



## 41. BHIKKHU AMARO

Born in England in 1956, Ven. Amaro Bhikkhu received his BSc. in Psychology and Physiology from the University of London. Spiritual searching led him to Thailand, where he went to Wat Pah Nanachat, a Forest Tradition monastery established for Western disciples of Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah, who ordained him as a bhikkhu in 1979. He returned to England and joined Ajahn Sumedho at the newly established Chithurst Monastery. He resided for many years at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, making trips to California every year during the 1990s.

In June of 1996 he established Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, California, where he was co-abbot with Ajahn Pasanno until July, 2010. Ajahn Amaro has written a number of books, including an account of his 830-mile trek from Chithurst to Harnham Vihara called Tudong - the Long Road North, republished in the expanded book Silent Rain. Other works published by him include Small Boat, Great Mountain (2003), Rain on the Nile (2009) and The Island - An Anthology of the Buddha's Teachings on Nibbana (2009) co-written with Ajahn Pasanno. Ajahn Amaro returned to Amaravati in July, 2010. At that time, he then moved back to Amaravati

Buddhist Monastery in England to take up the position of abbot of this large monastic community.

## **INTERVIEW**

***Q: You have an interesting name, doesn't Amaro mean never changing or immortal in Sanskrit?***

Amaro Bhikkhu: Yes maro is death and amaro is deathless.

***Q: And "Bhikkhu", could you please translate that word for people who may not be familiar with it?***

Amaro Bhikkhu: Bhikkhu means Buddhist monk and the Sanskrit version of that is Bhikshu. The pali version is Bhikkhu. It has two different derivations. One means one who lives on alms food. In India, even today, bhiksha is the word for food; alms food in particular. And it also means one who sees the danger in samsara. So two quite different meanings, but they are very closely related.

And the Buddha said, he is thereby a Bhikkhu merely because he seeks alms from others by following in the whole code of morality. Herein his conduct has transcended both good and evil whose conduct is sublime; who lives and understands in this world, he is called a bhikkhu.

***Q: What is the true purpose of seeking alms?***

Amaro Bhikkhu. The purpose of seeking alms is to stay alive (laughs) because these bodies need to eat and have to be sustained. And the mode of life that the Buddha espoused himself wasn't invented by him by any means, but it's the way of life of what is called the shamans or sramanas in Sanskrit, which is the wanderers. They are just seekers. And so, such people and seekers live at the margins of society and take precepts and vows of harmlessness, celibacy and so on. A part of that is because of the way of life of the sramana as codified in the Buddhist monastic rule. One is to be living on alms; so this means whatever is freely offered without coercion by those in society who are favorably disposed, but to see value in what you are doing and to try and support you in some way.

So the alms bowl is then your connection with the material world in terms of sustaining your life; in sustaining your vitality and that is where the food you eat as a monk or a nun is received into that bowl and that's what you eat from. Your very life source is seen as being an offering. That's what's offered by the world through the hearts and hands of helpful friendly people. So living on alms has the purpose of sustaining your life, but also it creates a bridge between the monastic order and the greater society. One of the reasons the Buddha made it against our rules to grow food and to keep food overnight, to ask for food, you can't just knock on people's doors or walk up to people and beg because the monastic order needs to live in relationship to the greater society so we can't just hide out in the mountains and grow our own vegetables. We follow the original rule so going for alms creates a link, a symbiotic dependency, and that creates a link where the spiritual resources within the monastic community then become directly accessible to the broader public. So then people always have a reason to draw closer to monastics, even if they might have eremitical desires - leave me alone I want to meditate.

They have to be a little bit not alone each day or they can't survive. So it was deliberately set up by the Buddha in order to help create a spiritual teaching that crossed all strata of society so it wasn't just for an elite of renunciates, but it was going to bridge into the broader population as well.

***Q: What if these monks were to live in mountainous regions where it was impossible to beg during certain times of the year in winter; would it then be appropriate to store food or live off agriculture or other means?***

Amaro Bhikku: Well that's what happened in Korea, China and Tibet to a certain extent. Korea particularly because the Buddhist community was oppressed by the various non Buddhist monarchs, so they had to go off and hide in the mountains, deliberately and away from the villages so if they were to survive, then they had to grow their own rice and vegetables and so on. That is contrary to the original rule. We are not even supposed to dig the ground, we are not supposed to break the leaf of a living plant, so our rules legislate against them, but in those circumstances you can see why those customs began, and of course once in place that's the way things gets done.

Even so, in southern Buddhism there has been less of that kind of oppression. The climate is much more conducive to live flexibly. You don't need a lot of gear to survive a winter in Thailand, Sri Lanka or Burma. You live very adaptively, in the cold climates. Such as is the case in Korea where it could be 30 degrees below in winter or in northern China. If you live in a remote place you can't just run on wishful thinking, in Samadhi. You actually have to get the veggies and pickles in otherwise you won't eat and you're going to die. But those things have been done and if you talk to Buddhist scholars from those countries, they will still clearly situate that there are rules and that we should live on alms, we shouldn't grow food or

pick food, and so on and so forth. So there are adaptations over the centuries that have happened, but even in those societies it is recognized, ideally a Buddhist monastic lives on alms, and that is the original structure that was formatted. Not everyone in those countries like Korea or Japan are aware of that, but if you talk to people who study the scriptures and the origins of their own traditions, they tend to acknowledge that it's a wonderful gift like in a place like Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma. Those traditions are carried on in a reasonably uninterrupted way.

So in those countries, it is recognized that adaptations got made out of a sense of contingency to do what you had to, given the circumstances. Better to go off into the mountains and grow your own rice than the sangha and religion to fade out all together. In Tibet, what they did, they were oppressed for three or four hundred years after the original Buddha dharma in Tibet. They had to go totally underground and the whole monastic order had to exist in secret. They basically functioned as secret monastics for three or four hundred years until another Buddhist monarch came into power, so they could come out of the closet and then other Buddhist traditions could come in, in the 11th century.

So those adaptations have been made and they have their effect over time, but what that does is you do have that sense of impendence so the monastic order can wall itself off from society. So that it doesn't really need anybody else. And that's really not ideal because then the monastic community then becomes a kind of spiritual elite and in some ways and to some extent, the teachings and the practices are less accessible to the greater society.

***Q: What are your views on lay people / householders that learn how to practice vipassana or jhanna from Theravadin monks and do not seek***

***alms, but set up their own meditation centers and charge for their teachings?***

Amaro Bhikku: Well I've been involved with a lot of vipassana groups in various places in California for a long time. Here in Britain also. So my encouragement has always been to always do things on a free will offering model. And so some centers have gone along with that, say like.

***Q: Spirit rock?***

Amaro Bhikku: No Spirit Rock charges, Gil Fonsdale is in charge of it.

***Q: IMS. (Insight Meditation Society).***

Amaro Bikkhu: No it's down in the Stanford University areas. So all their classes and retreats are just done on dana because Gil has a very strong feeling for that model and feels that it's very important that it's one place. The other centers like Spirit Rock and IMS both charge for their retreats and I've been in many many meetings and spent a lot of time giving my opinion when being consulted and encouraging more of a dana model, luring the overheads so that they feel that they don't have to charge money and to pay for the expenses and so on and so forth. Then another major group that does things on dana is the Goeneka tradition. Which is worldwide and none of their centers in which anybody charged any money and I believe its also custom of their practice that when you do the first 10 day retreat , you are not even allowed to make a donation. And when people do make donations they are given offering support for the next round of people who want to come and do retreats there. So that's very

admirable. That's a huge global operation to be making many canthers in Europe, India , USA, Australia and all over.

And they do it all on a strict dana model so I feel kuddos to them that they managed to do that. Other lay vipassana centers have certain elements of doing things on dana, like the dharma seed tape library, that is dharma seed recordings that with our encouragement and lobbying by us saying why don't you do your recordings based on dana. There were quite a few meetings, they were saying oh, I'm not sure, what about the overheads, how is that going to work, but when the dharma seed recordings, which is the audio facility of all the dharma talks at IMS, Spirit Rock, Gaya house etc, When they went to the dana model, I actually believe they made more money when they did things on a free will offering basis than when they charged for the individual tapes and recordings. So that's part of that same group, but the actual staying on retreat, to do a 10 day retreat, at Spirit Rock is quite an expensive undertaking.

Unless you've got a decent income it's very hard to get up and go on a retreat unless you can get scholarship of some kind and they do have some funds that are available for poorer people that can apply for a scholarship to have a reduced fee or a fee waived but some are few and far between . So I'm friendly with all of those people. And when my opinion is asked I strongly encourage the dana model and many of them have a lot of sympathy for that, but the law of their bottom line tends to dominate the discussion.

***Q: Is there any time when it's appropriate to charge for a workshop, retreat, satsang, for a one to one meeting or for the dharma?***

Amaro Bikkhu: I'd say no (laughs), but I'm completely biased because there is also the sense of expecting recompense. It brings a whole different dynamic into the room like when I have been at meetings with vipasana teachers and then in the middle of the conversation they have students calling you up and to visit and I realize 20 minutes into the conversation they are talking about how much they are going to charge these people who call them up and ask for advice over the phone. I'd be like what. (Slaps his head) That will be my reaction, literally the conversation could be going on a considerable amount of time before I realized they are talking in somewhat euphemistic terms about how much should they expect someone to charge for speaking to someone for 45 minutes and comparing it to the 50 minute (hour) a therapist would be expecting or what a person calling saying how much should I offer you, how much should I give for the advice. That whole dynamic to me puts a barrier between the person who's offering advice and the person receiving it. To me it's more important to have a completely unloaded connection so that if someone comes from a poor background and it takes you 5 minutes or three hours for the advice to give, it shouldn't matter. To be of no consequence whatsoever, the person who is teaching can't be thinking oh, I've been chatting to this person for two hours, (laughs) I hope that this is going to be appreciated. This is going to raise the expectation for recompense. I feel that it's very unhelpful to have that sort of dynamic in the room.

Sometimes when you have an event like with the Dali Lama where you have a basketball stadium with twenty thousand people and many people being hired, then you can understand for putting that on, they have to make a large financial out lay,

So in those kinds of situations it makes a bit of sense in order to create dharma-teaching venues for tens of thousands of people. Yes, that's understandable, but even then I wouldn't. I've never set up any kind of event in thirty three years as a monk, in a situation where we were

compelled to charge. Also, the way we would do it, probably the largest I've ever done is 300 or five hundred people and we are hosting it so the monastery shells out the money and if the money comes in, fine. If the money doesn't come in, fine. Say for example an even for three hundred people for the life and teachings of Ajhan Chai, that was organized by Gil Fonesdale group. That was all done on dana. They hired this Unitarian church down in the peninsula near Stanford and we just relied on whatever donations came in. You're glad if you break even and you're even happier if it comes in the black, but you don't make much off of it, if it comes in the red. My experience with doing 10 day retreats on dana for eighty or a hundred people for a period of 10 days, that's a twenty thousand to thirty thousand dollar out lay and that's every year. The monastery sets up a retreat like that and it's done on dana and so it's a big commitment for the organization to make that booking and they don't know if the money is going to come in, but as it happens, every year the money that comes in pretty much covers the event and it's extremely rare that they haven't broken even or even had a little extra come in. So even when there is a substantial out lay, if you have the resources to back that up, then I would encourage it. I can understand if say you are a dharma center in New York and you've got to pay 200 thousand bucks for a stadium.

The people who are looking after the books would say, can we have a little bit of a guarantee about the cash flow and their sense of fiscal responsibility would urge them to do this because they would feel we can't just do it and hope for the best because we haven't got the resources and we don't have the resources to back them up ourselves. So that one circumstance where we would feel that it's reasonable, otherwise I would just set it up another dharma circumstance and let it carry its own life; its own energy with it and what the numbers do is by the by because you created a situation where somebody comes along to this event who is very inspired, and they don't have their checkbook with them that day. You don't really think in these terms ( laughs) and I've known situations where someone comes along to a retreat and says it's a wonderful event, I'm really glad to be here. I've got this corporation and we've got this charitable

section and if you have any projects we could back up (laughs) and the next thing you know there is a multi-million dollar retreat center being funded because of the inspiration that has come from a particular patron being at that event, so the fact that it fell short at that one event is compensated many times over by the good effects and even if it's not the dramatically financial effect, I've known it to happen a couple of times. Even if it's just in the brightening of the lives, improving the wellbeing of many many people, that's worth the money, that's what it's all for - actually bringing blessings into the lives of people and actually bringing qualities of mindfulness and wisdom and wellbeing.

**END OF INTERVIEW**