

A Forest Monk

an interview with Ajahn Brahmavamso

Rachael Kohn: Finding peace in the fast lane of the entertainment world is quite different from the kind of life that Ajahn Brahmavamso chose as a young man. Born in London and educated in Theoretical Physics at Cambridge University, he became a Buddhist monk in the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah. Now the Abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery, in Serpentine, Western Australia, hes in demand as a speaker and is known for his story telling.

Although simplicity is the essence of monastic life, and thats particularly so in the rural setting of Serpentine, the whole point of Buddhist insight is to find tranquillity in the midst of chaos. And thats how it was when I caught up with Ajahn Brahm in the Bodhikusuma Buddhist and Meditation Centre located in the noisy inner city suburb of Chippendale in Sydney, where the transport trucks rumbled by just outside the door.

Ajahn Brahm, youve been a monk for some years now, was it when you were 23?

Ajahn Brahmavamso: When I was 23, I decided Id had enough of the world and became a monk. I used to be a schoolteacher before, and thats enough to make anyone leave the world and become a monk.

Rachael Kohn: Now I thought you had been studying physics at Cambridge University.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Yes, that was before I became a schoolteacher. I thought Id do something good with my life, instead of making bombs or things like that. And so I decided to try school teaching. However, after a while the whole feeling for a monastic life, or for something spiritual, was very strong inside of me. And one of the lovely things about Buddhist monastic life, in the Thai tradition was you can become a monk just for a short time.

So I decided I would take a couple of years off my career life, and then go off to Thailand, become a monk, get it out of my system, and then go back to the world again. But once I became a monk, something happened very quickly that I realised thats what I always wanted to do, I felt so comfortable in the role of a monk.

Rachael Kohn: Were you actually taking refuge as it were, away from the school life, I mean teaching children? What was it that really made you take quite a radical step.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: OK, what really made me take that step was a realisation that deep inside there was much more to life than just getting on in ones career or in relationships. Perhaps one of the most moving experiences in my life was one of my first meditation retreats. I did get into a very deep state of meditation, which was so joyful, it was so much bliss. And that never left me, and I wanted to find out what exactly that meant and how it fits in to the scheme of things. So that degree of deep meditation was something which changed a lot of perspectives on the meaning of life. I wanted to explore those perspectives more, and that could only be done in monastic life.

Rachael Kohn: Well the description you give of life in Thailand doesnt exactly sound joyful. I mean you spent a lot of time building monasteries, in fact I think it totals to about 20 years building monasteries, in rather difficult circumstances.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: It was difficult physically, building the monasteries, but there was always a lot of fun around, and it was done joyfully. For example one of my stories was when we were building the main hall in

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my teacher Ajahn Chahs monastery, there was a lot of earth left over and we had to move that earth from one place to another because Ajahn Chah, my teacher, said it didnt look good over there.

It took three whole days of very hard work from 9 oclock in the morning until about 10pm with hardly any breaks. Wed already eaten our meal for the day, and that was one day after the other in the tropical heat. When we were finished, we were very happy but then Ajahn Chah left for another monastery. The following morning, his deputy abbot came up to us and said he thought the soil was in the wrong place and we had to move it. So for another three days we moved it to another spot, and again I was very happy when it was all finished.

But the next day, Ajahn Chah came back and he said, What did you put the soil over there for, I told you to leave it over here. And so for another three days we had to move the soil again. And of course by this time I was getting very angry and upset. And being a Westerner, in an Asian monastery, I could swear in English without anyone understanding. But they did understand because they could see my body language.

And I always remember one monk coming up to me and saying, Its pushing the wheelbarrow is easy, its the thinking about it which is hard. And thats changed the whole perspective of what I was doing. As soon as I stopped complaining and moaning, it was easy to push that wheelbarrow, in fact it felt much lighter. And this is actually how I learned about the secrets, one of the secrets, of monastic life. Didnt matter what you were doing, whether you were sitting for hours and hours and hours in your hut, whether you were working building a monastery, theres a thinking about it which made it hard.

Rachael Kohn: Well it also sounds like one of the secrets of monastic life is learning how to take orders. I mean its positively torture, isnt it? to be told to do one thing and then to undo it and then re–do it again?

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Well sometimes. If you look from my perspective it seems like it should be, look for another perspective, it wasnt at all. It was just again, one can make anything torture, one could make sort of eating torture, or being interviewed torture, but its ones attitude which is the most important thing, and this is one of the things you really found in monastic life, its how you approached it. And a lot of times you had a choice. If you were going to keep those old silly ways of looking at life, then you would suffer. But if you actually changed the way you looked at life, in other words you did learn some wisdom, you find it was no problem at all.

Rachael Kohn: Were you always interested in your attitude to things? I mean were you always a kind of perfectionist, to try to find just the right sort of happiness, because when I think of happiness and most of us are quite content with some happiness and some unhappiness, you know the combination is what life delivers in most cases. But you seem to be going for the kind of almost magical solution to find happiness in all things.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Correct, yes, because I always thought that the search for happiness is the underlying force of life. No matter what were doing in our world, in our life, its always a search for some sort of happiness. Then again, one of those early experiences of deep bliss in meditation gave me a taste of some happiness which was out of this world. And so once youve tasted that you wanted to make even a deeper search into the meaning of happiness.

The meaning of happiness is the meaning of life. And so it wasnt just the meaning of happiness in meditation, it was also the meaning of happiness in anything you were doing. Because even sometimes your body gave you orders in saying, Now you have to sleep or Now you have to be sick or Now you cant do what you want. So it didnt matter whether there was something else in life which stopped you doing what you wanted to do. That was like the orders of life, and you had a chance there to actually let go, to surrender to the moment when you cant change things, and be content. And thats one of the wonderful things which I found in Buddhist practice. You can be happy, no matter whats going on.

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Rachael Kohn: In fact you tell a story about going to a prison and speaking to prisoners, where you described your life to them, and they're so shocked, they actually say, Gee, come and live with us, it's a lot nicer here than a monastic life. In fact stories are quite important to you, in the way that you communicate.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Life is lived in stories, not in thoughts. Thoughts are almost like a second-hand report of what actually happens in your life. So if you can take the stories of life and illustrate from them the meanings of life, I think people can relate to it much more easily. So I like those stories.

Just to actually complete that story which you only mentioned in part when one of my monks, it wasn't myself, another monk was teaching in jail, after the session they asked him about what it was like in a Buddhist monastery in the West, and we told him we get up so early in the morning, 3 o'clock in the morning and then we have to go to this cold hall to sit for hours cross-legged, meditating, and doing some chanting. And then only afterwards, maybe at 6.30, we might get a cup of tea, and then you have to work for three or four hours, hard work, before you can get some lunch. And that lunch is just what you're given, you've got no choice, and it's all eaten in one bowl, all mixed together. So it's not very delicious at all. And in the afternoon it's usually more work in those days. And then you can't watch the television, there is no television or radio, and you can't follow sport, you can't play sports, you can't play music or listen to music. There's no movies to watch, and there's nothing in the evening, you can't eat in the evening, except just to go to the main hall and to sit in more meditation, cross-legged on the hard floor for hours, and when you do go back to your hut to sleep, it's on the floor, in the cold.

And so when I said this, or when this monk said this, the prisoners were very shocked, and this is when one of the prisoners forgot where they were and said, That's disgusting, that's terrible, that's awful; why don't you monks come and live in here with us, in the jail? which was crazy, they forgot where they were. But the important part of that story was the reason why my monks and other people who visit the monastery like to stay there, and it's because they're content, they don't look upon a monastery as a prison, simply because it's where they want to be. Whereas prisoners in a jail, because they don't want to be there, therefore it is a prison.

Rachael Kohn: It's all about freedom, isn't it, about our perspective on freedom, what constitutes freedom. I mean when I think about what constitutes freedom for me, it's spontaneity, it's learning, it's choice. What is it for you?

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Well there's two types of freedom. The freedom of desire and the freedom from desire, and most people in the world only know the freedom of desire, the freedom of choice. In Buddhism, especially in meditation, we're looking at the freedom from choice, the freedom from desire.

So one is so content, so at peace, that desires don't come up. One is free from the tyranny of these desires always pushing or pulling you, and telling you what to do. And it's those are the orders which are coming from inside of each one of us, ordering us to be somehow different, ordering the pain to go away, ordering us to achieve some sort of goal, which we don't really know why we're reaching for this, but we're supposed to do it. So these are the orders which in meditation we're becoming free of.

Rachael Kohn: Did you always know why you were reaching for this goal to be a Buddhist monk, to be an abbot.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: No, an abbot just happened by bad luck, but being a Buddhist monk, I'd always had an inclination, that even though you saw many, many people who had so many things, that they did seem to have the opportunity to live their dreams, their dreams never stopped, they were never free from this, always reaching out, this stretching, this hunger, this thirst, and that hunger, that thirst, like any hungry person or thirsty person, is not all that comfortable. Sometimes we want to end thirst, we want to end hunger and be satisfied forever, but that never seemed to happen. But when I came across some Buddhist monks, they were

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the happiest people I'd ever seen.

They appeared to be free, and even though that many wealthy people, successful people in the world, they are looked upon as being icons, looked upon as being people we try and emulate. If you actually asked them, or interview them and ask the question Do you really feel free? then I think they would give some very interesting answers. But if you ask a monk who lives in a monastery with many rules, and many things you can't do, if you ask a monk Do you feel free? actually the feeling is freedom. So the ideas of freedom, the freedom of desire and the freedom from desire, in our modern world, we've got so much liberty to follow our desires and actually achieve those desires, basically we can do almost anything we want. But how many people feel free?

Rachael Kohn: It all depends on what we expect from life. I know that your message is often about happiness, and how the point of life is kind of like that song, Don't Worry, Be Happy, which is all about changing one's attitude, not really about changing the world. And yet you would know, that that kind of an attitude can also be breeding a certain indifference to the world.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: OK, well I don't think this relates to indifference at all, because many people change their attitude and the world changes with it.

Now the attitude of anger, of trying to get rid of problems, is like the attitude to the pest exterminator, and the attitude of the pest exterminator is instead of trying to live with nature, he always wanted control and eliminate all those things which create problem for us, and that could be a husband or a wife or it could be sort of some enemy which we perceive as being our pest. And you find you can't eliminate all the pests in the world, nor can you eliminate the pests in your own body, like cancers and other sicknesses. Nor can you eliminate the pests in the world. Some time there comes a time to learn how to leave at peace and in harmony with nature.

Rachael Kohn: Does Buddhism ever teach a resistance to things which are dangerous, which are bad, which are evil?

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Yes, we teach a resistance to anger, we teach a resistance to jealousies, we teach a resistance to stupidity. Those are the things which we should really be resisting, you know, the anger and the feelings of revenge, the hurt, the grief, the guilt inside of us, all those negative emotions which make our world. Those are the things which we want to resist, to understand, to overcome, by letting go. And so those things aren't there any more.

Rachael Kohn: I like the story that you tell about the lecturer who comes into the classroom and brings a jar full of rocks. Can you tell that story?

Ajahn Brahmavamso: OK, yes, that's actually from the internet, so many of your listeners will probably know that one, but it's a good story. There was a lecturer at a university who was showing just how broad his wisdom was, and instead of reading out his lecture notes one morning, he came with a big jar and put it on his desk. And while everybody in his class was wondering what he was up to, he started to put in some stones from a bag, one by one, into the jar until he could get no more in. And once he could get no more stones into his jar, he asked his class Is the jar full? and the class said, Yes, it is.

He smiled, and from under the desk he got out another bag, and that bag was full of gravel, small stones and one by one he managed to fit those small stones in the spaces between the big rocks. And once he could get no more small stones in, he looked up at his class and asked Is the jar full? Now they all shook their heads and said, No. They were on to him by now. And so he smiled and got another bag, of sand. He poured that sand on top of the big rocks and small rocks, shook the jar, much of the sand went into the spaces between the big

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rocks and small rocks. After he could get no more sand in, he asked once more, Is the jar full? And gain the class said No. And he got some water and poured that in. And after he could get no more water in, he stopped, he asked the class, What am I trying to prove? What is the purpose of this demonstration?

Now this was a business school, so one of the students in the class put up their hand and said, Sir, it shows to us that no matter how busy our schedule, we can always fit something more in. And he said, No, no, no, thats not what Im trying to show. What Im trying to show is if you want to fit the big rocks in, you have to fit them in first. Dont leave them to the last, otherwise you will never get them in. It was a story about priorities, what you should really fit in to your schedule of your day, of your life first of all.

So there are some things which many people realise are the precious stones, the big rocks of their life, like their family, like their relationships, like their peace of mind, whatever it is, and sometimes we leave them till last in our day, in our week, in our life, we find we never have the opportunity to fit them in. And thats one of the reasons why people dont find happiness. Their priorities are not correct. We should always remember that story of the stones in the jar, and put into our life whats very, very important first of all. The other things you can always fit in, but later.

Rachael Kohn: Ajahn Brahm, are there any more things that you want to fit into your jar?

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Fit into the jar? Just peace and happiness for myself and for others. I mean after all, thats whats most important to me in my life, is the happiness of myself and the happiness of others, but what I found after many years of life as a monk, I cannot distinguish between the happiness of others and the happiness of myself. So thats why I go out and serve as much as possible, to give talks, to tell stupid stories to make them laugh.

Rachael Kohn: Youre very good at it.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Thanks very much.

Rachael Kohn: Ajahn Brahm, were sitting in front of what looks to be a fairly traditional altar I suppose, with the great Golden Buddha in the centre, and lots of lotus flowers around. Can you explain the symbolism of this?

Ajahn Brahmavamso: Yes certainly. I mean we have at the very top there, a golden Buddha sitting in meditation with a bit of a smile on his face, and obviously thats a symbol of peace, and when people see images like that, its meant to engender a very soft and gentle feeling inside of them of peace. We have the candles on the sides of the Buddha, thats always been like the symbol of wisdom, because you have to light a candle to dispel the darkness, and for a long time that has been a symbol of enlightenment, so the wisdom is there, no-one owns wisdom, but we need to have a candle in order to actually see it for ourselves.

We have also on our shrine here, the lotus. The lotus is also a very potent symbol of Buddhism. Some of the lotuses we have there are ornamental, with many, many leaves on them, many petals, which is a symbol of the thousand petalled lotus, which is one of my favourite symbols for meditation, because to open the petals of a lotus, it means that the sun has to maintain its warmth on the thousandth petal before that opens up to reveal the 999th petal, and the sun has to stay on that thousand petal lotus a long time before it starts to open up the innermost petals.

The innermost petals of a lotus are the most fragrant, the most subtle and the most beautiful, and if youre lucky, and the sun maintains its warmth long enough, then the heart of the lotus can really open up and you can see what is called the jewel in the heart of the lotus. That is the very old mantra in Tibetan Buddhism, *om mani padme hum*, Hail to the jewel in the heart of the lotus. Its a symbol for meditation because you have to

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have mindfulness, unremitting, without any interference or stopping for a long time, to open up this thousand petalled lotus of your mind and to see what's truly inside, the jewel in the heart of you.

Rachael Kohn: Ajahn Brahm thank you so much for being on The Spirit of Things.

Ajahn Brahmavamso: No trouble, thank you.

Ajahn Brahmavamso is the Abbot of the Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery in Western Australia, and Spiritual Director of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia. He trained as a monk in the Thai Theravada tradition under the guidance of the renowned meditation master Ajahn Chah.

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