



Ajahn Munindo

# MONASTIC TRAINING

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Aruno Publications

*The article below titled, Monastic Training, is an edited version of a question and answer session with Luang Por Munindo, previously published in the Forest Sangha Newsletter, Spring 2008.*

*Question: How do you understand what 'teaching' means, in the context of our monastic communities?*

*Ajahn Munindo:* My first thought is that teaching is about passing on the benefits of practice. As for the context of our community, I'm not familiar with serving as a teacher in any other context. Perhaps the word 'serving' is important here. I see teaching as an offering. It has been a great help over the years to view my role of leader or teacher as an act of conscious giving. Rather than aspiring to become a master – which as a young monk I thought I was supposed to do – I work consciously on trying to be a good servant. In my own practice I hold an idea of Dhamma practice as 'serving reality'; I expect this shapes how I relate with or teach others.

Regarding the theoretical level of practice, or *pariyatti*, I think this is generally best dealt with through book learning. At our monastery this means that anyone wanting to join is given a reading list of Dhamma books they need to familiarize themselves with before being accepted. For each stage of training there is a new list. The same holds for the training around the rules, the *Vinaya*. Applicants are directed towards specific texts and before being accepted they are tested on their understanding.

*Q: Is there a difference between 'teaching' and 'training'?*

*AM:* Not to my mind. Probably I use the word 'training' more than 'teaching', as the latter could tend to take us into our heads and have us think that because we've arrived at some tidy ideas that approximate reality, we actually know something. This is not necessarily the case. As Ajahn Chah used to say, knowing the word for 'hot' does not give you the experience of being burned. He also said that the reason you don't truly know anything is because you know so much. I emphasize regularly that this path of practice involves our entire body/mind in training. We train with an awareness that shows us how to see effectively beyond the ways we have been conditioned to see, i.e. according to our preferences. A teacher is someone who helps us see in new and relevant ways – ways that serve our commitment to live in harmony with truth, or reality, or whatever word connects with that sense we have that some things are profoundly more important than others. For instance, it's relatively important that I stay fit and healthy so as to not be a burden on others and to maximize on the fortunate circumstance in which I find myself. Accordingly I pay some attention to healthy living; I do some exercises. However, it's much more important to know that I am going to die. So, to be as able as I can possibly be in meeting death when it comes, reflecting

on this calls for a much greater degree of my attention. Anyone who offers help with this kind of preparation is a teacher for me.

*Q: How do you approach your role as a teacher? What kind of teaching/training do you do, or how do you help people learn?*

*AM:* I don't really feel that I 'do' much in the way of teaching or training, but I'm interested in helping people learn. The first priority, though, is to maintain perspective within myself. If I lose that then I risk getting caught in ideas about myself as a teacher. Such ideas, if not clearly understood, are a guaranteed obstruction when it comes to benefiting others. Cultivating this kind of effort is a lifelong project.

The next thing I'd say is that attempting to train others without the context of a harmonious and mutually respectful relationship, can lead to loss of faith and even a turning away from the path. The classic texts point out the importance of this with extensive, detailed explanations of what is suitable and what is not. It would be a big mistake to see the role of the teacher as one of merely passing on information. If for instance a student doesn't feel trust in the teacher then whatever benefit the teacher might have realized for themselves, the student probably won't get it. This works both ways, teacher-student/student-teacher. It's been an important area of learning in our monastic communities, especially since we left the traditional Asian context and came to the West. These days we spend a lot more time listening to each other, being patient and kind, which generates a context of friendship that is essential. At the same time, of course, once we know how to maintain our own practice we can learn from everything and everyone, including those we might not like or even trust.

Leading a community, sometimes I see myself as being like the conductor of an orchestra, an orchestra comprised of seriously enthusiastic players, each very capable in their own way. Most people who take up the Buddhist path of practice have already stepped aside from the flow of popular culture. This is even more so for those joining a monastery – they are not inclined to settle for the status quo. They don't necessarily need me to tell them what to do. They need something else, and it's that something else that the conductor offers. Through the process of playing together each player is altered in how they relate with their own instrument. They learn, the conductor learns – everyone benefits. So maintaining the right attitude is primary.

Then, as I was saying, it needs to be emphasized that this training involves the entire body/mind. All aspects of our lives are included – nothing at all can be left out. In practice this usually means finding ways to highlight imbalances in our approach. We all come to training with a

mixture of intentions, some wholesome and worth developing and others neurotic, by which I mean not genuinely serving our aspirations to be fully free from suffering. Part of a teacher's job is to act like a mirror, reflecting back to a student any tendencies of avoidance they might have, preferably at the time they occur. Of course, most tricky to spot are the ways we avoid our faults, but there can also be times when our strengths and abilities need reflecting, to make them more conscious. The Buddha pointed out in many ways how devious our deluded minds can be; left to our own devices most of us would ignore our weaknesses and overemphasize our strengths. Traditional Buddhist mindfulness training is about developing skills that eventually allow us to be our own mirror. We have a teacher so that we won't need a teacher.

There are tried and tested ways of developing these skills. I encourage people to contemplate how we benefit from those who have walked the way longer than we have. When we appreciate the nature of the task we face then we can offer ourselves into it more fully, and a teacher can help us see better what we're dealing with. I needed a lot of encouragement as, although I sincerely wanted to let go of the habits that kept tripping me up, I regularly lost it: getting caught in complaining and criticizing for instance. Here I was, living with great teachers, all my material needs were more than adequately met, yet the nature of my conditioned mind meant that I would indulge in thinking, saying and even doing things that created discontent. So although I was making a lot of effort, ostensibly to realize unshakeable peace, I was at the same time generating the causes for lack of peace. Without the patient, tolerant, consistent encouragement of my teachers, I might well have given up. It takes time and skill to see faults as faults.

The more subtle faults can be the biggest troublemakers and they can also be the most difficult to unearth. They tend to be overgrown with a dense mass of intertwined opinions – like for instance, 'I am already aware of all my faults'. If the right kind of reflection comes at the right time, then we see something new and meaningful about ourselves. With this comes letting go, which in turn generates an authentic interest in submitting ourselves more fully in the training. This quality of interest is distinctly different from the synthetic kind of energy that comes with our initial idealism. And by 'more fully' I mean an increased willingness to take whatever comes. In the beginning we like to pick and choose, saying we need such and such conditions for practice. As we learn true letting go, we find that 'this' – whatever is happening here and now – is the only practice.

That isn't to say that in practising with everything we forget that we need to protect ourselves from that which is harmful. The things that harm us

come from both within and without, but mostly it's our heedlessness that undoes us. If our teachers can help us stay connected with what first brought us to practice we won't go too far astray. It's only when we forget this that we indulge in complaining and so on.

Nurturing faith (*saddha*; meaning trust, rather than belief) is also something I think about a lot when considering my responsibilities to those who ask to live with me. It's not that students necessarily lack faith; if they didn't already trust that there is a reality to be realized behind all the confusion of distorted consciousness, they would never have got started. But until a certain point in practice it's possible for that faith to become obscured. If we allow ourselves to get too busy, for example too much talking, too much socializing, getting excessively well known, all these things can lead to a loss of connection with our faith. It shows itself when students are faced with challenges that require a surrender into total uncertainty – but they find they just can't do it. There isn't the well-developed sense of there being an indefinable dimension, behind the apparent chaos, in which they can simply trust. So an important part of a teacher's job as I see it is to protect the practice environment so a student's faith is maintained; and it's the student's job to learn how important faith is, and to look after it wisely.

*Q: What do you do to encourage such faith or trust? Are there techniques?*

*AM:* Some people find techniques more useful than others. It depends on how tricky or devious your ego is. Mine is very devious; it's a good imitator. As soon as I learn something from practice, the monkey mind quickly starts performing it and it's no longer the real thing. What changes over the years is that you get more alert to these antics; you don't get so surprised or upset about it. You learn to take appropriate precautions. If you have such a mind you need to be agile and cultivate an extensive repertoire of skilful means to stay ahead of the ego's con-tricks. You can't afford to rely on one or two specialized techniques.

Regarding faith though, there aren't any sure ways that I can see. That's part of it. Living out of faith means we can't be sure, at least not sure in the way our deluded self wants to be. We have to be willing to face the fear of losing everything. But if we practise consistently, not in too much of a hurry, we won't go too far out of balance and lose our connection with what's important.

One of the things I've found I do when teaching others – and myself for that matter – is to emphasize the questions. Perhaps when I give talks I might even offer the listeners more questions than I do answers. As a young monk I once heard a teacher asked what his teaching technique was: was it concentration, or investigation, or mantra repetition and so

on. When he eventually replied he said, 'It is to trick you.' That instantly rang a bell for me. Not that I see myself as a teacher intentionally trying to trick people, but I do see how our clever minds can shamelessly employ any means to avoid looking suffering in the face. And this is what is called for if we want to let go. We need help to see that. Moments of struggle that we find ourselves in can be resolved by asking the right question. The most fundamental question, and one that we can always ask, is: How do I get to see the resistance I am generating that turns the natural pain of life into unnatural and unnecessary suffering. This is the Million Dollar Question.

So I don't believe giving people more techniques or information about how to practise really helps. Asking the kind of questions that return us to our underlying sense of trust in Dhamma does help. Through trial and error, gradually faith is purified and intensified, until it becomes something we can rely upon. To the degree reliable faith is established it becomes easier for us to let go of the incessantly grasping, conceptualizing mind, and that's a nice thing.

Having said all that, a creative engagement with ritual practices can also help support faith. It might not be immediately obvious just how this process works. For those of us addicted to our sophisticated ideas about reality, simply, regularly, submitting ourselves into traditional ritual practices such as bowing and chanting can be an excellent antidote. It might appear completely pointless much of the time, but can be exactly what is needed.

*Q: Training monks and novices must entail differences in relationship and expectations than teaching laypeople. How do you approach these areas? What are some of the differences and similarities?*

*AM:* First, we are all human beings doing what we can to be free from suffering. Whatever our choice of lifestyle, basically we are all in this with the same motivation. It's true though there are differences in how we engage practice. It is all to do with commitment: what are we willing to sacrifice? As our practise becomes more firmly established we find we can take more pressure. This is the pressure of our frustrated attachments; it's the energy needed to awaken us out of our dreams of delusion. The degree of intensity we can handle determines whether or not transformation takes place.

In the process of transforming our raw wild nature into something truly human – that is wise and compassionate – we must attend to the strength of our container. The container is primarily our sense of self-respect. Self-respect is much more than an idea we have about ourselves; we could think of it as like energetic force field building up as we develop *сила*

(virtue) and renunciation. Someone who has internalized these fundamental principles to a greater degree can take a lot more pressure. And that in turn serves the process of purification.

In terms of how this approach might show itself, I always tell those new to training that whenever they have doubts about what constitutes right practice, be it meditation or observing precepts, they should feel free to ask. And for the junior sangha members, I often ask them to write a report on where they are at. This gives them a chance to bring up things they might find difficult to speak about. There were times in my early years as a monk when I had the impression I wasn't supposed to have doubts, or if I did I should just observe them, not express them in any way. As a result I struggled for years over things that could easily have been cleared up. It's true I developed strength in patient endurance in the process, but there are endless opportunities in life to develop that particular quality. Some doubts are more useful than others and to get to know this in the beginning it's right we feel allowed to ask.

For someone well established in the training it could be appropriate to tell them to simply watch the doubt; let the pressure build up, allow the agony of uncertainty to be a thorn that spurs them on in their effort – to use the heat and pressure generated to break out of old, limiting structures of self. For them the feeling of, 'this is too much too soon' is not to be believed in, but endured with resolute determination. The real thing feels like that eventually. At an earlier stage of training though, right practice might mean equipping oneself with a wholesome sense of self-worth and relative contentment; it might really be 'too much too soon' in their case. Enduring at their stage might cause their container to fracture.

It's also useful to consider the effects of living inside or outside of spiritual community. Obviously the Buddha recognized the benefits of supportive companionship. In setting up the sangha he established a here-and-now, visible presence in society that could function as an example to inspire all those who seek a way out of the tedious mediocrity that is 'worldliness'. But it's not an option for everyone to live in spiritual community, with the support that entails. I do recommend to anyone serious about their training to try and locate themselves so they have regular access to inspiring examples of those living in accord with Dhamma.

There is one more point I would make. This is the recognition of individual responsibility ('Work out your own liberation with diligence' [the Buddha's final words]). Any ideas we might still be holding to that there is someone out there, up there, looking after us, have to be let go of. Just as in the time of the Buddha, these days many people hold to such notions as being ultimately real, if not consciously then unconsciously. The idea that there is someone taking care of things is real: it is a real



idea, a real movement in our minds. But the only thing ultimate about it is that it is uncertain, unsatisfactory and inherently insubstantial (*anicca, dukkha, anatta*).

Joining the Sangha or belonging to a Buddhist group does not in itself guarantee anything. If we continue our habit of projecting responsibility outwards – now onto our community, whereas previously our energy was invested in, for example, our conditioned ideas of God – we lose out. We merely swap one form of false security for another, and this will certainly lead to eventual disillusionment. When this sort of thing happens, those who become disappointed tend to blame the community for letting them down. But perhaps the difficulty actually came from investing too much in an unsafe refuge. We need to remember that being a member of a great group of meditators or being ordained under a great teacher are not ends in themselves. Taking responsibility for our spiritual development was one of the Buddha's many radical teachings and something of which our teachers might need to remind us from time to time.

*Q: So for someone considering going forth and living the life of a renunciate monk or nun, what would you say are the benefits?*

*AM: Spaciousness: mental, emotional, relational. You have permission to move through the world, touch it, sense it, observe it, without automatically being defined by it. That's the most direct answer. And two other things come to mind. The first is to do with consistency of practice. Have you ever seen someone try to start a fire by rubbing two dry sticks together? If they take a break when they get tired, the heat doesn't build up enough for the fire to ignite. Being received into the Order of Buddhist monks or nuns is making a public statement of our commitment to live the celibate renunciant life for the purpose of purifying the heart. This effectively puts you in a position that makes it more difficult to not keep practising, to not keep firing up the furnace of purification. We all know what it's like to feel enthusiastic for a while and then find the energy passes, leaving us unmotivated. Having the robe on stops you from doing things that dilute the goodness that your practice has generated. It helps prevent backsliding. I recall many years ago one teacher told us how he had been in robes for about thirty years, but he had only been ordained for about nine; he had only really practised for nine of the thirty but during the other twenty-one he hadn't drifted backwards. So one benefit of taking up monastic training is what it stops you doing.*

The second thing is what it gives you. If we want to wholeheartedly, single-mindedly, inquire into the process that is ignorance, then we need to be able to draw on a huge reservoir of goodness. Sangha life is the optimum environment for embracing suffering; but attempting to

transform our suffering without access to a lot of well-being is likely to fail. The Holy Life as set up by the Buddha is a goodness generator. All our activity – body, speech and mind – is guided towards enhanced integrity and expanded compassion. We learn to expect from ourselves, and others expect from us, that we continually increase in goodness. These expectations are helpful. The values of the casual culture in which we live condition expectations that do not accord with Dhamma. They aren't helpful – quite the opposite. Wearing the robe of a renunciant elicits free energy, so to speak, by way of what people project onto us. Even in a country like Great Britain that is not predominantly Buddhist, most people recognize a monk when they see one and expect us to be kind, patient, considerate, friendly, wise. It makes it a lot easier to live simply, and harmoniously.

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Published by:

**Aruno Publications**

Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery  
2 Harnham Hall Cottages,  
Harnham, Belsay,  
Northumberland NE20 0HF UK

Contact Aruno Publications at [www.aruno.org](http://www.aruno.org)

This book is available for free download from [www.forestsangha.org](http://www.forestsangha.org)

Digital Edition 1.0

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