



37. BHIKKHU BODHI

Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American Buddhist monk from New York City. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1944, he obtained a BA in philosophy from Brooklyn College (1966) and a PhD in philosophy from Claremont Graduate School (1972).

Drawn to Buddhism in his early 20s, after completing his university studies he traveled to Sri Lanka, where he received novice ordination in 1972 and full ordination in 1973, both under the late Ven. Ananda Maitreya, the leading Sri Lankan scholar-monk of recent times.

He was appointed editor of the Buddhist Publication Society (in Sri Lanka) in 1984 and its president in 1988. Ven. Bodhi has many important publications to his credit, either as author, translator, or editor, including the *Buddha — A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (co-translated with Ven. Bhikkhu Nanamoli (1995), *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha — a*

New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya (2000), and In the Buddha's Words (2005).

In May 2000 he gave the keynote address at the United Nations on its first official celebration of Vesak (the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing away). He returned to the U.S. in 2002. He currently resides at Chuang Yen Monastery and teaches there and at Bodhi Monastery. He is currently the chairman of Yin Shun Foundation.

INTERVIEW

Q: When you first became interested in Buddhism, was it through Theravada or another school?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Actually when I first became interested in Buddhism, this would be back in the period of 1965/66, the books that were most easily available were the writings on Zen Buddhism by DT Suzuki and his English American interpreter, Alan Watts. That was my initial introduction to Buddhism. This was my last year in college, in Brooklyn College. Then I went to graduate school in California to Claremont graduate school. My first year at graduate school, there came to live at the same residence where I was living, a Buddhist monk from Vietnam.

He was from the Vietnamese Mahayana tradition. Vietnam is quite close to Cambodia and partly because of a result of a wave of modernization that was sweeping over Vietnamese Buddhism, there was a lot of interest in the text of early Buddhism, the Pali cannon. My Vietnamese Buddhist teacher had the English translations of the Nikayas in his personal library and he

stressed to me the importance of learning the Nikayas to get a foundational understanding of Buddhism.

Q: The way in which your teacher taught, was this system set up as a monastery system, a school or through formal classes of some kind?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: We were both graduate students together at the same university. So occasionally he would give some instructions in Buddhism to me or give me things to read. But it wasn't quite in the sense of a formal instruction studying under a teacher because we were both doing our graduate studies.

He went back to Vietnam in 1970. The next year a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka came to the United States. He was coming through Los Angeles and at the time I had become associated with a Buddhist mediation center in Los Angeles. I was set up by another Vietnamese monk that was a friend of my original teacher.

Ok, so this monk from Sri Lanka, his name was Venerable Piyadassi. In a few days I had the task of driving him around and showing him Los Angeles and we became friendly. This was just over about a week or so when he was in Los Angeles. And when he departed at the Los Angeles airport he said one day you should come to Sri Lanka and if you like I could arrange for you to stay in a Buddhist monastery. So then over the course of the next year, I decided that I wanted to go to Sri Lanka and become ordained as a monk. I wrote to this monk Venerable Piyadassi and asked if he could arrange for me to take ordination in Sri Lanka. And then he connected me to an elder Sri Lankan monk named Venerable Ananda Maitreya who would be able to give me ordination and instruct me and guide me in my studies. I wrote to Venerable Ananda Maitreya who was completely fluent

in English and he wrote back saying that I would be welcome to stay at his monastery. In early November of 1972 I arrived at his monastery in Sri Lanka. Then I was ordained a couple of weeks after that.

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bam.html>

Q: It sounds like this happened over a very short period of time; from the time you first met this Buddhist monk in college.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes, that was 1967.

Q: So three or four years?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Altogether it was about a five-year period.

Q: So from the time you met the Buddhist monk that you were studying with and the time that you decided to become ordained, was that one year or two years?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Actually, I became ordained as a novice in the Vietnamese system with the first monk; the Vietnamese monk that I became friends with. So I guess after a few months; I suppose it just happened pretty quickly in my mind.

Q: How old were you?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Twenty-two. (Laughs)

Q: It sounds like your decision was made pretty fast.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: It seemed to happen over a couple of months, yes a few months.

Q: Can you recall the process that you went through? About becoming ordained, was it easy for you?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes it was. There was no struggle at all with the decision. In a way it just seemed like what I was aspiring for. And now it just seemed like the encounter with this monk from Vietnam was removing the roadblocks and opening the driveway to the path that I wanted to take.

Q: And leading up to that as a child, what interests did you have?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: It was not religion or monasticism in any way. I was just like an ordinary student.

Q: Did you have a Christian upbringing?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: My family was Jewish, but secular Jewish, not religious Jewish. When I was a child we went to the synagogue maybe just on the

high Jewish religious holidays, but at home we weren't religiously observant.

Q: Was anyone in your family religious, such as your grandparents or relatives?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: My father's side of the family was conservative Jewish and I think in my father's home, he was brought up to be religiously observant. But by the time he reached adulthood he pretty much rejected his religious heritage and wanted us to assimilate into secular American society. So he didn't give much attention to religious matters apart from preserving the sense of Jewish cultural and ethnic identity. And this was quite common in the United States.

Q: It is?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes.

Q: At that age in time?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: In that period, young Jewish people were brought up in secular Jewish homes.

Q: At any point during these Buddhist teachings, was it always through dana or was there any type of monetary transaction?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: No, there was never any type of monetary transaction.

Q: Never?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: No.

Q: With none of the teachers?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: No, all of the teachers that I studied with, stayed with, especially after becoming ordained, there was no expectation of payment at all because all of the monks lived in dependence and on the charity of lay people.

Q: Do you know if the Buddha had any teachers in the Vedic tradition that had studied the Upanishads? In the secret forest tradition?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: This is an interesting question. First I'm not so sure that from the texts of early Buddhism that we can find clear evidence that the Buddha was familiar with the Upanishads' teaching. I mean the Buddha has a critique of atma or atta which is the doctrine of self. But it seems that the Buddha is dealing with the doctrine of self. Also he critiques various philosophical views of the self, but he also is critiquing the ordinary clinging; to the notion of I or the conception of the ego self.

Q: As with the five aggregates as an identity?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes, identification with the five aggregates as even being the self or in some way possession of the self. Ok, but we don't, I haven't found a direct critique of what is the cardinal doctrine of the Upanishads; what is the identity of the Self or atman?

Q: Brahman?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes with Brahman, the ultimate reality or the ground of the universe. Now we don't find any formula like that in the Nikayas.

Q: I haven't found it either and have searched through it, but I know he mentions Brahma.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: He mentions Brahma but we don't find mention of the neuter impersonal Brahman.

Q: Yes, nirguna Brahman? Without attributes, non indicative type of all encompassing absolute truth.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes. I haven't found the clear evidence for that. There are a few little statements here and there that seem to be playing off this.

Q: Yes.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes, you know those?

Q: Yes.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: There is one that comes in the Majjhima Nikaya that is in the end of sutta 51 where he is speaking about the progressive development of the disciple where he goes on through the different stages of meditation and insight and at the end he becomes an arahat. A liberated one and he says he dwells, atma bhutto brahma vihara. He dwells with a self that has become Brahma. So it seems almost to be echoing the Upanishads formula of the self that has become Brahma.

Q: Yes, there is a distinction between Brahma and Brahman.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes, in this particular grammatical form Brahma Bhutto, one can't determine whether Brahma here represents Brahman or Brahma; the impersonal absolute or Brahma as the supreme deity. And then the word Brahma in the sense of holy or supreme occurs in numerous compounds in the Pali canon. What's called the spiritual life or the holy life is brahmacharya. Literally it's the course or path to the holy or to the divine, the divine life. And then the Buddha himself is said to be Brahma bhutto, one who has become Brahma which is understood to mean, become the Holy, become the supreme. But there's not an explicit statement or an explicit formulation that uses Brahma clearly in the sense of the impersonal divine absolute.

And also looking at the development of Indian religions historically, we usually assume that Indian spirituality had been diffused throughout the whole of India, pretty much in a homogenous way. But recent scholarly studies distinguish between the types of spirituality that flourished in northeast India and in central north India and it seems that the center of

Brahminic culture and Brahminic spirituality would have been in central and west India. Where as in north east India, a different type of spirituality was dominant which was that of the sramana. Of course the Brahmins were already spreading to east India and making their influence felt. But I think they had not achieved the dominance there required in later times. It's quite possible that the Upanasadic type teachings were cantered more in north central India rather than in east India. There's an interesting book I just came across a year ago. I have it upstairs. It's called the origin of yoga and Tantra. The author is Geoffrey spelled in the British way.

Q: The Buddha was obviously exposed to yoga, Jainism and they all practiced these various ascetic type of practices.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes.

Q: I read in the Pali cannon that the Buddha also practiced breathing methods like khumbaka (breath retention), but all of these methods gave him splitting headaches.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes, there is something called the upanicajhana which means the non breathing meditation.

Q: So he tried that?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Restricting the breath yes.

Q: Then he said that he didn't feel that it was conducive.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Right.

Q: Then nirvikalpa Samadhi or nirodha samampatti, is that how you say it?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes.

Q: So is that meditation (jhana) the same steps of the meditation that you go through with yoga more or less? What would you say is the difference?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: This is, here is an interesting problem that arises from the texts. According to the suttas where the Buddha gives his own biographical account after he left his family life and came down to the state of Magadatta and became an ascetic. He then learned and studied under two prominent meditation teachers of the period and under one he practiced and reached the attainment. He uses the terminology, in the Buddha's text the base of nothingness, (Pali term here). Then he became dissatisfied with that. Then he studied under another teacher and under him he reached the forth. The state of nothingness is the third of the four formless meditations. Then under the second teacher he learned the forth of the four formless meditations which he reached the base of perception or non-perception and again he was dissatisfied with that.

Then he went off by himself and practiced for several years these extreme austerities, self-mortifications, until he came to the verge of death. Then he

realized that this was not the way to enlightenment. He then had a recollection of an experience that he had when he was just a youngster. Are you familiar with that?

Q: Yes.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Where he sat under a tree when his father was plowing the field and he entered into a state which he calls the jhanas. So now he reflects back on that experience and he sees that, he asks himself could this be the way to enlightenment. Then he has the intuition; yes this is the way to enlightenment. Then he develops the four jhanas and on that basis he reaches the higher knowledges and then he achieves full enlightenment.

Ok now what is puzzling here is under the first two teachers, whom under he learned the highest formless meditations, there is no mention of him reaching the jhanas. And yet it would seem that in order to reach the formless meditations one would have to go through the jhanas because the lower four jhanas are like the lower four rungs on a ladder.

The four formless attainments are like the four higher rungs on a ladder. And you don't jump from the ground to the fifth rung on the ladder but you go up through the first four rungs.

But no mention is made of that. In the suttas themselves, why is it that he finished with the ascetic practice. Why did he recollect this experience of the jhanas when he was a youngster rather than the experience of jhanas he might have attained when practicing under these teachers.

I don't know the answer to that question.

Q: At what point did the Buddha first mention dana?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: The practice of dana was in no way an invention or an innovation of the Buddha. The practice of dana seems to have been already a well established practice in Indian religious scenes of the period. I think it operates first within Brahmanic culture because the Brahman were the ones who devoted themselves to the study of the Vedas, the performance of the religious rituals, and so those Brahmins who were probably following the duty of Brahmins and being supported by donations from lay people . Particularly during later times by support from the kings and even in the Pali cannon we read that prominent Brahmins had received gifts of land from the kings; gifts of cattle. So that's in brahminic culture, then in sramanaic culture. In the culture of the renunciate ascetics they would all depend on their livelihood on donations and offerings from householders. So this was already a pretty well established culture at the time the Buddha appeared on the scene.

And even before the Buddha's enlightenment, from the beginning of his quest, as soon as he renounced and cut off his hair and beard and went forth as an ascetic, he would have gone with his alms bowl, through the towns and villages collecting offerings of alms food from people.

Q: And what exactly would be the reason for not charging somebody for the teachings?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: I say that charging for the teaching would be in a sense a travesty of the basic underlying principles of Indian spirituality. During that

period, particularly within Buddhist culture, the idea is that householders provide monastics with what is called umnisa dana which means a gift of material things: robes food, dwelling places, medicines and then the monastics provide lay people with what's called dhamma dana, the gift of the dhamma. So it's considered like a kind of exchange, but it's not conducted in the sense like a business transaction, like you give me food and I teach you the dhamma. If you don't give me food, I don't teach you the dhamma. It's just that the monastics take the responsibility of spreading the dhamma, teaching the dhamma. And then lay people understand it. The monastics live with the support of the offerings that they make. And so it's done as a kind of exchange of love and mutual support rather than of a business transaction.

Q: Some are saying that Buddhism should be more like psychology where you have clients. Have you heard about that?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes, I've come across that.

Q: And where they charge by the hour?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Oh no. (Laughter) I have to say I understand that at least from the perspective of some teachers. They remain as lay people but they are living pretty much full time through teaching and so their conditions are different from that of monastics. I don't like the idea of making a payment of a fee a necessary condition for somebody to be entitled to take a course, but I can understand how meditation centers have to pay for their fuel, during the winter. They might have rent to pay, or have payments on the buildings to meet. They have to provide food for the meditators, or various other expenses. So I could see that they would levy a charge for meditators

to come to take courses there. So I wouldn't condemn or blame them for doing so or say that it is a betrayal of the spirit of Buddhism.

What would concern me and what happens in some of the insight meditation centers that I know of is that the expenses of the lay people / meditators who meet to take the course, do not go as fees to the teacher but go to maintenance of the center.

And then after that, an announcement is made that the teachers depend on dana, on offerings from the retreatants. So it's requested that people give what they can according to their means.

In that case I would say it's acceptable and understandable under the circumstances. But then you probably know more about meditation centers that charge for a lot of courses (laughs) where rather extravagant fees are charged and teachers say if you want to see me then you have to meet a certain fee for the hour. Then I would say this is going quite contrary to the spirit of dana.

Q: What about “suggested donations”, making some kind of a suggestion or implanting a thought in a person’s mind in terms of a monetary figure? Would that be considered dana or something else?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: I think I would prefer it done in the form of suggesting that the students give a particular amount to support the teacher, or rather I would say what would be in the range of acceptability for the organizers of the course or retreats to announce approximately what it would take to support the course. Or they could mention an expected figure, let me just see how to phrase this. Perhaps they could give a suggested amount of a

donation but then they should also include a rider saying that if one is unable to meet this amount, they shouldn't feel ashamed in any way or humiliated, but one should just give according to one's ability within reason. I would say that would be in my view acceptable.

And this would be within the context of lay teachers. Within monastics I think it's just sufficient to announce that the monastic depends on offerings from the laity and that the donations are not going to the monastics as an individual but going to the support of his own temple, monastery or center, or to provide the airfare for the teacher.

Q: Ok, let's say that a lay person/teacher already has their basic needs met: they have a house, or some kind of a roof over their head, they have food, clothing, heat, and enough material possessions to live a comfortable life. Then why would they need extra money?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Yes, that's a good question. On the one hand I would say, imagine that there are always ongoing expenses that anybody has to meet. Even though that one might have enough, one has covered one's heating cost for one winter but there is going to be another winter with new heating costs. There will always be the need to buy more food.

(Editors note). The tape ran out at this point and we did not get a chance to finish this interview, or to elaborate on what he was going to say, (so much more) so hopefully we will finish this in the future.

END OF INTERVIEW