

Ajahn Sumedho Interview

Interviewed by Philip Moffitt – July 7, 2005

Phillip Moffitt: Thank you Ajahn Sumedho for taking the time to share your teachings with the Spirit Rock community.

PM: I would like to begin by asking you to elaborate on what you mean by “relaxed attention”?

Ajahn Sumedho: Well, what I’m pointing to is to put yourself in a state where you feel at ease, but attentive. It’s an oxymoron in a way – we sometimes can give attention as kind of a willful forced experience, and that can be quite counterproductive to meditation. So this combination of “relaxed” and “attention” is to encourage attentive openness to the present moment.

PM: How does what you call the “sound of silence” relate to “relaxed attention”?

AS: I found in my own practice when I am in this relaxed attention state, and I’m not absorbed or focused on anything in particular, then I hear this kind of high-pitched vibration or a sound of whatever it seems to be. I call it “the sound of silence.” It’s kind of like the background of everything. And so once that’s recognized, then I find that it is like a stream that you can rest in, and it allows both attention on this wide spectrum of awareness and it stops the thinking mind.

The “sound of silence” can serve as a point of reference, to know when you’re in the natural state of awareness. It means having a relaxed attention towards the feelings in your own body and your emotional states and your thoughts and memories. You are experiencing them from the perspective of this *empty place* rather than the endless reactivity that the mind usually has to your feelings or emotions. It’s not a *created sign*-- something that you have to perpetuate. It’s just a matter of recognizing and trusting in your relationship to the world around you.

The encouragement is to recognize and learn how to rest in relaxed attention rather than trying to concentrate the mind or get in a particular state you imagine you should have. Your relationship to the conditioned world becomes one of awareness and reflecting on the nature of impermanence.

AS: The sound of silence is not an object that you have to sustain through concentrating upon, it’s just recognizing and trusting it so that whether you are aware of it or not, it’s still there.



PM: So you are pointing to meditation as open spacious attention.

AS: Open spacious attention, right.

PM: From this open, spacious attention you notice what the mind is experiencing?

AS: Then you can watch and be aware of whatever arises in consciousness.

PM: If you don't mind my asking, how would you describe your practice?

AS: It's just awareness, really. What it is for me is just a very natural state of being. It takes no effort. It doesn't need special conditions. I don't need to be on a retreat or in quiet solitude to do what I call practice. It's just a state of being, really—whatever state I'm physically in, or whatever conditions I happen to be experiencing.

PM: Will you give me an example of this awareness in daily life.

AS: Well for instance, there was a monk that I had been living with for a number of years. He had very eccentric mannerisms and ways of doing things that I oftentimes felt very frustrated or annoyed with. He also affected others similarly. There was this sense of many people sharing the same opinion. I became aware that this monk and I were somehow at odds with each other in a way I felt a sense of despair with. I felt it was his fault. And then one day I had this insight – it was my fault rather than his. The insight was that I was holding to my idea, unstated and unrecognized in myself, that he shouldn't be the way he is. Once I saw that was how I always regarded him and how I related to him, I could drop that and then it was more accepting him as is with no conditions or ideas that he shouldn't be this way. From that moment on, our relationship began to work. He and I became very good friends. It was quite an insight for me, because sometimes you aren't even aware that you're doing it, especially when the individual is considered difficult by others in the community. You can stick together and agree and get it all wrong.

PM: The Third Noble Truth, the truth of cessation, is the one that's most confusing for most students. It's also taught less than the first two, for various reasons. Would you explain what cessation is?

AS: It's the end of suffering, really. This you have to recognize. You can't describe it. Cessation does sound a bit annihilationist in a way to the thinking mind. You think everything is going to cease, a kind of void of nothingness. It's really the end of suffering. That's why the First Noble Truth is suffering, the Second is the causes, and the Third is the end of suffering. It's not like cessation is a kind of extinction of everything, but cessation is suffering. Then when suffering ceases, the awareness is still operating. To realize the cessation of suffering, you are no longer attached to the causes. This is recognized or realized. Cessation is peace, is liberation, is enlightenment, Buddha, all the things we might long for as ideals. These are realized through letting go and the cessation of suffering. But if we are trying to get rid of suffering because we don't like it, we never let it really cease.

We're just suppressing it or running away from it. It's through this receiving, recognizing, using suffering that we can actually let suffering go and realize the cessation of it.

PM: What is meant by the phrase, "a path moment?"

AS: To me that means to have an insight into the path, which is a realization of cessation. That's a profound insight. That first moment is usually very brief and then the thinking mind returns saying, "What was that?" or "That was a path moment." When you remember it, it creates a desire to have it again. But after that moment this is where the sense of letting go of the memory [is important and one should focus on] cultivating awareness in a kind of ordinary way, not looking for another path moment as such but developing awareness in daily life, ordinary routine daily life.

PM: Integrating insight into daily life is perplexing for many students. They have what feels like a deep insight, and then they expect everything to change. They may have this insight for just a few moments, or they may be in an altered state of some kind for a period of time, hours or even days. But there's always a point when that too ceases. They express such disappointment and seem so uncertain about how to continue. How would you explain to the students that this is okay, that there's not supposed to be something big happening?

AS: Oftentimes, students have such insights on silent retreats or when they're alone where everything is very controlled and their environment is very quiet, very still. Through the practice, the sense of the self falls away and one has insight. But it's easy to connect mentally to the memory of the insight with a situation. You get this sense of always wanting to have that experience again through having a similar situation.

Students often fail to recognize the possibility--the reality of awareness always being there, no matter where they are or what they are doing. They mistakenly think they have to control the environment, go on a meditation retreat or go off to some special place to have awareness. Such thinking can be another kind of defilement, it is "clinging" to memory. The practice is always to just see the suffering and the cause of suffering, in all situations. Keep working with the awareness of suffering and of letting go of the causes. In this instance suffering is the desire to have another quiet retreat or the desire to have something that you remember, but you don't have right now. If you keep working with suffering, then you begin to recognize even attachment to views of vipassana or views of meditation techniques or to your own particular views and opinions about practice is suffering.

PM: Students often get attached to the idea of progress: "okay, I've done this, what's next?"

AS: Such thinking is often deluding. It reinforces this pattern of a personality wanting to attain something. Actually the practice is all about letting go and relinquishing. Practicing letting go is much more humbling than putting your self into "What stage am I in my insight program?" To me, if I think like that, it's my ego again wanting to feel like I'm getting somewhere. What I've found more helpful is to see through that desire and to not try to become or get or attain, but to see the suffering of holding on to these views.

PM: You use the phrase “ seeing through that desire.” One of the things that struck me about your teaching is that you teach it’s not desire, but attachment to the desire that’s the problem. Would it be fair to say that when you’re not attached to desire, the desire is transparent?

AS: Yes, because desire is a kind of natural energy of this realm. The suffering is caused through ignorance...attachment to the desire is the cause of the personal suffering. In this instance of spiritual progress, by attaching to desire – what stage am I in, and I want to get to the next stage – you can see this is based on the illusion of me as a person trying to become something. To me this is desire out of ignorance. By recognizing the ignorance, the delusion, you let go. And then, just by letting go, the insights into the Noble Truths happen – the heart becomes apparent and becomes real for us. It doesn’t help me to see myself in terms of attainment or achievement. These kinds of words are not useful to me because that’s my ego.

PM: Most students now seem to understand that they are to be *aware* of the moment, but they have had much less instruction on the *receiving* aspect of practicing mindfulness. Part of your teaching seems to be around this understanding of fully receiving the moment, accepting the moment like it is.

AS: When you receive something, you are embracing the whole, even the part that you may not particularly like. So if you’re embracing somebody, you’re embracing the whole person, not the bits and pieces that you particularly like. That sense of receiving then is not picking or choosing or correcting, but allowing this moment to be what it is and even welcoming it. It implies a welcoming attitude, rather than a kind of critical, resisting or judgmental attitude.

PM: That would be receiving it body and mind.

AS: Body and mind. For me, awareness brings this intuitive moment that includes everything. It’s not dividing anything into good, bad, right, wrong. It’s receiving whatever arises just the way it is. Both right and wrong can exist in the same moment.

PM: Having been a monk for 40 years, you now know a great deal about human nature. Looking back is there one particular thing that would be most surprising to that 30-year-old who first put on robes?

AS: Yes. Not to believe anything your mind says. (*Laughs.*)

PM: Say more about that.

AS: In other words, you are not what you think. This is the greatest discovery. At 30, my thoughts were my reality. They were the way I created and judged myself. I was very hard on myself and in many ways quite cruel and judgmental. Now I know how to think without being a victim of my own thoughts.

PM: On the recent retreat you repeatedly said: “The personality never gets enlightened.”

AS: What I regard as personality are my habits of thinking and attachment to memory and just the way I’ve developed on a personal level. These are like habits you acquire, so like any habit they are what they are, but they’re not anything more than that. *They have no life to them.*

This self that seems so real, so me-and-mine, is dead stuff, really. It no longer has any illusion of being person or soul. It’s like being free from the dreariness of habitual patterns of thought and emotion that tended to dominate consciousness before.

PM: At the last retreat many students remarked on how fully accepted they felt when they were in your presence.

AS: Once I became cognitive of the emptiness of consciousness-that there was just awareness, I could see people with out any kind of memory or opinion about them.

PM: (Bowing) Venerable Sumedho all of us at Spirit Rock feel blessed by your teaching and your presence. You have our deepest gratitude.