

LIOLIOTA

Lioliota's Blog of Discovery

The Adventures of Ani Palmo

In Uncategorized on May 17, 2010 at 12:05 pm

Ani Palmo Rybicki is an ordained nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Nyingma, which is a thread of Vajrayana Buddhism), and the Director of Songtsen Gampo Buddhist Center of Cleveland www.sgbcc.org. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ani Palmo's teacher requested her to return there in 2005 to serve others through teaching Buddhism and meditation. Since I have never met her, all I can pass along are the glowing reports from those who have. In Shaker Heights, Ohio there is a weekly meditation group that I used to attend. The attendees spoke with such appreciation that her ability and learning seem to speak for themselves.



Ani Palmo Rybicki

Palmo and I had a conversation on the phone after she read a list of my questions in an email, and I tried as hard as I could to keep up with notes. Since I'm a pretty slow typist, I had to paraphrase everything she said, but hopefully there weren't any huge inaccuracies. Then she read over the interview and wrote in her own words. Enjoy.

How did you first become interested in Buddhism?

I was raised Catholic, but had always had difficulties with the church. Despite this I didn't want to leave, since I knew that it would be painful for my parents and I could see that there was a lot of value in the Church, regardless of the faults I perceived.

What were the problems?

For me, the treatment of women was very hard—the fact that women could not be priests. Especially when I knew a few Catholic nuns who would be a true blessing for any congregation as priests. One of the other things I found challenging was the notion that you needed someone between you and God. There were a host of other issues, but instead of just walking away, I tried to go deeper into the Church to see if I could find a way to survive in this faith. I even became a Eucharistic minister, but this proved to be the last straw in the end, since it was only then that I discovered Catholics are supposed to believe that the communion wafer is not a mere symbol of the body of Christ, but the body of Christ in reality. In the end, I decided I had to leave the church.

When I was in my junior year of college I accidentally, and briefly, got involved with a Born Again Christian group. I didn't know anything about these people at that time and they were advertising themselves as a group of people simply interested in following the teachings of Jesus as they were laid out in the Bible, without any ritual, without any hierarchy. I thought this would be a wonderful thing, because I had, and still have, great respect for the teachings of Christ. But, when I went to the meetings of this group, they were talking in tongues, even singing in tongues! And I knew this was not at all the thing for me.

This was the mid 1980s when the New Age Movement was just getting into full swing. So, I started checking into what they had on offer. I was reading Shirley MacLaine [<http://www.shirleymaclaine.com>] and Starhawk [www.starhawk.org], among others. Looking into Wicca, affirmations, and the like.



Shirley Maclaine

However, I found the whole thing very frustrating. Each system lacked any depth and was wholly self-centered. “What can I get for ME? How can I make MY life better?” Very materialistic: how to get more money, a new man, a better job. So, I left that behind as well.

After university I went to Japan to teach English. Naturally, I looked into Zen. I enjoyed meditating, but found the whole thing too austere for me. I was practicing at a local zendo with a few other Japanese and foreigners every morning at 6am. It gets cold in Japan. It snows. There’s no insulation in the older homes and temples, which are made basically of wood and paper. So, one morning all of us were in the temple waiting for the priest to arrive. We were sitting there shivering in our coats and we all kept our socks on because it was so cold. The priest strode in, looked at all of us with utmost disgust, and set about opening all the doors and windows. That marked my last visit to the zendo. I was done with being punished. I think because of coming out of Catholicism I just had a real aversion to what appeared to be spiritual punishment.

And I say that very carefully, because I don’t want to judge these other systems. I don’t want to disparage Catholicism or Zen. I’m just saying, in my personal experience, this is what happened and this is how I viewed things at the time.

After my teaching contract was up in Japan, I traveled to Thailand. But I had no interest in the temples and Buddhas I saw there because by that time I was completely disillusioned about religion in general. I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing out there for me, as a spiritual system so to speak, and I’d given up on the whole idea, resolving to go it alone.



Buddha statue in Thailand

So, I'm staying at these really cheap, but lovely bungalows right on the sea. I'd made friends with a couple of Western guys and was a bit dismayed when they'd disappeared for about 10 days. When they returned I asked them where they'd gone. They said, "We went to this Buddhist retreat not far from here. It was great. You should go!" I replied, "No way. I'm so sick of all this metaphysical crap. Everybody thinks they know what they're doing, but finally no one has any idea." They looked at me very seriously and said "Oh. Then you should REALLY go!" This really cracked me up! But, it also made me think, and I figured "Okay, I'm full of anger and I don't have a boyfriend. Maybe if I go to this retreat I can learn to relax and maybe I'll meet a cute guy!" So, that was my brilliant motivation for going to do a Buddhist retreat!

The retreat was wonderful, though. I felt like I'd come home. I could not have imagined a better "spiritual system" if I'd invented it myself. What really impressed me was the intelligence, logic, and tolerance of other faiths expressed in the teachings. But, the most important was the method. Pretty much every religion teaches the Golden Rule—love your neighbor as yourself. But, what if you hate your neighbor? What are you supposed to do? Just wishing to love them doesn't really work, as we all know. Finally, in Buddhism, I'd found a way, through meditation, to develop the qualities every religion admires: compassion, love, patience and so forth. Instead of just expecting his disciples to be a certain way, the Buddha taught them how to develop these qualities in their own hearts.

How long did you want to ordain before you did?

I had the idea to ordain right from the first retreat. But, I thought eventually this desire would go away. I figured it arose because I was new and excited by what I was discovering. And it was a scary thought, so I was kind of hoping it would go away! They had retreats for the first 10 days of every month at this particular monastery. It was during my second retreat that I met the "cute guy" I aimed

to meet in the first retreat. We ended up being together for two years, and he was quite important in my life, since he was practicing Vajrayana and was introducing me to teachers and ideas in that tradition.

After Thailand we went together to Nepal and did a one-month retreat at Kopan there [<http://kopanmonastery.com>]. Kopan is quite famous for being one of the first places westerners could do retreat and was initiated by Lama Zopa and Lama Yeshe of FPMT [<http://www.fpmt.org/>



Kopan Monastery in Nepal

We traveled around for a while after that, spending nearly a year in Australia (where he was from) and returning eventually to India to do pilgrimage. His idea. I was not fond of the notion of going around to holy places like my grandmother collecting holy water from Lourdes [www.lourdes-infotourisme.com/uk/]. *Lourdes is a small town in France known for the birth and life of Sainte Marie-Bernarde Soubirous in the 1800's. She saw several apparitions of a young girl, now known as Our Lady of Lourdes, and was canonized post-humously by the Catholic Church*, but it turned out to be a great way to anchor our trip and it was in the end a very beautiful experience.



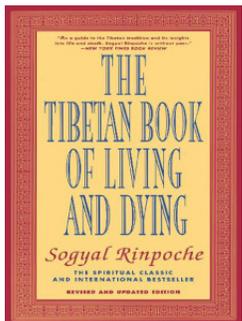
His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

A year later, after meeting the Dalai Lama and other Vajrayana masters, I was still practicing the Theravada. At that point, though, I felt like I had to choose between the Vajrayana and the Theravada, since having a foot in both felt like I wasn't giving either the proper attention. I'd decided on the Theravada since it was more familiar and I found it elegantly simple. So, when I left India for America, I left not only my boyfriend, but the Vajrayana as well.

On the way back to Ohio I decided to stop in California to visit an old friend. As it happened, Sogyal Rinpoche was in town to give a talk on death and dying

[<http://www.spcare.org/about/sogyalrinpoche.html>

He is the author of the now-famous work *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.



(https://lioliota.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/tibetan_book_of_living_and_dying.jpg)

I grew up in a funeral home, so the subject interested me and, despite my decision to abandon Tibetan Buddhism, I went to hear him speak. He was very impressive. Not just what he was saying, but his presence. I had a very intense experience at his talk, so I thought maybe I should look into this a bit more and decided to attend the one-month retreat that was beginning that weekend. At the end

of this retreat, he was encouraging everyone to go to France to see Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche [<http://www.shechen.org/index.php> "Because," he said, "he's really a living Buddha and quite old. This may be the last chance you ever have to hear him teach."

I was sitting there thinking "I can't go. I haven't been home to see my family in two years. I don't have any money. I just can't go." I didn't say anything, I was just thinking it. But, he looks right at me and says "Especially those of you who can't go. Go."

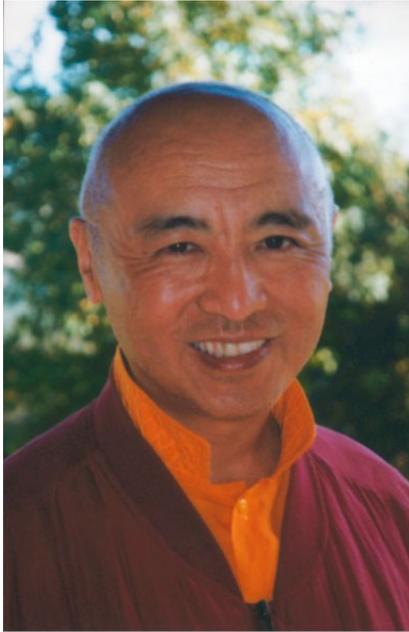
So, I thought about it and as I was already planning to go to Spain to teach English, since I was out of money, I thought I would just speed up my trip a little bit. So I went home, and said, "Hi, I'm leaving in a month to go to France." And left a month later.



H.H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche

The teachings were magnificent. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was...there aren't the words to describe it. When he spoke, it was as if he were speaking from the center of the universe. Even though I couldn't understand a word of Tibetan—the teachings were translated later—I was very moved by listening to His Holiness. You knew you were in the presence of someone who had access to great wisdom. Not only access, but pure experience. First-hand knowledge. It was extremely moving.

And there were lots of other Lamas there as well. It was a regular Lamapalooza! My teacher, Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche (<http://anipalmo.org/AboutTulku.html>) (<http://anipalmo.org/AboutTulku.html>) was also there—though I didn't know at the time that he would be my teacher. All of them were giving teachings.



Tulku Rinpoche, Ani Palmo's teacher

I was so overwhelmed by this experience. There were a lot of things I didn't understand, but it was very clear to me that there was something very important going on here. That this particular system, Tibetan Buddhism or whatever you want to call it, was producing great beings, full of wisdom and immense compassion. I had no choice but to reevaluate my earlier decision to forego Tibetan Buddhism in favor of the Theravadan path I'd found so much easier to practice and understand. Still, I wasn't quite ready to jump in with both feet.

I wanted to find a place where I could do a short retreat—maybe 3 months—just to study this philosophy and try out some of the practices to see what it was all about. I'd heard about this place called Chanteloube [<http://pagesperso-orange.fr/chanteloube/english/chanteloube.htm>] where it would be possible to do that, so I went there.



A stupa at Chanteloube

At this retreat center they had one area for those who wanted to do individual short retreats, and a cloistered area where they were about to start a group retreat, which would last for three years. People who were set to do the three-year retreat were busy working on the place—painting, cleaning and so forth—in preparation for their retreat. I wasn't very busy, so I offered to help them work. And well, one thing led to another and I ended up doing the three-year retreat!

But, I was scared. I didn't know very much about the Vajrayana and almost nothing about a three-year retreat and I thought, "If things get too weird, I'm out of here!" So, I ended up doing the whole retreat very cautiously, like an experiment. This turned out to be a very good approach, because by the end of it I was really convinced that this was the right path for me. I'd also still had the desire to ordain, after 6 years of thinking about it, so I decided to go ahead with that as well.

What were your motives for ordaining?

I just wanted to practice. It's really that simple. After that 3 year retreat in particular, I saw that this path was one in which I could benefit myself and others, and I saw that with impermanence I didn't have much time, and it would be better to just get to it.

Did you have any personal conflicts about your decision?

My main concern was, did I want to get married and have kids? And I just felt like I had to be really sure about that before I ordained. And I wasn't sure, frankly, but I thought if I had kids first, I wouldn't be able to ordain. But if I ordained first, if it didn't work out maybe later I could give back my vows and get married. (Which is not, by the way, the best way to approach ordination! But, that's where I was at the time.)

How did your family respond?

My parents were actually very sweet. My dad, who always had a very bad temper...I thought he was going to hit the roof. My mom was always calm. When I told them there was no response from either of them. It was almost worse; it felt to me like a land mine. My dad just got up from the table and went about his business.

I asked my mom, "Did he hear what I said?"

She said, "Yes. I think he's just going to take his time."

Later I approached her as she was ironing and asked her what she thought. I am the seventh of ten children, so she'd already been through quite a lot with my sibs. She said, "I'm finally starting to understand that there can be more than one way." It was very sweet. Very beautiful to see how she had changed over the years.

My dad wanted to discuss all of this over dinner at a restaurant, which was a good thing since it meant he wouldn't be shouting. He was also very kind, asking lots of fatherly questions like, "Where does the Dalai Lama get his money?" I answered, "I don't know, Dad, I suppose it's the same place the Pope gets his money," and laughed. He gave a wry smile to that. But he asked other questions which showed how he was caring for me, like "Who is going to take care of you when you get old?"

Is there any difference between being ordained in the West versus in Asia?

Being ordained in the west is not at all the same thing as being ordained in Asia. The main thing is the isolation. You have to say goodbye to your family and you have virtually no support of any kind. The phrase for taking vows is, "Going into Homelessness" in the Theravadan tradition. But over there you don't really because there's the whole community. You leave your family and your home, yes, but you go into a new family and a new home in the form of your fellow monastics and the monastery.

Whereas in the west, you're sort of thrown out on the wilderness. Your family thinks you're crazy, at best; society has no idea what you're doing; you receive zero support financially, zero support emotionally. That's the situation for most monastics in the west.



Gampo Abbey

There are a few monasteries in the West like Gampo Abbey in Canada [<http://www.gampoabbey.org/> (<http://www.gampoabbey.org/>)], but for the most part Western monastics are on their own. You go out on the streets and instead of people being delighted to see you, people are sometimes even abusive. It's a whole different practice to be ordained in the west. It's really an attack on the ego.

How are people abusive?

Sometimes people get angry just seeing you. They assume you are in some sort of cult or that you are a Hare Krishna and will try to convert them. Once there was a woman working in a café I go to sometimes, where you go up to the counter to order your food and you have to give your name so they can call you when it's ready. So, as soon as I walk in this woman looks me up and down with the utmost contempt. I place my order and give my name. She spits out, "I bet that's not the name your mother gave you." She was really angry.

Tibetans often think that you're not actually ordained, that you're just playing dress-up. Part of that is because some Westerners have done that. People can just buy these robes online and start wearing them around and nobody knows the difference. But part of it is that there is a general lack of knowledge or acceptance that there are serious Western practitioners who decide to ordain.

I've been ordained for the last 16 years, and it's only in the last four years that I've felt comfortable wearing my robes around.

But, there are really nice things that happen because of wearing the robes as well. I've had waiters and waitresses start talking to me about the meaning of life. It's kind of delightful. My teacher said for people to see the robes is very positive for them. So that's why I stuck it out, to be beneficial to them.

Are there any issues that pertain specifically to nuns rather than monks?

Nuns are at the bottom of the heap. Really. Nuns have no status at all. Nuns are looked down on by everyone, even monks. I'm generalizing a lot here, but almost everyone will take a monk more seriously than a nun. Misogyny is the last acceptable prejudice. I'm not in it for the status—in fact I really don't like that, when people fold their hands in front of me and treat me like I'm something special. But you walk into a Buddhist center in the west and because you're not a man, and god forbid, not Tibetan, they think you don't know anything. Sometimes I can't imagine what's going through their minds. But, like I said, it's all about destroying the ego.

What are/were the steps to ordain?

For me, it was a matter of talking to my teacher. Quite a lot! Asking questions, asking his advice. Finally, he suggested I take *genyen* vows for a while—these are vows taken as the first step towards ordination, but they are also taken by lay people on certain days of the year, just for the day. About a year later I went with a group from France to Nepal to ordain under Kyabje Trulshik Rinpoche [<http://www.choklingtersar.org/teachers/trulshik.htm> (<http://www.choklingtersar.org/teachers/trulshik.htm>)].

How do you find the right abbey/living situation?

I didn't. I'm living in an apartment by myself. I have to pay my rent. I work 16-hour days between the work I do for InterAct and my work teaching the Dharma and the work I do for our newly-formed center, Songtsen Gampo Buddhist Center. [Palmo works with Interact Cleveland. See InteractCleveland.org] It was my teacher who asked me to come here and teach, otherwise I would be in France with him.

Can you explain the teacher-student relationship and the process of finding and officially choosing a teacher?

You have to find each other, first of all. You have to accept your teacher and your teacher has to accept you. You should be really careful about that. Really examine the teacher closely. Because a teacher who is not a genuine teacher can at best waste your life, and at worst lead you in a very bad direction. There is some very practical advice in the Buddha's teachings about this process. For example, it says you should examine your teacher for 12 years (which is difficult in our day, but it indicates the level of care which should be taken); the teacher should care for others; they should know the teachings inside and out, and so forth. My teacher, Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche, always, always, without fail is thinking about others. You can ask him the most esoteric questions and he has the answer at his fingertips. He has each and every quality mentioned in the text that defines an authentic master.

You also have to see, do we understand each other? Does this teacher understand me? Do I understand him or her? Do we have genuine communication? *After* all that I think comes the gut part—you just have really strong feeling that this is your teacher. But don't start with that—it's not hard to be charismatic and there's a really big difference between mere charisma and true realization.

If there's one thing you would like others to understand about the Buddhist path, what would it be?

Method, masters, and compassion. For me, these three are the essence of what is important and unique in Buddhism. First, there is a method, as I mentioned earlier, for actually developing in oneself the qualities all religions aspire to: love, patience, generosity, peace of mind, etc. Second, there are living masters of this path to whom one can look for inspiration and advice. Imagine, for example, having St. Francis right there so you could learn from him directly. Knowing these extraordinary, yet fully human, beings is to know that you too can reach the same state. It's not just words in an old book. It's a living reality. And finally, there is compassion. Every faith system incorporates compassion as part of their teachings and practice. But, in Buddhism, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, there's a tremendous emphasis on working for the benefit of others. The entire reason we embark on the practice is so that we can benefit others. It's not just an element of the path, it *is* the path.

Is there anything you would like to add to help your work in Cleveland?

Our center, Songtsen Gampo, is newly-fledged. We are a small, but dedicated group, aiming to provide services to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike in the Cleveland area. We want to be a force for the good in a city that is in dire need. We want to offer methods rooted in Buddhism for calming the mind, developing compassion, increasing awareness to all. One doesn't need to be Buddhist to benefit from these practices.

If anyone is interested in learning more about these methods, please visit the website. [www.anipalmo.org] Come to a talk or a class and see what you think.

We are currently looking for a physical home for our center. We also are in need of someone to help us with sound recordings when we have visiting Lamas and we need a web designer as well. It would also help us tremendously to receive monetary donations. There are a lot of expenses that come with running these programs and with receiving visiting Lamas, and as we are small (for the moment!) we struggle to meet these expenses.

If anyone can help us with these projects, please contact me at palmo@anipalmo.org. We'd be so grateful. Thank you!

One Response

Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com. The DePo Masthead Theme.

9 Follow

Follow "Lioliota's Blog of Discovery"

Build a website with WordPress.com