

SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

BRIDGING CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE AND ACTION A CONVERSATION WITH ADAM BUCKO

Interviewed by SAFOURA NOURBAKHS

Adam Bucko is the cofounder of The Reciprocity Foundation, an award winning nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of New York City's homeless youth. He is also the co-author of *Occupy Spirituality: A Radical Vision for a New Generation* (2013) and *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living* (2015). In the following interview Adam shares his fascinating spiritual activist journey which spans across many continents, chronicling the awakening and training of a compassionate heart in search of ways to serve others and to heal human suffering. He grew up in Poland during the totalitarian regime and spent his early years exploring the anarchist youth movement as a force for social and political change. At the age of 17, Adam immigrated to America where his desire to find his path towards a meaningful life led him to monasteries in the U.S. and India. His life-defining experience took place in India, where on his way to a Himalayan hermitage, he met a homeless child who lived on the streets of Delhi. This brief encounter led him to the "Ashram of the poor" where he began his work with homeless youth. After returning to the U.S., he worked on the streets of various American cities with young people struggling against homelessness and prostitution. What distinguishes Adam Bucko's approach in helping the homeless youth is his belief in the possibility of opening "that space of heart" in every individual he encounters. To him working with the homeless is simply another way of experiencing and sharing the sacred with others.



Let's begin with your early life experience. You were born in 1975 in Poland, which was a communist country at the time. Yes, that's correct.

You grew up there and lived there until you were seventeen years old. Can you tell us a little bit about growing up in Poland at that time, especially your experience of faith and spirituality and how it shaped you as a young man? Of course during that time in Poland there was this big movement called The Solidarity Movement which was a movement for democracy and human rights. That movement was deeply rooted in faith. In many ways my experience of the church in Poland, when I think about that time, is that churches were the only free places in Poland where people could go and really speak honestly about all of their difficulties, all of their pain and also about all of their hopes. We were stuck in the system that was very oppressive and that didn't really give people many opportunities for self-actualization or any kind of a life of meaning and purpose. It was all about following orders, so to speak, and at times very, very oppressive and so early on I learned about these few activist priests who were kind of like Gandhian figures and preached non-violence, who talked about building a world that reflects all of those values that we had within our hearts—those values of justice and compassion. And those values that Jesus preached. And so I was very inspired by that and it just so happened that some of those priests that I admired were killed by the system. One of them was my parish priest. That was a very devastating experience for a child.

So when you were seventeen, you and your family moved to the U.S. At the time when you left, did you want to leave? No, I didn't want to leave. It was a decision that my family made. Now I'm very happy that it happened, but at that time at the age of seventeen I was struggling with that quite a bit. The first couple of years in New York were very tough. We were undocumented immigrants. We didn't speak English, so for a seventeen-year-old kid it felt like you were transported into this foreign place and you don't even have the tools to connect with that new place.

Can you say a little bit about how you ended up in a Hindu ashram in the U.S.? Was it something you were searching for, or a door opened, someone suggested that? How did that come about? After a couple of years, two or three, in New York, I just felt like my life just fell apart and I started experiencing periods of depression, panic attacks; a combination of different things and I was not able to function. My parents were taking me to doctors but no one really knew what was happening and it got to the point where I couldn't get out of bed. Then one day my mom found a holistic counselor from an ad in a Polish newspaper in New York and we scheduled an appointment and I started seeing her. She was a follower of an Indian holy man, Haidakhan Babaji, and she taught me meditation and it was one of those experiences where within a couple of weeks I started feeling better. Her

office was like entering a Hindu temple with pictures of saints and lots of incense and we would sit on the floor and just talk for hours at a time. She essentially started giving me instruction in contemplative life and after a couple of weeks the saint that she was following just started appearing in my dreams. He was showing up in my dreams and always laughing. I didn't know what to do with that, but eventually the experience of contemplative practice just really healed me. The way that the Hindu ashram happened essentially—my perception was changing so rapidly that I couldn't imagine myself just focusing on things that other kids my age were focusing on. There was this desire to dedicate myself to this practice. She gave me the name of a bookstore and I remember walking in and it was one of those spiritual bookstores called East West, a really wonderful bookstore that unfortunately no longer exists. I walked in and I picked up a book, opened it and there was a picture of this Hindu monk with long dreadlocks and I had dreadlocks too and I said Wow! That's my guy. I want to be like him. So I started reading these stories about Himalayan saints and then at some point she said why don't you just get on a Greyhound bus and go to one of those ashrams, and that's what I did. I went first for a month and it really changed my life because I got a very strategic lesson in how to live a contemplative life in the world. It was almost like the beginning of a monastic formation and while at the Hindu ashram I also started discovering this tradition of Hindu Christian ashrams of people like Father Bede Griffiths and others, essentially Christian monks who went to India initially as missionaries. Eventually that led me to India to do a retreat at a Christian hermitage outside of Rishikesh operated by a nun who was both a Hindu Swamini and Catholic nun, a Catholic Sister, so basically for her there was no contradiction. So that was a big thing for me and eventually some really important things happened in India. I met on my first day a homeless girl and that really changed everything.

Yes. I heard you talk of that experience of seeing this homeless kid on the street and I want you to talk about this more. It's an experience that many of us understand coming from developing countries where you see kids every day, very young kids begging on the streets, sometimes selling stuff and you never know what to do about it or how to respond. Yes, before I went to India everyone told me that I'm going to see homeless kids and they instructed me to never give them money, you know things that we hear that those kids make more money than anyone else. They hang out in touristy areas. So I knew all of that and yet you arrive in Delhi in the middle of the night and go for a walk because you're curious about this place and all of a sudden these kids emerge out of a dark alley and take your hand and start walking with you and she's asking you for food and you look at her and it's like a twelve-year-old girl just skin and bones, dirty clothes, dirty face burned with cigarettes and it's like what do you do? You can't just ignore that. You can't just not respond to that. For me it was one of those experiences where all of a

I remembered the words of my theology professor who said that in life every person that we meet is a call that we need to respond to and for me that felt like that was my call and I needed to respond to her needs, I needed to respond to that something that I felt was calling me.



sudden everything stopped and I remembered the words of my theology professor who said that in life every person that we meet is a call that we need to respond to and for me that felt like that was my call and I needed to respond to her needs, I needed to respond to that something that I felt was calling me.

So instead of going to a monastery you ended up going somewhere else? Well, the next day I couldn't get that experience out of my head because it really shook me, so I called a friend of mine who was running an ashram outside of Delhi in the slums and he was one of those guys, in a way, one of those Christian monks who lived kind of like a Hindu sanyasi. So I called this guy and asked him to explain what was going on! Who is this child, why is this having such an effect on me? Being with him and seeing what's happening, just seeing all the brokenness, seeing all of the people who were rescued from the streets, maggots in their bodies, people who were dying of AIDS. Seeing that and feeling that pain was something that I had never experienced before. I felt like I was being trapped into pieces just being around that. Smelling, like rotting human flesh, seeing the maggots, seeing the blood and the suffering, but being in that... at first I just wanted to run away, but I was too embarrassed to do that so I just stayed.

How long did you stay, then? Initially I stayed there for a couple of days and on the third day I had this opening where I was this person who was not in very good shape, and all of a sudden something cracked in me—that identity that wanted to objectify other people's pain, that was afraid of people's pain, that wanted to just turn my back and run away from it because it was uncomfortable. That cracked. And after that all of a sudden it was like, okay, his pain is my pain. The only reasonable thing to do when we are in pain is that we address it.

So you came back to the U.S. after how long? I stayed in India for a few months. I still went to the Himalayas and spent sometime in the hermitage. But eventually I got very sick in India and I came back to the U.S. initially to Florida to heal. After a few weeks I realized that my experience in India had changed me. I couldn't just go back and pretend that nothing happened. I started working with homeless kids engaged in prostitution in Orlando and then one thing led to

To help them to find that something that infuses them with life. To help them find their gifts, then figure out a way how to offer those gifts to the world in a way that they can make a living, but also in a way that they can offer something really unique, something that reflects who they are, to the world.

another and essentially it was this process of discovering how things work in the U.S. Of discovering that even though we don't see it, we have kids, and we have adults living in conditions and situations that are just as bad, if not worse, than what I saw in India. It's just that here it happens in the back streets of our cities and no one knows, no one sees, all of it is hidden. We don't see that naked body in the streets, but those things are happening. They're just hidden. So I spent a year working in Florida and basically my work was to be on the streets to become part of the street fabric of all the homeless kids. To hang out with pimps, gangsters, crack dealers, and build relationships with them and in a way create these kind of spaces on the streets where both the abused and the abusers could come in, take a break from their identity and experience what it means to be cared for. Eventually, also, some of those kids were in trouble and needed help taking them out of that space and bringing them into a shelter and helping them to heal and helping them to rebuild their lives. But I had this experience, actually a couple of different experiences, that showed me that it was time to actually leave Florida and also to start an organization that could be contemplative in nature, that would be rooted in deep contemplative spirituality and that could address the needs of the young people in a way that was very direct.

So in a way you saw that the more traditional programs for the homeless somehow didn't address the needs, or didn't work. Yes. I think there are many restrictions, that's number one, many rules and restrictions that were not actually helpful and in addition to that the whole system and the way that it was built... it was built in response to what the situation was twenty, thirty years ago. The whole design of the programs was based on a belief that probably used to be true but is no longer true, namely that people become homeless because they lose their jobs and so therefore we have to provide them with short-term help where they can have a place to stay, where they are required to work, to save a little bit of money, and once they save two or three thousand dollars they are ready to go out on their own. Now, people become homeless for all kinds of reasons, especially young people, and also most of them, if we make them work while at the shelter, most of them are going to only have access to minimum wage jobs and in cities like New York or any big city, and probably most small cities in the U.S... if you have a minimum wage job that's not enough to have a life...

To make a living... Yes, to make a living. You can't even rent an apartment with that, it's just not enough. And so, we wanted to address that, so in the organization that we started we thought that instead of pushing kids into low-wage, low-skill jobs we help them to find their calling—to help them to find that something that infuses them with life. To help them find their gifts, then figure out a way how to offer those gifts to the world in a way that they can make a living, but also in a way that they can offer something really unique, something that reflects who they are, to the world. So that's one component. The other component of traditional youth help is that there are many, many restrictions. For example, one time I was standing outside of this hotel, and it was one of those hotels where you could get a room for weekly rates that were cheap and what that meant was that everyone who lived in that hotel was either prostituting or selling drugs or pimping. Those were the things, and so I remember standing outside and this girl approached me and she said could you help me. This is what I have to do, and she was doing sex work, and she said inside the hotel I have two small kids and they're sleeping, so when they fall asleep every night I leave the hotel room and basically I stand here and try to pick up some clients, trying to make a living, so this way I have money to pay for the hotel and also for money to pay for food for my kids. Can you help me? At that moment I realized that under the system I was working for—what would happen if we took her to a shelter? Immediately her kids would be taken away from her. They would be enrolled in the system and she would be made to work. They would send her to get a job at a fast food restaurant and then after she would make one thousand or two thousand dollars they would kick her out and ask her to get a place of her own. How is that solving anything? The kids would still be away and she still probably within a month or so, she would run out of her savings and she would be back on the street.

Exactly. And another situation was I remember this other girl... sometimes you look at someone and you know that you're there to help them, you have to do something. And it was a sixteen-year-old girl who was prostituting. We tried to help her but it was very hard and one day she got arrested for prostitution. I had the sense that I had to go and visit her in prison and do something. She had to essentially get into a shelter but it was very hard because the rules and regulations said you can't interact with your clients, so to speak, outside.



When you're part of Social Services you call those kids your clients. You can't really interact with them outside of a setting of a shelter or outreach or something like that. Going to visit someone in prison was against the rules and we still tried to do that but we just couldn't get around the system and then on the day she was released she got shot and she was killed. And another girl was killed by a drug dealer, so all of those experiences showed me that a new way was needed. But, of course, I didn't have the skills. I didn't have the courage to start a new organization but I did have an amazing friend, her name was Taz Tagore, and she was a Buddhist contemplative and a Buddhist teacher and at that time we had spent years talking about social change and one day she said let's stop talking and let's start doing. I was like, oops, okay, we have to do it. So we started the Reciprocity Foundation together.

Yes, one of the questions I had for you was about professional training because there are a lot of people out there who really want to start a non-profit organization and they have the right idea and the right motivation but wonder whether you need to have special training to start a program like this. And what was it like for you who had, of course, a very unconventional way of doing this? You had your spiritual journey and alongside that you also had this calling for service and you started to do that, but did you have any formal training? I did have some formal training. By the time I started I had an undergraduate training

in theology and philosophy and a graduate degree in sociology focused on social movements and social change. I also had some training in psychotherapy and years of training in contemplative spirituality (which happened through mentoring with my mentors and teachers). And I would say that most of my work and the methodology that emerged for working with young people emerged more from my spiritual training than the other stuff, but nonetheless the other stuff informed it. I think it's very important to have training and it's also very important to have good mentors. I had some amazing mentors. I had a mentor who was a Hasidic Rabbi, for example, a very holy man who spent decades working on the streets of New York applying his kind of Jewish mystical teachings to how to rescue kids from the streets. You never see that done. I had my mentor in India, Ton Snellaert, whose unconventional approach really shaped how I looked at things. I had other mentors like Matthew Fox and Andrew Harvey who not only gifted me and infused me with some extraordinary teachings from the Christian contemplative tradition but who were truly there for me, sharing with me their lives and encouraging me to stay true to my vocation and to always remember that I am here to let God live through me as much as possible. And there were others who are some of the monks and hermits that I was mentored by. All of that contributed, but ultimately, I think, most of the methodology just came from contemplative prayer, from realizing that I need to show up with these kids just like when I show up for



contemplative prayer—in a state of prayerfulness, receptivity and listening, putting all of my preconceived notions of what I am there to do aside, and just being able to be there for them. That meant being able to experience their pain without any buffers, being able to accompany them into the depths of their suffering, and then oftentimes breaking with them as a result of that pain. What I discovered in that process is that when everything falls apart and nothing works and there is nothing to stand on... there is this something much bigger than us, this Presence of God, that just emerges and holds us... this something infuses Itself into whatever is happening and starts doing the work of healing... both on me and them. And, so in the end it is not even clear who is helping whom. And it's all Grace. And that's when action becomes contemplation. That's when this work becomes prayer.

That's a very important distinction here between the way you use contemplative practice for these youths as opposed to a conventional therapist who sits with them. My assumption is that a therapist doesn't see that as part of their job to break with them, to go through the experience with them. And there is always this distance. Yes. It's very different in a sense. When kids come to us we welcome them into our family and they become our kids. They are not our clients. Our kids who go through the program are part of the family and eventually they run programs there. It's like this growing family in which... and what people say, "when I came here I felt love for the first time." It's a family rooted in God and love and for us that is the key. That is the kind of work that we wanted to do. That is what we felt was missing in the sector and it is different from the traditional way of working with people, however, I would say that it is important

to supplement what we do with some more conventional things. Sometimes kids need therapy. Sometimes kids need all kinds of things that are more conventional, but for us we don't try to pretend that all of the things including the lack of love that they've experienced in their lives can be substituted with conventional things. There's no substitute for being able to show up as a loving person. There's no substitute for that. There's no substitute for a feeling of family where everyone can come in and feel seen, acknowledged and loved. But at the same time, it's important to deal with things that arise in a way that is skillful. So our program has many things, we help kids heal from their trauma, we enable them to go to college, they work with leaders from the industry of their choice, complete projects and that becomes part of their professional portfolio, we place them in internships and jobs. But none of that is disconnected from this family-like setting where you treat each of those kids as your kids, with special gifts, vocations, and ways in which they are meant to make a difference in this world. And yet, they do need to learn how to make a living in the process... but we help them to do that by sharing what's most unique and special about them.

Can you tell us a little bit more about the contemplative practice that you used in your program? What exactly did you teach and how did you teach these practices? My cofounder is Buddhist, I'm Christian, so the organization kind of fused those two traditions together in a way. People are often surprised—you guys are working with hundreds of young people and all of them practice contemplative practice? How is that possible? No one is interested in this stuff—well, they actually are! And for us we did a bunch of different things but at the core of it was, you enter our space and there's



a specific feeling, there's specific music, there's specific smells and colors. You enter a space and someone can immediately ask you would you like a meal. And you were given a nice organic vegan meal within a caring environment, whether you would like to get a massage and relax. We had a meditation room where kids offered objects that were really meaningful to them and that became their holy space. It's like you would enter the space, and sometimes a couple of different times each day there would be this movement towards silence where everyone would practice. In addition to our work one-to-one just helping kids to discover their calling—what is your calling?—you can't really know what it is unless you're in a state of receptivity and listening. And that's essentially a state that you get to through contemplative prayer. And one-to-one... everything basically that we did started and ended with contemplative practice. In addition to that we combined a lot of holistic practices for healing like acupuncture and massage therapy and we worked with these questions of what breaks your heart, what makes you truly alive. So we started with questions. We didn't talk about spirituality. Once we would get people to this space of receptivity and listening where they began to feel this presence of something bigger than them, we would name it for them and simply say this is what people are talking about when they talk about the sacred, the divine, and then they would be like, Wow! This is the most powerful thing that I have ever felt. I felt completely myself and yet more than myself. And then we would connect that to narratives and stories and practices and then all of a sudden we wouldn't be talking about some abstract spirituality or religion, we would be talking about the experience that they just had that was life-changing to them and then

we would be talking about practices that could help them stay connected to that experience and deepen that experience and help them build courage to live from that place as much as they can in their lives. So that kind of became the center, really.

I imagine that most of these kids come from a very traumatic experience. The first thing before anything else for them is to get to that place of healing. Unless they get there they can't really grow in any way. Exactly. Unfortunately, that's not how our society looks at things. We believe we can do things in one month, three months and just change people by giving them a minimum wage job. A minimum-wage job is a good start for some things but it's not a solution at all.

In the email exchange you told me that at the moment, you are taking a break from the Foundation. Can you just tell us more about where you are at right now and what you are doing and what's happening in your life right now? I am on a break in a sense that I am not in NYC anymore. But they are still my kids. I hold them in my heart every day. At this point in my life I felt that God was calling me to enter into a deeper prayer. So here I am... living a semi-monastic life, following the daily Benedictine schedule of prayer, study, and work. Drinking deeply from my tradition and learning how to consent to God completely so each day God can live through me more and more. And all of those kids are with me... in a sense that as Archbishop Ramsey said, prayer is being with God with people on our heart. So they are always on my heart and their stories, their pain, their victories are what enabled me to have a relationship with God that I have today. They are my teachers.