he named Nirvana. His title transformed into "Buddha," which means "the awakened one." Buddha spent the rest of his life spreading his teachings of the Four Noble Truth's and The Eightfold Path. He eventually died at the age of 80. At its roots, Buddha and his close followers encouraged practitioners to engage in meditation. That is, "developing a full consciousness of all about you and within you—whether seated in a special posture, or simply going about ones life," (Boeree 1999). This was the type of meditation Buddha himself practiced and is also the seventh step of the eightfold path. As the trio scurried about the room, grabbing mats, pillows, and "Zen sitting" books and setting them out in a specified pattern, the two strangers took time to

introduce themselves as Eamon, (being the male) and Evelyn (being the female). I offered to help out, but they politely refused my aid. The next step was to set up the altar. A yellow tapestry was laid out on top of one of the machine made tables and placed in front of the couch in front of the bay window. I took a closer look and found the tapestry was laden with black elephants in various poses of joy and grandiose. I wondered why they had picked this tapestry for their altar; it made one feel as if they themselves were at the doorstep of Nirvana. A small statue of Buddha sitting atop a lotus flower was placed on top of the tapestry. I ran my fingers across its surface finding it to be smooth and well crafted. Accompanying the tiny Buddha sculpture was a candle in a blue vase, scuffed and battered matchbox holding at least 100 matches, and two incense sticks that smelled of cinnamon. I wondered the significance of each item... "I don't know of a specific significance other than that its just tradition. It developed in a time where we didn't have electricity so I think the candle could have just been very deliberate as simply having a source of light." Holly took a large bite of her chicken pad Thai as we ate lunch together at Basil Thai Café. She swallowed and continued, " But I think candles seem soothing in some way. They seem to have an image of calmness and consistency. And the incense is just another way to," she lightly took a sip of iced tea " I think we live in a very sight dominated society and it's just another way to make us use all five senses instead of ignoring a lot of our senses we choose not to use." The room was finally set up for the meditation ceremony. The mats were laid out in the shape of a triangle, and one mat directly faced the altar. Atop each mat was a black circular pillow that reminded one of a chocolate donut hole, and under the left side of each mat was a prayer book. The mat facing the altar possessed a golden bell facing upwards on a small pillow that looked like a pincushion, and two thick wooden planks laid atop one another. On the mat to the right of the altar was another golden bell, but this bell was facing downward and had a red handle protruding out the backside From the end of the hand came a string of red yarn, and tied to that was a silver stick used obviously for ringing purposes. Sure, the room was beautiful, almost endearing, yet something didn't seem right. That is, the mental image of what I thought CSZO would be was drastically different than what it actually was. To start, all of the members I'd met so far were Caucasian, not one of them seemed to possess a drop of blood from a native Buddhist practicing country. Second, CSZO met in a Presbyterian church, and third the members of CSZO seemed to know very little about structure of the ceremony in which they were partaking, other than that it was "tradition." These naturally led me to wonder if organized religion, with a strong backbone of understanding and rigid practice routines, was collapsing... and people were taking religion in a more personal direction. Finally, the meditation ceremony was about to begin. I

placed myself behind the others as they gathered in a line by the door. The fluorescent lights were killed with a flick of a switch and two lamps on opposite sides of the room were lit, causing a deep orange glow to flood the room. The sun had set, and the only outside light came from the infinity of streetlights lining the avenue outside, and the headlights of the occasional passing car. We ditched our shoes in a corner and could feel the soft carpet meeting our socks. I had no idea how this ceremony was to proceed and decided it would be best just to follow exactly what Holly and the others were doing. "I had been taking a yoga class when I was living in Michigan. I did that for about a year, and that was of interest to me as a musician to try to find the most relaxed positions for singing. It was really important for me at that time, but it was also great for learning different approaches to breathing. Especially as a singer breathing is like...you know you have to breathe correctly." Holly laughed, and I laughed along with her. The crowd was shrinking in Basil Thai Café, the lunch rush had finally died down and one could hear the ambient background music slowly rhythmically emerging from the speaker's overhead. "So when I moved here, I was kind of doing yoga on my own at that point, and didn't feel like I necessarily wanted to do that in a group situation anymore...but I really [joined CSZO] because a friend of mine was already a member and encouraged me to come because of a few conversations we had had about meditation and what it had done for him as a musician." "So it has a lot of musical basis?" "Mhm...And so, for us it was a particular interest to practice meditation on its own and see how that could influence like focus when your practicing and you know...other issues of music." The type of meditation practiced at CSZO is called Zazen, which is the traditional meditation practice of Zen Buddhists. To correctly practice Zazen one "sit[s] on a thick round cushion (zafu), [and] has legs crossed in lotus or half-lotus. The pelvis is tipped forward, so that the knees push against the floor...the chin is tucked, back of the neck stretched, shoulders naturally relaxed. The eyes are half closed, the gaze resting on the ground one meter in front..." (International Zen Association website at: [www.zen-azi.org/](http://www.zen-azi.org/)). One must also possess a slow methodical breathing and a correct attitude. Who knew sitting could be so complicated!? The ceremony began with a low bow towards the altar on our entrance. Our hands were placed together palms facing inward, fingers to the sky. We then walked towards our individual mats and faced the altar. Eamon, being on the mat directly right of the altar rang his bell clearly with great precision. The cry reverberated about the room, stroking the eardrums with every wave of sound. All the members of CSZO bowed low from the waist towards the altar then sunk to their knees and placed their head against the ground. They slowly lifted their hands three times, palms separated and facing upward, from the carpet to the ceiling, as if scooping water from a trough. Who were they bowing to and why?

Holly looked up at the overly large professionally produced picture of jalapeno peppers. I thought she didn't hear my question but her eyes soon snapped back into alignment with mine, she returned to Basil Thai Café. "Its paying tribute to something higher than yourself. In Buddhism you can think of it similarly, but its not as much paying tribute to the Buddha as it is an acknowledgement that you are part of something bigger and the bowing is sort of symbolic of that, that you're not the greatest." So I bow, three times, by getting on my knees and raising my hands to the sky in one fluid motion. I felt very strange bowing, I wondered how the culture of bowing to a higher power became a custom in many religions around the globe. As much as I hate to admit it, it felt really wonderful to bow, and this was hard for me to accept because of all my years as a Jew, and as a an American, bowing has been seen as a practice that is to be looked down upon with great disdain. But God, I felt like I was sacrificing myself, that for at least that moment, it just didn't matter who the hell I was or what I did or my pathetic petty problems that really mattered to nobody at all. I was finally just a fragment of the universe rather than thinking that I am the whole universe. I loved it. I loved bowing. We got back up off the ground the ground and the group began chanting out of the "Zen Sitting" books complete with photocopied prayers and chants, bound together by a three-hole punch system. I unfortunately was not given a book; so I stood politely on my mat and listened to them recite the Prajnaparamita, which in English translates to Perfection of Wisdom. I couldn't catch every word, but some of the words used were "suffering, enlightenment, emptiness, etc." It sounded like a mishmash of various Buddhist terms thrown together onto a page and used as a prayer. I felt a bit left out not being able to chant with the rest of the group. It seemed like it was a good mental preparation for meditation. The chanting ended after a series of repetitions and bell rings, and it came time to meditate after bowing once more, remembering that we just don't matter all that much, and how silent the room became! Very silent. Absolutely still. Buddha taught to destroy one's ego... "I would say the ego is something where you're putting yourself before anything else" said Holly as she laid her chopsticks down on her plate. "So when you're in ego you're putting yourself before anyone else. It's a type of self- centeredness in a way..." The experience was slightly awkward at first, humans after all hate their own silence. People feel the need too fill up space with noise and colors and bombard you with feelings to signify that their life has a good amount of importance. But nobody spoke up, the room remained quiet and tranquil, and dear God I got a chance to sit and think, and at the same time, not think, it was just lovely. I listened to nothing, I listened to silence, I thought meditative thoughts and tried to destroy my incredibly large and obtrusive ego I made only small progress, but I felt relaxed, I felt detached from the

world, I needed to feel that way, for I had been immersed in the culture of indulgence for simply too long. I needed to know that truly I was not an American, or a Caucasian, or a Jew, but simply that I was/am a member of the human race. It was very meaningful, very deep, almost forgotten at times, but always very much a part of me. The meditation allowed me to face moments within myself that were normally very difficult to deal with while in my normal state of consciousness. I felt hate, felt fear, and felt love, I felt frustration, I felt embarrassment, all the while reliving these memories in my head, like watching a motion picture entitled "My life." I hated these images, but I knew they were popping up for some reason, and I just allowed them to, I let them fly out of their cage. It felt awful, a huge ball of misplaced emotion just rotting in my chest cavity, but I let them be. I wondered what the others experienced during their sitting. I wondered if all humans felt the same suffering, and through group meditation we all felt connected through our collective unhappiness. Or was it that this group congregation was simply a cover-up for a selfish practice? Did these people and myself gather so we could exploit religion to benefit ourselves and thus "enhance" our lives? That is, did Holly, Eamon, and Evelyn meditate to add a spiritual sounding activity to their lives? The bell rung after about twenty minutes or so, I got ready for walking meditation, I stretched on my mat, looking around, and everyone was doing the same. Was I stretching to look like everybody else? Most likely... that seems to be the way people function. I stood, and Holly clapped the two planks of wood that sat beside her mat together causing a dry crack to resonate about the room. I began to walk, slowly, every step measured by my breath, very small, but very calculated. I had no direction, but I needed to get wherever I was going with extreme accuracy and precision. My mind was surprisingly clear; I did not feel like myself. Myself meaning the character I choose to play everyday of my life, my personality. I just existed, and was conscious enough to really notice the stillness in the objects around the room. I looked at a chair, a table, they too were motionless, they did not question the flow of life, they did not need a direction, or money, or to go to college, their path was one that simply existed in the present moment. I took the chance to observe Holly as she walked about the room, and I felt a strange connection with her, as if somehow, we were communicating without any words or physical contact. I felt in a sense that I was Holly and vice versa. Just as I was considering leaving my life to be a hermit on the deep woods, the clapper clapped once again, and we all began to walk briskly around the room. It felt like I was in a zombie film and someone decided to press the fast forward button. We were all silent except for our feet dragging across the carpet; our eyes were hard and staring straight ahead. My head began swimming once again and thought reared its ugly head into my field of consciousness once again. I my stream of thinking and

realized that my thoughts were elsewhere than in the present moment, and at that moment I understood where my suffering was rooted... "I think the... Buddhist would say that everything else is an illusion because...if you're thinking in the past it's not a direct experience anymore. You're maybe attributing judgment to that past experience, and if you're thinking about the future, then you're playing out different possibilities...so I think the present moment is an opportunity to experience something directly and then to see what your relationship is to that direct experience. [It's like] taking that ego out of the moment...and just experiencing the moment as it is without trying to add something extra to it..." The waiter came and retrieved our trays of empty food. Walking meditation ended with a final clap, and we all returned to our mats, and the second sitting meditation session began. This one was not nearly as effective as the first, my mind was wandering more often, and the silence was not as prevalent. I felt rather uncomfortable. My foot fell asleep. It was heavy like a lead brick and felt as if no blood was reaching the end of my toes. I wished desperately to leave the room and stomp my foot violently until it awoke from its painful slumber, but I toughed it out. I compared the sleeping of my foot, to the "sleeping" state of our consciousness, and realized that unconsciousness is just as painful to the soul as my sleeping foot is to the body. Then I realized I was thinking too much and continued to meditate. During the meditation, Holly pulled out a small hardcover beige book from behind her mat. The book had beautifully painted Japanese letters on the cover, and red spine. The book had been kept in good condition. The text was respected. To my surprise, Holly began reading a short passage from the book. The words emerged from her mouth without hurry, and without hesitation; as if time was non-existent. The passage was about not trying to attain enlightenment, and how when we practice meditation, we should simply do nothing at all... Clear Sky Zen Organization, I realized, meets weekly to be nothing. Their culture is one of humans who gather to forget who they think they are, and connect on a deeper level. Their culture exists in that it does not exist at all... We meditated for another few minutes, and then the bell rang. I could finally stomp my poor foot awake. We all bowed and then recited a chant about why and how we will attain the "Buddha way." I couldn't help but find it ironic that the religion encourages finding your own path, and being your own light, yet Buddhists are trying to emulate the Buddha's spiritual path... "Maybe this is where my cynicism comes in a little bit is that the tradition of [Buddhism] is passed down from teacher to student, but part of me feels like only you could know yourself, if you're at an enlightened stage." I beamed, for Holly and I had reached a common understanding. "I don't tend to consider myself a Buddhist...I like to read about other different kind of philosophies. So I think that, I'm not really concerned about what I label myself enough to have chosen one

name that covers everything I would believe in." Basil Thai Café was closing in five minutes. The chanting finished, the bells dinged with all of their golden glory, and the ceremony concluded. I stretched, watching everyone else do the exact same thing, and then left CSZO for the evening, feeling slightly more enlightened than when I had first arrived. "Well, it's funny, there's a little game of semantics I think around the whole concept of enlightenment anyway. Our particular lineage of Zen Buddhism refers more to everyone already being enlightened. So, it's less about attaining this thing that you don't have, but more about finding the enlightenment that you already do have. So yeah, I do think about the attainment of enlightenment but I'm still undecided as to whether it's something that I'm going to be able to maintain in every single moment or whether it's going to be something I can call upon in certain parts of my day to fall back on." We sauntered out of the restaurant, into the brisk autumn air.

**Reflect:**

Daniel Wolff 12/01/08 Self-Reflective Essay Looking back, I must say I feel a bit foolish about what I expected to get out of researching Clear Sky Zen Organization. My expectation was to find deeply spiritual people, meditate with them to a point where I felt a stronger sense of inner fulfillment, and hopefully cling to CSZO as a stronghold of inner peace where I could find refuge. Well, I didn't. I knew from the first time I met with the organization that my hopes for this project were going to be shattered. But in that mass of shards, I found something profound and meaningful, regardless of whether I expected it or not. I've got to be honest, that first day of researching CSZO was a total and complete drag. In other words, absolutely nothing was I had expected it. First off, the Buddhist organization met in a large, ominous looking Presbyterian Church complete with stained glass murals and wooden crosses nailed above very door. Second, the group congregated in the Dean Clark Room, which was the equivalent of a carpeted storage space. Finally, all the members I came in contact with that day were Caucasian. I tried my best to give my field notes a sense of excitement, but inside felt as if I was being led into a trap of some sort, where I would be forced to write a paper faking how I truly felt while desperately trying to reconstruct the image in my head of what I wanted my experience to be. The first couple of weeks I kept a certain distance from the members of CSZO, and focused my energy on taking detailed sensory observations about my surroundings, watching the meditation ceremony so as to gain a greater understanding of how it worked from a technical standpoint, and do a little more research on the religion of Buddhism and how it had evolved over the years. During this time, I still felt a pang of disappointment and regret when entering CSZO for the evening meditation. Yet, this feeling was slowly diminishing and I was beginning to see that, although this was not what I wanted

necessarily, it was still an interesting sub-culture that posed thought-provoking questions and forced one to ponder their own values and customs. Soon, my field notes taken at the beginning did not seem so synthetic. I began to see the allure of the thin film of dust that rests upon every object in the Dean Clark room, as well as find a deeper, more personal meaning behind the mediation ceremony that occurred every week. To put it simply, during this time, I found myself ceasing judgment of my sub-culture and its inhabitants, and allowing a new perspective to emerge out of the ashes of my previously held expectations. I realized it was time for me to dive headfirst into my sub-culture, which included my participation in meditation services and becoming more intimate with the members of CSZO. I found this to be the most rewarding portion of my research, but also the most revealing... I had meditated many times before on my own, but never with a congregation and I found the experience to be quite powerful. When one meditates on their own, it is easier to delve into one's self to gain personal insights, but when one meditates with a group, one tends to develop a certain connection with those around them. In a sense, being silent with this group of strangers was actually a great way to get to know them. Instead of speaking with them in order to form a connection, I established a bond with them simply by their presence in the room. Experiencing this was one thing, but writing about was an entirely different issue. I found it very difficult to convey just how it felt to connect with others on a non-verbal level. I challenged myself to explore the realm emotions I was going through, rather than through sense perceptions or thoughts. After a few weeks of participating in the meditation ceremonies, I could say that I felt I knew the members of CSZO on a deep level, but ironically not on a surface level consisting of personal histories and various bits of dialogue. I began to question the inhabitants of my sub-culture about their religious beliefs, and where they came from. I was not surprised that most of the members were from primarily Christian hometowns, and chose to abandon that religion for various personal reasons. I was surprised however, that most of the members did not consider themselves to be Buddhist, or any religion at all for that matter. Possibly the most surprising responses I received came from Holly Holmes, the President of CSZO, and my interviewee. She stated that she was the leader of the group not for philosophical or spiritual purposes, but rather because she was good at organizing events! She too did not consider herself to be a Buddhist, but rather found enjoyment in researching various religions around the world. I found my writing had taken quite a turn. For I thought myself to know my sub-culture only to be presented the information that the members of it did not seem to connect with it directly! I became aware of the fact that even though I had stopped judging the practices and outward appearances of my people, I still had assumptions about their inner beliefs. In a sense, I realized just how difficult it is to accurately

portray people when writing about them. I feel I reached the final stage of my research when I began trying to find a meaning behind all of what I had observed. I reviewed notes and mapping exercises but could not seem to find anything coherent. There was a brief stage of panic where I felt I had not done enough, or even done so much that I could not possibly sort through all the mounds of information. The epiphany I so desperately longed for finally arrived one night when I was observing the meditation ceremony. As embarrassed, as I am to say it, I was dozing off, but suddenly out of nowhere, it hit me. These people come together to be nothing! They congregate every week in order to forget who they are on the outside and find their innermost emptiness and essence. I found it funny that a group of people who did not like to consider themselves Buddhist congregated for a very Buddhist ideal. From that, my conclusion flowed not as answers to the nothingness, but rather questions that seemed to emerge from its depths. I questioned how religion had evolved in America, if one can possess a personal religion, and so on. I found my journey to be rough, but was content as to how my conclusion had been altered from high personal hopes, to questions that benefitted the whole of humanity.