



21. ARJUNA ARDAGH

Arjuna Ardagh is an awakening coach, writer, teacher and public speaker. He is the author of seven books and many audio and video products, including the 2005 bestseller *The Translucent Revolution*, and his most recent book *Leap Before You Look*. He is the Founder of the Living Essence Foundation, in Nevada City, CA, a non-profit organization dedicated to the awakening of consciousness within the context of ordinary life.

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INTERVIEW

Q: Can you tell me how you became interested in consciousness?

Arjuna Ardagh: Through suffering. I became interested in consciousness through suffering. I was born in London, in the 1950s; there was probably a

high degree of suffering in my family; mental and emotional angst. So I realized pretty early on that I needed to do something and psychotherapy at that time didn't seem to be very helpful. It seemed that the people who were involved in psychotherapy were more in trouble than the people who were in need of the helping. So I learned meditation when I was 14. That was in 1971 and that's how I have been addressing it ever since.

Q: What kind of meditation did you practice?

Arjuna Ardagh: Well at that time it was TM, transcendental meditation, but things shifted after that. I did not stay with it for very long. I studied it for about 10 years then I did a lot of other things after that.

Q: Did you have any teachers besides meditation teachers?

Arjuna Ardagh: My main teacher was a man named H.W.L Poonja, who was also known as Papaji. I lived with him in Lucknow for seven years. So he was really the one who was most influential for me.

Q: Did Papaji at any point charge you for the Advaita teachings, atma vichara (self enquiry) or anything like that?

Arjuna Ardagh: No.

Q: Did he have a collection bowl; did you ever see anything like that?

Arjuna Ardagh: No.

Q: His teachings were basically dana - a gift?

Arjuna Ardagh: No there wasn't even dana. He was a retired man; I met him when he was in his late 70s. I think he was 87 when he died. I can't remember exactly, but he had a pension and lived in a small house. He lived very simply; he didn't need anything. We just hung out; I don't think there was no arrangement like that at all. There was nothing.

Q: Did he ever speak to you about why he didn't charge or why he taught that way?

Arjuna Ardagh: I think it wasn't a big topic of conversation, but I think many times he would say "I don't need anything from anybody." It was just a practical thing, he didn't need anything. He didn't have any organization. There was no overhead, so he just showed up at his house every day and met whoever was there. When I first met him there were maybe 8 or 10 people in the room. Most of the days he actually provided us with lunch. (Laughter) So it was like that you know.

Q: Were there any other types of teachings where you had to spend money on in some way? Whether it was meditation, some kind of course, lecture or satsang?

Arjuna Ardagh: Well Papaji asked me to give satsang. So I had never really attended satsang with anybody as a participant. My experience with satsang has only been leading it, except with him. I've paid a lot of money with things that have helped me over the years. I've probably spent half a million dollars over my life. In different courses and things that have been helpful. And I don't see so much of a distinction between spiritual teachings like that and other kinds of courses that have been helpful to me. Sometimes they are free, sometimes they are not. I personally don't think it matters very much. It's whatever works best you know.

Q: How would you describe the model that you use for your awakening coaching training?

Arjuna Ardagh: Well I do a lot of work for free and I teach by donation as well. I do tele- seminars for free. I write articles for free. I give away most of what I do anyway. I have also developed a coaching model which I think is quite useful. I wouldn't say it's necessarily the only way to do it, but I do take coaching clients as well. This is not exactly Advaita teaching, it's more of a coaching method based in awakening. It's not really like satsang because satsang is the transmission of waking up to what you already are. With awakening coaching it's much more of a focusing on living your life; like unfolding your gifts in an effective way. And I charge money for that. I basically don't charge a fixed amount, but when I take a coaching client I interview them to see what they want to do with their life. If they have

money, then I ask them to pay some money because I have to live you know. When I train other people to be coaches, they pay a fee and if they can't afford a fee they ask for a scholarship and we give them a scholarship. Basically my attitude is, you need to be sane about this, we have to cover our expenses, I'm not making a profit and I'm not getting fat and rich. To have a website, to have technology and so on, somehow or other bills have to be paid so that's how I do it. I don't have a big fanatic thing about it. I give stuff away for free if people can't afford something, I give them a scholarship, and for people who can afford it, I'm grateful to them for their help.

Q: So any person that approaches you to be coached and does not have the financial resources has an option of a scholarship?

Arjuna Ardagh: Well, that's not quite right, it's not like I take just anybody for coaching, but if I feel that somebody is a suitable candidate for coaching and I feel like I can help them, then we discuss together what we are going to be doing about that piece of it. There are plenty of people that I have coached for free and there are plenty of people where I ask them to pay. I really keep it quite flexible.

There's another piece to this John, in my opinion, which is when I went to see Poonjaji, I didn't pay him any money, but I gave up a lot to be with him. I had a house in Seattle that I sold. I really gave up my whole life. I had a successful business and I gave that up and I traveled to India because I so was deeply longing for freedom. When I met him he didn't ask me for any money, but that doesn't mean that I hadn't made any sacrifice. I had given up a lot. I hadn't given it to him, but I had given up a lot and because I had given up a lot it means that I didn't go there with a casual attitude. I went there with a very focused and decimated attitude that I was serious about this. And I think that's an important thing, whether it's done through money or something else. People need to be serious and dedicated about what's important in their lives otherwise you just become a dilettante, following one teacher or another. In the Tibetan tradition, they have the practice of Ngöndro where you do three years, three months, three days and three hours of sometimes a hundred thousand prostrations. The purpose of this,

you could ask why do you need to do 100 thousand prostrations, at the end of that they give you the pointing out instructions. They give you the instructions that Padmasambhava gave in his terma, but it's not given immediately, you have to earn it. You have to show that you are serious. I don't really care how people show that they are serious, but I'm aware particularly in our culture, we are a fast food culture, we want something for nothing all the time, we want it cheap, we want it quick and I don't think that works with the pursuit of freedom. So I'm interested in providing people with an opportunity and I if I meet some boy for example I make sure that they are serious. I coached somebody recently who was helping people in prison, right. That means going to the prison everyday to volunteer work with prisoners. Well I was delighted to coach that person for free because he had demonstrated already that he is serious you see. I had another guy in England actually who was working with troubled youth for free. He was donating his time to work with troubled youth. I gave him the training for free because I know it's going to go to good use, but honestly there are a lot of people in this country who hop from one thing to another looking for a quick fix and somehow we have to find a way to find out if people are serious and committed to freedom. I have no problem with making that money if money is the easiest way to do it. Money is a good way in this culture for people to show that they are serious. What I think is a problem is not using money, but rather if the teacher becomes greedy and that money is their motivation. They're just trying to do stuff just to get money at any cost and there is plenty of that around. Maybe not so much in these circles, but there are plenty of people teaching stuff that just want to make a lot of money. I don't really like that. That's one extreme but on the other hand to say that there should never be money involved, well that's a form of dogmatism you know and generally dogmatism gets us into trouble whenever we say that anything should always be a certain way. We become rigid in our thinking, so personally I have no problem experiencing each situation fresh and feeling what is appropriate.

Q: What do you mean by dogmatism?

Arjuna Ardagh: Having a rigid attitude about something.

Q: Like the dharma for example, where in Buddha's teaching he said the dharma should not be traded, he made some very clear comments about it being a gift?

Arjuna Ardagh; Yes.

Q: They say the same thing about the Advaita Vedanta.

Arjuna Ardagh; Who says that?

Q: The lineage of Shankara for example.

Arjuna Ardagh; Well this sounds to me, if you forgive me for saying so that you have come to a fixed conclusion about this based in tradition which is fine; personally I'm not a traditionalist, I think life changes all the time and your referencing Buddha, but Buddha was making some dramatic breaks from the tradition he was born into. He wasn't a conformist, Buddha was born at a time of very elaborate Vedic rituals and his teachings were revolutionary. The same with Shankara, so in my opinion, this is just an opinion, I'm not trying to sell you anything but people who are revolutionary in their thinking are not following an established tradition, thousands of years old they are thinking fresh out of the box now. Where I think we would agree you and I is that we don't want to be giving the dharma motivated by greed. Right. Where I think we disagree, you and I, I feel the issue around the dharma and money should be made intelligently based upon a fresh observation in this moment that can best serve people. It sounds like you are not interested in a fresh observation, but following more of a traditional. Something that's been laid down in tradition, all the best to you for that but we are not on the same page.

Let me ask you this, imagine we got a psychotherapist like John Prendergast. Let's say we have got a psychotherapist who goes through a strong awakening. So they have a some strong realization of their true nature as unborn consciousness, but they continue practicing psychotherapy where that realization now starts to influence the way they do psychotherapy. Does that mean they can't charge for psychotherapy anymore?

Q: I would say that psychotherapy and the Advaita teachings are two very different things. One is dealing with the temporal reality and the other is dealing with the absolute.

Arjuna Ardagh: That's true. That's a good point, I think that's a really good point that you just made. My orientation around this is when I'm dealing with the absolute, I generally don't charge. If you go to my blog, there's a gazillion, I don't even publish books anymore, I put everything on my blog for free, right. So you will find everything you need to know about what I teach is there free. I just put up a site on Papaji's teachings I just built on my own dime. It's all free, right. If I do satsang type events it's always free, but I also support people in what you are calling the temporal realm. I don't do psychotherapy, I do coaching, right.

Q: Right.

Arjuna Ardagh: I support people on how to help their lives flow more smoothly, but it's from this perspective, it's from this perspective of greater spaciousness. So I help people a lot with relationships. I help people a lot with work and money and helping them finding their correct gift to the world. For those services I charge money because it's dealing with the temporal world. I'm dealing with the temporal world from also knowing the perspective of the absolute realm.

Q: Ok, I understand.

Arjuna Ardagh: And for me John, I feel really relaxed with that attitude, but I also try and take a tolerant attitude to other people. There's a whole smorgasbord of stuff and I really don't have a problem with any of it. If there are people charging, I think Tony Robbins charges 10,000 dollars an hour for coaching. I don't have any problem with that. People have all different things, I really don't care honestly. But I'm interested in making the world a better place. I have no problem with money changing hands. I have no problem with money not changing hands. What I do have a problem with is people getting moralistic and judging other people. That's what I don't like. That I feel is not in the interest of the dharma and actually, a lot of that goes on. A lot of people who think of themselves as spiritual are using their

spirituality to get on a pulpit and preach to other people. I don't like that. I especially don't like that around money. For somebody to say, this is how it should be, this is the correct way because how are is no different from a Sunday school preacher who says, this is what it says in the bible, now what you are saying, this is what Buddha said, it's the same kind of preaching and dogmatism, and I don't think that makes the world a better place. Put that in your book.

Q: Ok. (Laughs) that's very clear, thank you. I will.

Arjuna Ardagh; I feel that most of the harm that happens in this world not happening because someone is charging for the dharma. I would say the harm that is happening is because people are judging each other and making each other wrong. So I'll be interested to see your book, how much of it reflects a curious attitude, or how much of it reflects the dogma.

Can I add just one more thing to this interview?

Q: Sure.

Arjuna Ardagh: Ok. Let's just take this world of satsang and Advaita. And I'm not talking about anything traditional, but people are wondering around the planet these days who are identified with that world right.

Q: Yes.

Arjuna Ardagh: So, people who are very into Advaita, satsang today in 2012. What I have noticed is this, because I used to be a part of it myself, is that it is definitely possible to have a deep and profound realization of what you are calling the absolute dimension of that silence and spaciousness and freedom beyond the mind. There is no question. When I work with people I feel that people can get that in a few minutes. It's not very difficult to drop out of the mind for a few moments right, but what I have noticed is pragmatically, I'm not speaking theoretically here, pragmatically the majority of people that go for that kind of realization generally are not living lives that are working very well on a practical level, right. So in that world of spiritual teachings you find many people are struggling with money. I've noticed that many people have difficulties with

intimacy, just being intimate, vulnerable and honest with other people. And I could go on and on and on.

So what I see is a kind of disconnect and the disconnect is even advocated in the teachings; this world is just an illusion, and its maya, just don't pay any attention to it, just rest in the Self, or whatever you call that. So my take on this John, is I really don't experience that to be true. I would say if you try and rest in the self or in the absolute, if your material life is not attended to, it's going to bite you in the butt. It's going to become a constant distraction if your relationships are not loving and flowing, if your money is not flowing, if your health is not good. If you're out of integrity, if you don't have good relationships with your parents and children, that is going to become a constant distraction. Either you deny it or you have to attend to it. So I feel like getting your life so that it flows well in a material way is a really good foundation for freedom.

And the other thing I have noticed the other way around, actually if you experience freedom and allow that freedom to move more into your life, it becomes the foundation of a good life. Freedom opens up creativity which can allow you to give your gift. It opens up your relationships to be more loving. This is very heretical from the traditions you come from, but awakening has many material benefits that I have no problem with at all, you see. So awakening to your true nature, makes your life better. I think that's a good thing. right. So basically most of what I do is what you call the temporal realm. Most of the help I give people is to get their money flowing, to help clear up their difficulties with their parents, with their children, to find a mate if they don't have one. To have better more loving sex to find that gift and give it to the world and make money. Those are the things that 99 percent of my awareness has to do with because it is who you already are. You don't need help to be free; you just need to be undistracted to be free. You see and because I am almost entirely helping people's day to day temporal life, I don't have any problem whatsoever to ask to give something back.

Q: That's good. I did have one other question about an article you wrote for the Huffington Post, charging money for the truth, you said

that, "There's a common saying in India that if a teacher charges money for "the dharma" (loosely translated, "teachings about the truth") he or she will go to a special section of hell set aside for spiritual entrepreneurs, an area cornered off and designed to be much nastier than the areas for axe murderers, rapists, and the like.'

What are your thoughts on karma and people who charge for spiritual teachings?

Arjuna Ardagh: Well you have got to remember that every action you take has karma. Whether it's positive or negative or neutral; in other words, pleasurable or painful or neutral, everything you do has karma, right. The way to be free of karma in my experience is not to avoid doing bad things, but to know who you really are. To know who you really are is consciousness, awareness, and presence. Not to know it just intellectually, but to know it when you close your eyes, there is infinite space, right here right now. That infinite space that is available to you moment to moment is not subject to karma. Infinite space is not affected by karma. It's only the mind body organism that is affected by karma. So the way to be free of karma is not to try and manipulate your actions and be really careful about what you do. The way to be free of karma is to wake up to the dream of separation. So that's one answer, in terms of the relative aspects of it. I think we need to look at this intelligently; if you cheat somebody, if you take money from somebody who can't afford it, if you don't provide any benefit, obviously that's going to come back to you in one way or another. In a very simple way it's going to come back to you; you are going to get a bad reputation – Right? If you slap somebody, that's going to come back to you because they won't feel so open to you anymore and it's also going to come back to you because it affects your reputation. It makes you feel guilty. In my opinion to help someone in a genuine way to lead a more fulfilling life, which includes opening up to their absolute dimension as well as to their relative gifts, to support somebody in a way they feel grateful for and to receive money, I don't see how that has any negative karma attached to it. Except if you want to start quoting scripture, you can make anything true, but if we just sat here in the realm of common sense I don't see how spending your life, dedicating your life to helping people and being

willing to receive some support to pay your bills, I do not see how that is going to create negative karma. If you do then you've got to run by your own vision, but I don't see that. I see that for example judging people creates negative karma, but you may have noticed in that article which I wrote a long time ago, but I think that article goes on to say what do you think? What is your opinion?

Q: Right.

Arjuna Ardagh: In my opinion, this is just ,my opinion, gluing ourselves to Vedic texts or even to Buddhists texts or to the bible, its just different kinds of dogmatism you know. And you can shift from being a Christian fundamentalist to being a Buddhist fundamentalist, you are just as trapped in thoughts, you know. Where these teachings point to is freedom, not dogmatism. Where these teachings point to is a condition of absolute freedom where every moment is fresh and new and beautiful. And then what you do and what you say is in alignment with that. So personally I'm not a traditionalist in that way, I don't view any particular book as holy; it has to be read with intelligence.

Q: Yes.

Arjuna Ardagh: Well you asked about Papaji and what he did and it's true he didn't charge money because he didn't need any money. He was in his 80s and was on a pension. When he sent me back to America to teach, he told me to receive money from people to cover expenses. Ok.

Q: Ok.

Arjuna Ardagh: That was his instruction to me. Right. And the other thing he told me many times was do not follow anybody. Basically he said freedom is not for sheep, freedom is for lions and lions don't follow the pack. Lions walk alone. Lions are not followers, sheep are followers. You see. He said people that are sheep will become followers of a dogma. People that are lions will become embodiments of freedom. That's what Papaji left me with. He didn't leave me with a dictate of you should do this or you should do that. You see.

Q: Ok. That's a very important piece there, that's the first time I've heard anyone say that.

Arjuna Ardagh: Right, put that in your book.

Q: I meant that he gave instructions to charge for the teachings.

Arjuna Ardagh: No he didn't, well he said, his exact words were "you should be willing to receive money to cover for the expenses."

Q: Ok. That's different because I also know with some traditional teachers, they do receive money to cover their travel expenses, basically what you said, as long as they are not hoarding the money.

Arjuna Ardagh: Yeah.

Q: Or amassing great amounts of money in a some Swiss bank account. (Laughter)

Arjuna Ardagh: (Raising his right hand) I raise my right hand, since I have been teaching the dharma which is about 21 years, I have never hoarded a single penny.

Q: Ok.

Arjuna Ardagh. I have never hoarded a thing, on the contrary I have actually spent it. I inherited money and I spent it all on the work I do with people. I have not hoarded a penny, but I am willing to receive money, not only for rent and for travel, but also for websites, and for people who build websites and to eat and to have rent to live. All of those things are considered to be cost of living.

Q: Ok, understood.

Arjuna Ardagh. All right man this has been a spirited conversation hasn't it?

Q: (Laughs) Yes thank you very much I really appreciate it. It was very nice speaking with you.

END OF INTERVIEW