



42. BHIKKHU THANISSARO

Thānissaro Bhikkhu, also known as Ajaan Geoff (born 1949), is an American Theravada Buddhist monk of the Dhammayut Order (Dhammayutika Nikaya), Thai forest kammattana tradition. He is currently the abbot of Metta Forest Monastery in San Diego County. Thānissaro Bhikkhu is a notably skilled and prolific translator of the Pāli Canon. He is also the author of many free Dhamma books.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu was born Geoffrey DeGraff in 1949 and was introduced to the Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths as a high schooler, during a plane ride from the Philippines. After graduating in 1971 with a degree in European Intellectual History from Oberlin College, he travelled to Thailand, where he practiced meditation under Ajaan Fuang Jotiko, who'd studied under Ajaan Lee. He was ordained in 1976 at Ajaan Lee's Wat Asokaram, where Ajaan Lee's nephew, Phra Rajvarakhun (Samrong Gunavuddho), served as Preceptor for his ordination. Later, he took residence at Wat Dhammasathit in Thailand, where he continued studying under Ajaan Fuang.

Before Ajaan Fuang's death in 1986, he expressed his wish for Ajaan Geoff to become abbot of Wat Dhammasathit. Some time after his teacher's death, Ajaan Geoff was offered the position of abbot, but with "strings... attached" and no authority since he was a Westerner in a monastery founded by and for Thai monks. Instead of taking that position, he travelled to San Diego County in 1991, upon request of Ajaan Suwat Suvaco, where he helped start Metta Forest Monastery. He became abbot of the monastery in 1993. In 1995, Ajaan Geoff became the first American born, non-Thai bhikkhu to be given the title, authority, and responsibility of Preceptor (Upajjhaya) in the Dhammayut Order. He also serves as Treasurer of that order in the United States.

INTERVIEW

Q: Can you please tell me what the word dana means in the Theravada Buddhist tradition?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: It literally means, "gift." It's associated with the word caga, which means generosity or liberality. The two go together.

Q: What are the requirements for somebody to accept dana? For example, does somebody have to be a monk taking certain precepts or living a certain way?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: No. Given the fact that dana means gift, it covers everything from an everyday gift you might give to a member of your family or to a friend, all the way to what you might offer to a member of the Sangha. The expectations, though, differ based on how or why it's being given. If you're a member of the Sangha living off peoples' dana, there's a set of requirements on how you behave before receiving a gift and how you handle the gift once you've received it. This is to preserve the good faith of the donors, and to help keep the monastic institution alive.

Q: Is asking up front for a "suggested donation" technically dana in the Theravada Buddhist sense of the word?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: Technically speaking, it would count as dana. It's like the gift you give to panhandlers. But it's an abuse of the tradition of how dana in the Buddhist sense is taught and practiced. One of the rules the monks adhere to is that you're not supposed to ask for a suggested donation in any way. If people make an offer beforehand, such as, "If you need anything, let me know," or if they word it in a way that places restrictions on the offer, then you can ask within the range of the offer. But even then you have to take in consideration what the person is capable of giving and would like to give.

In the Theravada tradition, the culture of dana is designed to maintain trust on both sides. In that context, it would be considered an abuse if one asks for a suggested donation. A gift should be freely given so it can be freely received. That ensures that there are no strings attached.

Q: Should the student feel obligated in some way? Or feel like they owe a debt for the teachings?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: The only obligation is that you treat the teachings with respect, as you would any gift. In other words, you sincerely put them into practice.

Q: Is there unhealthy dana? Such as giving too much, too little or giving in an inappropriate way?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: Yes, if you're harming yourself or the other person with the gift. That means, on the one hand, giving a gift beyond your means, and on the other, giving something that the recipient shouldn't be using. That would be considered inappropriate.

Q: What are the requirements for a lay teacher to accept dana?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: There are no specific rules for how lay teachers should behave around dana, but when this becomes an institutionalized practice, they're going to see the wisdom of the traditional Buddhist culture of dana. If you keep putting pressure on people to give, or if you misuse their generosity, there's going to be a backlash. I've met many people, for instance, who have been offended by dana talks at the end of retreats, because no matter how tastefully the words are crafted, the underlying intention is obvious: Give to us. Give more than you intended to give. That kind of intention is really offensive when coming from people who have been teaching you to be compassionate and unattached.

Q: What is your view on a layperson charging for a meditation class?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: One problem is the appropriateness of charging for something that originally was freely given. Lay teachers originally got their knowledge about meditations from monastics, but then they turn it around and charge for it. It's like Walt Disney taking a fairy tale from the public domain and turning it into a Walt Disney product and claiming ownership rights over it.

The second problem is that those who pay for a service are in charge of deciding whether they're getting their money's worth. They begin to have a say in what's worth and what's not worth teaching, because after all, it is their money that they're paying. They'll pay for what they want, and not for what they don't want.

In a case like that, teachers become very sensitive to what kind of teaching the audience likes and doesn't like. Even when the sensitivity isn't conscious, it begins to shape what does and doesn't get taught. For example, if you start teaching about karma and rebirth, and the people in the audience show through their expressions that they don't want to hear about these things, you start leaving them out. It's in this way that Dharma-for-sale inevitably becomes Dharma distorted.

I once heard of a behavioral psych class taught by a professor at MIT. The professor had the habit of pacing back and forth in front of the room while he was lecturing, and the students—being MIT students—decided to perform a behavioral psych experiment on him without telling him what they were doing. When he was in the left corner of the room, they'd look at him intently and take notes. When he was in the right corner of the room, they'd look out the window, look bored, whatever. It wasn't long before they had him trained to stop pacing and stay in the left corner. And he never realized what they had done.

The same sort of thing happens all too easily when you teach Dharma for money. The teacher isn't even aware that certain topics have been dropped from the discussion.

Q: When the Buddha said that the Dharma (Dhamma, Pali) should not be traded, are there exceptions to this rule or are there any loop-holes or ways of working this system in some way?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: Not within the monkhood. The rules are very clear that the monks and the nuns should never trade Dharma for favors. There was an occasion once where a layperson offered the Buddha a "teacher's fee." The Buddha regarded it as so inappropriate that he told the man to throw it away.

The principle that people should be allowed to give of their own accord is an important illustration of one of the distinctive aspects of the Buddha's teaching on karma: that you have the power to exercise choice in what you do. Allowing people total freedom in how they give gifts makes the power of choice real in their lives.

Q: What about bartering? Is that considered trading?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: Yes.

Q: In some of the other Buddhist traditions, some teachers ask for a set fee for retreats, workshops, meditations, or lectures. They use words like "cost," "concessions," "pay at the door," "entrance fees." Some use "suggested donations" but make it clear that without

paying this fee you are not going to receive any teaching at all. No money, no honey, so to speak. What are your views on this?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: I think it's unfortunate that they do that. The Dharma then becomes a commodity, which makes it subject to market forces. One of the most basic lessons of the Dharma is generosity, and one of the best ways to inspire other people to be generous with one another is by being generous with the Dharma—teaching the Dharma for free. It creates the right atmosphere for people to receive the Dharma as a gift, in which case they'll treasure it more. If they receive it as a commodity, it'll be easier for them to throw it away.

Q: Speaking of markets, you mentioned Walt Disney earlier and the selling of the Dharma. I've actually seen certain Buddhist teachers trademark aspects of the Dharma. Have you heard about that?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: Yes I've heard about that.

Q: So when you hear that, what first comes to mind?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: It's prostituting the Dharma. Or maybe it would be better to say that it's turning the Dharma into a "processed Dharma-product"—the same sort of thing as when they have to label things as "processed food-products" because they're not really food.

Q: What are the karmic aspects of prostituting the Dharma? What did the Buddha say about trading the Dharma? Did he ever say anything on that?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: He basically said that, as a teacher, you have to look at your motivation for the teaching, and the motivation should never include the idea that you expect a monetary reward. The Buddha never explained the karmic consequences for going against this principle, but it's easy to see that you'll end up distorting the Dharma. When you distort the Dharma to others, you're going to be exposed to nothing but distorted Dharma yourself. And you won't have to wait to the next lifetime for that to happen. You'll start justifying your actions to yourself now, and that will deaden your sensitivity as to what's genuine Dharma and what's not. Even when you hear genuine Dharma, your attitudes will distort what you hear.

Q: What would you say is the better option or lesser of two evils, no Buddhist teaching at all or teaching it to someone but for a fee of some kind? Is a compromised Dharma better than no Dharma at all?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: (Laughs.) Those are never the only options. There is a third option: to offer the teachings for free.

Q: But many of these teachers say that they have no choice and are driven or called to teach or to "share," to communicate the truth to others. These teachers say that in order to teach/share/communicate full time they need to make money to pay their bills, pay their mortgage, car payments, travel expenses, hotel rooms, food and so on. This is what they tell me.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: The teacher would do better to find another occupation and then, with any free time left over, offer the Dharma for free.

Q: So you're saying that there's no reason to teach this for money at all? People should get a job to earn money and teach the Dharma for free on the side?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: Right.

Q: What about setting up some kind of not-for-profit meditation center of professional lay teachers asking for fees and donations to run it? What are your thoughts on this?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: I'm concerned that in organizations like that, the needs of the organization come to be paramount: paying for the staff, paying for the middle level management, paying for the advertising. Even non-profit organizations need to make ends meet, and it would be all too easy to start cherry-picking the Dharma for what coincides with the needs of the organization and to drop what doesn't. This is not to say that the monastic orders are totally incapable of distorting the Dharma, but they are designed to minimize the pressures that would lead in that direction. Overhead is low, and the monastic culture encourages frugality and places a high value on being unburdensome. Large organizations with large operating budgets, however, are burdensome by nature. Their needs tend to shape the views and ideals of the people working for them.

Q: What about giving other "guidance," or "mentioning," "coaching" and charging by the hour for suggestions or advise on spirituality, jhana, or vipassana meditation?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: When teachers say that they expect "fair compensation" for their time, and they're measuring compensation in terms

of money, it's a sad commentary on how the capitalist market mentality has invaded every aspect of our culture, including the minds of Dharma teachers. Even economists are beginning to see that there are moral limits on markets, that there are certain areas where you can't let the market intrude on peoples' interactions or else everything gets corrupted. You would think that people teaching the Dharma would actually be ahead of the curve in realizing this.

Q: Is there such a thing as being “inspired by dana”?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: There are three ways in which dana can be inspiring.

The first is when you are the recipient of something that obviously required some sacrifice on the part of the donor. When I was a monk in Thailand, there were a number of poor homes on the road where I went for alms. Some of the shacks were barely enough for two people to lie down together. And yet sometimes the people in the shacks would put food in my bowl: a piece of sausage or dried fish. Every time that happened, I felt especially obligated to practice hard that day, for I had been the beneficiary of a poor person's generosity. That always made me feel inspired.

The second way is when you're the recipient of a free gift of Dharma. My teacher and the other teachers in his generation really had to put their lives on the line to find the Dharma. The fact that he gave it freely to me showed his genuine concern for my welfare. The sense of his compassion and concern was really inspiring. It was as if he regarded me as family. You can't get that same sense when a price is being charged for Dharma. As Lewis Hyde said in his book, *The Gift*, charging a price for something creates barriers between the sellers and the potential buyers. Freely given gifts erases those barriers.

The third way of being inspired by dana is when you see other people being generous with one another. It reminds you of what makes human interaction valuable, and you want to participate as well.

Q: Where do you see this heading in the future? To more of a westernized entrepreneurial business model like trademarking or setting up lay meditation centers, or back to a traditional model of dana?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: I think we're going to end up with both. When you trademark the Dharma, there is going to be advertising to promote the new processed Dharma-product, to convince people that it's an improvement over the old Dharma, and there are people who will go for that. But then there are those who are going to rebel, who will value the type of Dharma they can learn in a culture where the teachers embody the principles of the Dharma in how they teach. So I think we're going to end up with both models, and people will have to choose whether to go for the hype or to look for something of substance.

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