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THE BHIKKHU AND THE BUTTERFLY:

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN AJAHN PASANNO AND JULIA BUTTERFLY HILL

Ajahn Pasanno ordained trees in Thailand as a way of saving them, and Julia Butterfly Hill climbed into one grand old redwood in order to save it, creating news that inspired millions. Inquiring Mind editors Dennis Crean, Barbara Gates and Wes Nisker brought the two of them together for a conversation about trees, activism and love.

AJAHN PASSANO: Soon after I arrived at Abhayagiri Monastery in Mendocino County in 1997, people began to tell me about this woman, Julia Butterfly, sitting in a tree. After speaking to her on the phone a couple of times, I decided to take some of our community to visit her. We brought some offerings and did some chanting for her.

INQUIRING MIND: As a Buddhist monk in what's commonly referred to as the Thai forest tradition, you too must feel a deep connection to the forest.

AP: Well, I live in the forest and it helps form the ethos of my tradition of Buddhism. The Buddha was born in the forest, he was enlightened in the forest, he gave his first teaching in the forest, and he died in the forest. Thai forest monks repeat that truth almost as a mantra, and we are constantly referring to how much the forest plays a part in our lives. My teacher Ajahn Chah would place a big emphasis on how nature teaches us

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all the time—if only we are aware enough. The basic truths of existence are there for us to see in nature. So when I heard about Julia's commitment to protecting and saving forests and her role in being a catalyst for others in this work, I wanted to support her.

IM: Julia, did you have any connection to Buddhism when you began sitting in your tree?

JULIA BUTTERFLY HILL: Not much. I was raised with a traveling preacher for a father, and we lived in a thirty-one-foot camping trailer that we pulled behind our car, going from church to church throughout the Midwest and South. In my early teens I became disgusted with what I saw as profound hypocrisies in Christianity and with a tradition that really didn't allow me to be honored as a woman, other than the role I might play for a man.

For a while I thought I didn't believe in God, and then I realized I was angry at God. But how can you be angry at something you don't believe in? [Laughter] Eventually I began to study different religious traditions, including Buddhism, and I started taking little pieces from many of them. But I didn't really embrace any spirituality until I was up in the tree, when everything—my mind, my body, my heart, my spirit—was completely broken. At that point I started asking myself, How can I make every moment an act of meditation? That was the only thing that was going to allow me to survive. And now that's the way I try to live my whole life.

One of my practices is to get up in the morning and sit. In my meditation space I have different sacred objects that people have given me, including a little amber bracelet from Ajahn Pasanno. While I'm sitting, I pick an intention for the day based on where I am feeling some weakness or need. So on days when my heart is hurting, I'll choose to be focused on love. On days when I'm feeling shy and withdrawn, I'll meditate on connecting with people. I set the intention and then try to live that day with that intention as my meditative practice.

IM: Did you make that practice up or did you read about it somewhere?

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JBH: I think it came partly from my reading, partly from my life experiences, and partly from my experiences in nature. I've found that all faith-based traditions have a way to tap into sacred wisdom and interconnection, and one fairly common path is through nature. So after I came down from the tree, people were telling me that my spiritual practices were just like tai chi, or just like *tonglen*, and I thought to myself, Wow! My tree taught me all that.

AP: Julia, you are now out on the road a lot, trying to encourage people to focus on protecting the life of the planet. But I live in a monastery in Northern California, which is to some degree in a cultural and political bubble. From what I read and sense about the current social climate in America, people are caught up in a lot of fear. Is that your experience?

JBH: Yes, the common language being spoken is often one of fear. So I am trying to be a holistic practitioner, and my medicine is the language of love, which creates a space where all people can sit down together. Our world is literally dying for us to become emissaries of love, and that love has to be based in every thought, every word, every action. I've been blessed to see real miracles happen in that space. But when I fall out of my center and begin thinking of a lot of four-letter words—none of them *love*—you can bet I don't have nearly as much success.

AP: At the monastery we get your newsletter, and I have noticed that you always try to go underneath the individual issues to the place where human beings can be with each other as human beings. It reminds me of one of the practices of monks in Thailand who traditionally begin discourses or sermons by greeting people as "brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death," as if saying, "Here we are together in this human condition. So what are we going to do?"

JBH: My whole approach to the people I meet is to communicate the language of love, so I make it a point not to have conversations based on issues. I learned in the tree that "issues" are just symptoms of a disease.

IM: But Julia, how do you talk about the environmental crisis without talking about individual issues, without talking about the species die-offs, or the need to transform our oil-based economy? Where do you go?

JBH: In my organization, Circle of Life, every time we approach an issue or problem, we approach it from the place of the solution versus the place of

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the problem. We focus our intention and awareness on what it is we *want*: peace, love, justice.

When I climbed up in that tree I was new to activism, but I soon realized that we had become so good at defining what we were against that what we were *against* was beginning to define us. I saw the problem in meetings where activists were “clear-cutting” each other with their words and their anger. As people were talking, I could literally hear the chain saws in their words, cutting each other apart. I saw that the peace rallies had become antiwar rallies, places where I couldn’t even walk up close to the rally because of the way people were speaking through the megaphone; it sounded like they were dropping bombs.

This all became clear to me about halfway through my time in the tree, when I was experiencing a lot of pain and really felt like I was falling apart. That’s when I went deeper and realized I had climbed up in the tree not because I was angry at corporations and governments—although I *was* angry at them—but because I loved the forest and I loved the planet and I loved this sacred life that we’re all a part of. And so I began to approach all the issues from that place of love.

When we are committed to approaching issues from the perspective of what we want—rather than what everyone else is doing wrong—it’s important to look into our own daily practice to see all the ways we are out of integrity with the world we want to live in.

IM: So on a concrete level, how can we live our daily practice with integrity?

JBH: I am committed to raising awareness about what I call “disposability consciousness.” I went up in the tree with this disposability consciousness, and I came down without it. Now I see forests in every paper cup, every paper plate, every paper napkin and every paper bag. In every plastic cup and plastic lid and plastic bag I see the oil fields of Ecuador that I’ve walked through and the people whom I’ve worked with in Africa. I now see the Earth being destroyed by our disposability consciousness.

So now I am a fierce communicator about this. I’ve been in meetings where we were getting ready to do a direct action, and when I saw disposables in the room, I said out loud that we hadn’t earned the right to

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do that action. How can we tell a company to stop logging when we're throwing away paper cups that support that logging? Saying such things doesn't make me very popular in the moment. But I am passionate about this because our work has to be about creating what we are *for*. Such work, truly based in love, can only happen if we do what we do with integrity. I want us to become what I call the "revolutionaries."

IM: How did the tree teach you to see the world through love? Can you describe any specific events or moments?

JBH: I compare it to when I was little and learned how to take a magnifying glass and turn it in the sun to just the right angle so that it concentrated the rays and started a fire. I feel like my time leading up to the tree was the forming of the magnifying glass, but the tree really focused it until it ignited my passion. Then, when I was completely broken, the fire turned into love. I was literally in the fetal position, sobbing, rocking back and forth, saying, "I can't take this anymore!" I was sitting up in that tree and being a witness to an old-growth forest being destroyed. I was witnessing the brutality of what disconnected consciousness does to us. All around me I heard the saws whining and saw the trees falling. I could see for miles, so everywhere I looked there were clear-cuts forming. And I'd breathe through a wet rag while they lit the clear-cuts on fire with diesel fuel or with napalm from helicopters. I had to bear witness to it every day and there was no running away. It felt like the pain and grief were killing me.

One day I was praying and begging for help, and the answer that came was, "Julia, you must simply love." I thought, That's a funny answer, and I kept praying, but the same answer came again: "Julia, you must simply love." Prayer is very powerful for me, and now I know that the trick is being willing to hear the answers. It's just as in meditation practice when you find yourself saying, This is not really what I wanted to happen right now, but it's still happening, so what am I going to do with it?

I learn very well through images, and so I am grateful when the universe gives an image to me when I need it. Of course, what came into my mind was a tree. Big surprise. As I was focusing on this tree in my mind, hearing, "Julia, you must simply love," the branches of the tree began to move. They were moving out and back in, out and back in; it looked almost like arms that were gathering in the air. As I watched I started seeing all of this very

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dense-looking smoke and grit being absorbed into the tree. As the branches moved back out, I saw little prisms of light coming out of the tree. At that moment I had an epiphany, realizing that trees actually grow by transforming our toxins into healthy air. That is what love is all about. Previously, in my life and in my mind, love was either associated with lust or somehow conditional. Suddenly I saw it as a transformational tool. Every time I can take something that's hurting, something that's toxic, something that's out of balance, and actively participate in its transformation, that act will help me to grow. And then I will be able to take on the next challenge, which may be even bigger. One day when I was sharing all of that, someone told me about the practice of tonglen. Once again, I realized that the trees had taught me a spiritual practice.

IM: Nature has certainly played a special role in your spiritual transformation and growth.

JBH: Nature has always brought me a sense of peace. I grew up living in some violent neighborhoods and had a very troubling childhood. I actually tried to take my life at a young age. But even if it was just a tree on the corner, even if I couldn't climb up into it, I could go and lean my back against it and feel something profound holding me when everything else was in chaos. So I've come to understand that the divine is in all of life and that nature holds up a mirror for us that is much more ancient than we are as a people. We come from this ancient life of the planet. For me it is a deep, deep soul home.

AP: It occurs to me as I'm listening that the Thai word for nature, *dharmachat*, could be roughly translated as "the birthplace of truth." Embedded in the language is the idea that nature is where we can see the dhamma, both in terms of how the teachings display themselves in the world as well as in the natural truths the Buddha pointed to. In Buddhism we look at the cycles of nature that are outside of ourselves but also inside. That's what meditation practice is all about, looking at how we experience our own nature—the ways we live and breathe, experience emotions, create suffering or live in harmony. We can only really understand this within ourselves. That's why your theme of love is so important, Julia. When we're in conflict with something, we're pushing it away and making it "other." It's only when we rely on love, or have a very caring attitude, that we bring the outside into ourselves. Only then do we understand it, do we see its truth.

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JBH: That's a really important point. A lot of my work is to remind us that we are not separate from nature. Even a conversation like this is hard to have because it makes it sound like nature's something separate from me. The violence of our words, the violence of our actions, even the violence of our inactions disconnect us from the oneness of human nature, which is inseparable from nature. That's part of why I felt driven to stay so long in the tree. I saw how disconnected we had become from the nature we are part of. My prayer was that if I put my life in the same position as these trees, maybe it would help build a human bridge for people to reconnect.

IM: To offer this bridge, you make yourself extraordinarily vulnerable to the vicissitudes of weather, of the seasons, of people's reactions.

AP: Being vulnerable is a necessary part of spiritual growth. As Buddhist monks, it is a big part of our training as well. The way of life keeps us dependent on the generosity of others. For instance, we sometimes take the opportunity to just wander, relying on people's offerings of food and shelter. This puts us in a very vulnerable situation and can be difficult at times, but it also tends to expose us to people's goodness. It is very inspiring to us, and it also gives others the occasion to remember their own goodness. There is a yearning within the human condition to live with a fundamental goodness, but it seems to get deflected by so many distractions.

IM: Ajahn, the forests of Thailand where you lived and studied for so many years have also been decimated. Can you tell us about your practice of ordaining the trees to protect them?

AP: Yes, I've done that on many occasions. It's quite a skillful means for drawing people together and then being able to talk to them. I actually started a couple of organizations that worked with villagers in northeast Thailand to protect areas of forest. Sometimes the dynamics that go into cutting a forest are very complex. Often it's outside interests that are paying to cut down the trees, so it's important to get the local people involved to truly make it their forest.

We found that one good way of protecting the trees was to ordain them. We put robes around trees and held traditional ceremonies, and then we chanted for the protection of the forest. We would always pick the largest tree in a particular grove for ordination, because the people believe that

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guardian *devas* live in those trees. We wanted to get people to reflect on that.

In northeast Thailand, people's lives are completely intertwined with the forest. Traditionally, they plant rice and keep a little garden patch of garlic, chillies and spices, but all other nurturance comes from the forest—bamboo shoots, mushrooms, edible leaves, the creatures who live there, and the water, which disappears as soon as the trees are gone. But the villagers are very poor and easily enticed by the promise of money. Our ordination ceremonies offer a tangible way to remind people of their sincere wish to protect the forest and make it sacred rather than seeing it as a resource to be exploited.

The protection of the forest is delicate work. There are some areas where people have marched in to do tree ordinations without doing the groundwork and have literally been shot. I know one particular monk who ended up in prison trying to protect the forest. There were just too many forces against him. But generally the ordination ceremonies offer an opportunity to draw people from different factions together and create a base of communication.

IM: Maybe you should take some monks and hold an ordination ceremony for Luna, Julia's teacher tree. How is Luna doing, Julia?

JBH: About a year after I came down from Luna, someone attacked her with a chain saw and tried to kill her. All the best scientists and tree experts said that two-thirds of the tree would die back and become a snag while the other third would continue to grow. They said we would begin to see significant dieback within two years. It's been four years now and there is no dieback at all. In fact, every spring the tree is covered in new growth. This is largely due to the work of amazing scientists, structural engineers, tree biologists, activists and even workers from the Pacific Lumber Company, who all came together to save the tree.

I was in the tree for more than just trees. It was my commitment to create a space of healing for all of us. What really moved me was that some Pacific Lumber employees put their metal shop to work building what are basically metal bandages to hold the tree's cuts together while the wounds heal. I talked to some of these Pacific Lumber workers, and they said,

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"Julia, we didn't necessarily agree with what you did, but you were always respectful, you never called us names, and you came to a respectful agreement with the company. Whoever attacked this tree does not represent all of us." When I was thanking them, one of them even said, "Anything for Luna." He even called the tree "Luna"! This is what our collective work is about—healing our planet, our world and ourselves as one—peace on Earth and peace with the Earth.

Ajahn Pasanno was ordained a bhikkhu (monk) over thirty years ago in Thailand and is now coabbot of Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, California. Julia Butterfly Hill is founder of Circle of Life Foundation and author of The Legacy of Luna (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).