

PATIENCE

Ajahn Sumedho



Venerable Ajahn Sumedho

is a bhikkhu of the Theravada school of Buddhism, a tradition that prevails in Sri Lanka and S.E.Asia. In this last century, its clear and practical teachings have been well received in the West as a source of understanding and peace that stands up to the rigorous tests of our current age.



Ajahn Sumedho is himself a Westerner having been born in Seattle, Washington, USA in 1934. He left the States in 1964 and took bhikkhu ordination in Nong Khai, N.E. Thailand in 1967. Soon after this he went to stay with Venerable Ajahn Chah, a Thai meditation master who lived in a forest monastery known as Wat Nong Pah Pong in Ubon Province. Ajahn Chah's monasteries were re-nowned for their austerity and emphasis on a simple direct approach to Dhamma practice, and Ajahn Sumedho eventually stayed for ten years in this environment before being invited to take up residence in London by the English Sangha Trust with three other of Ajahn Chah's Western disciples.

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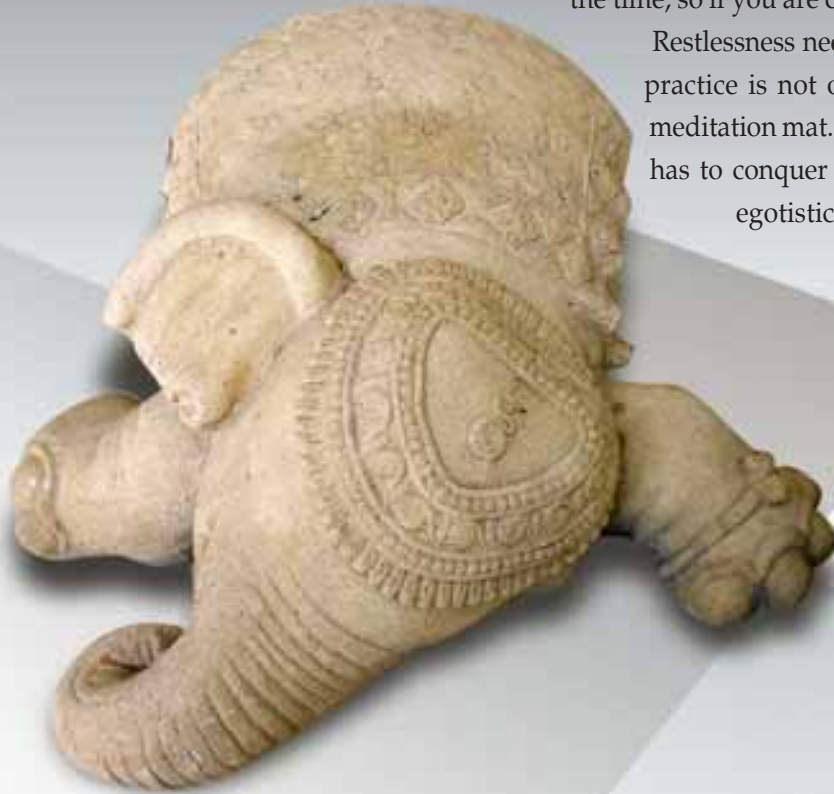
Peacefulness and tranquillity can be incredibly boring, and can bring up a lot of restlessness and doubt. Restlessness is a common problem because the sensory realm is a restless realm; bodies are restless and minds are restless. Conditions are changing all the time, so if you are caught up in reacting to change, you're just restless.

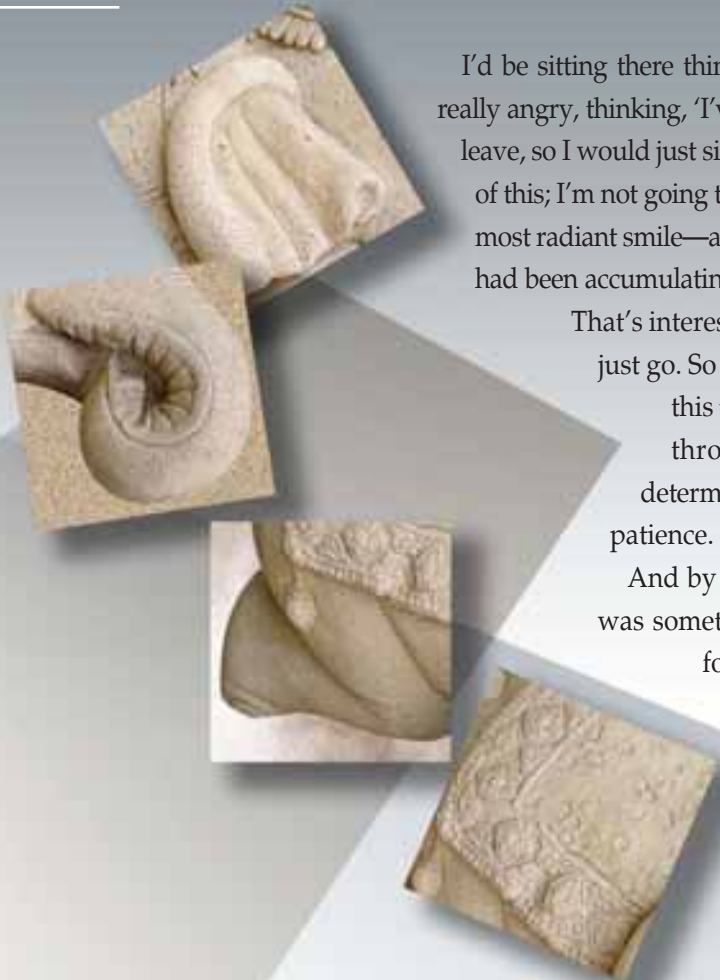
Restlessness needs to be thoroughly understood for what it is; the practice is not one of just using the will to bind yourself to the meditation mat. It's not a test of you becoming a strong person who has to conquer restlessness—that attitude just reinforces another egotistical view. But it is a matter of really investigating restlessness, noticing it and knowing it for what it

is. For this we have to develop patience; it's something we have to learn and really work with.

When I first went to Wat Pah Pong, I couldn't understand Lao. And in those days Ajahn Chah was at his peak and giving three-hour *desanas* every evening. He could go on and on and on, and everybody loved him—

he was a very good speaker, very humorous and everybody enjoyed his talks. But if you couldn't understand Lao...!

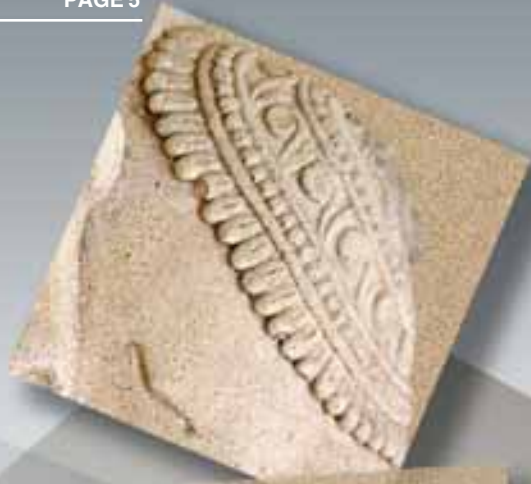




I'd be sitting there thinking, 'When's he going to stop, I'm wasting my time.' I'd be really angry, thinking, 'I've had enough, I'm leaving.' But I couldn't get enough nerve to leave, so I would just sit there thinking—'I'll go to another monastery. I've had enough of this; I'm not going to put up with this.' And then he would look at me—he had the most radiant smile—and he'd say, 'Are you all right?' And suddenly all the anger that had been accumulating for that three hours would completely drop away.

That's interesting, isn't it? After sitting there fuming for three hours, it can just go. So I vowed that my practice would be patience, and that during this time I would develop patience. I'd come to all the talks and sit through all of them as long as I could physically stand it. I determined not to miss them, or try to get out of them, and just practise patience.

And by doing that I began to find that the opportunity to be patient was something that has helped me very much. Patience is a very firm foundation for my insight and understanding of the Dhamma; without that I would have just wandered and drifted about, as you see so many people doing. Many Westerners came to Wat Pah Pong and drifted away from it because they weren't patient. They didn't want to sit through



three-hour *desanas* and be patient. They wanted to go to the places where they could get instant enlightenment and get it done quickly in the way that they wanted.

Through the selfish desires and ambitions which can drive us, even on the spiritual path, we can't really appreciate the way things are. When I reflected and actually contemplated my life at Wat Pah Pong, I realised that it was a very good situation: there was a good teacher, there was enough to eat, the monks were good monks, the lay people were very generous and kind and there was encouragement towards the practice of Dhamma. This is as good as you can get; it was a wonderful opportunity. And yet so many Westerners couldn't see that because they tended to think—'I don't like this, I don't want that; it should be otherwise.' And—'What I think is... what I feel is... I don't want to be bothered with this and that.'

I remember going up to Tarn Sang Phet monastery, which was a very quiet secluded place in those years, and I lived in a cave. A villager built me a platform because in the bottom of this cave was a big python. One evening I was sitting on this

platform by candle-light. It was really eerie and the light cast shadows on all the rocks: it was weird, and I started to get really frightened and then, suddenly, I was startled. I looked up and there was a huge owl right above, looking at me. It looked immense—I don't know if it was that big, but it seemed really enormous in the candlelight—and it was looking straight at me. I thought, 'Well what is there to be really frightened of here?' and I tried to imagine skeletons and ghosts or Mother Kali with fangs and blood dripping out of her mouth or enormous mon-sters with green skin—than I began to laugh because it got so amusing! I realised I wasn't really frightened at all.

In those days, I was just a very junior monk and one night

Ajahn Chah took me to a village fete—I think Satimanto

Bhikkhu was there at the time. We were very

serious practitioners, and we didn't

want any kind of frivolity or fool-

ishness. And of course going to a

village fete was the *last thing* we wanted

to do—because in these villages they love

loudspeakers. Anyway, Ajahn Chah took Sati-

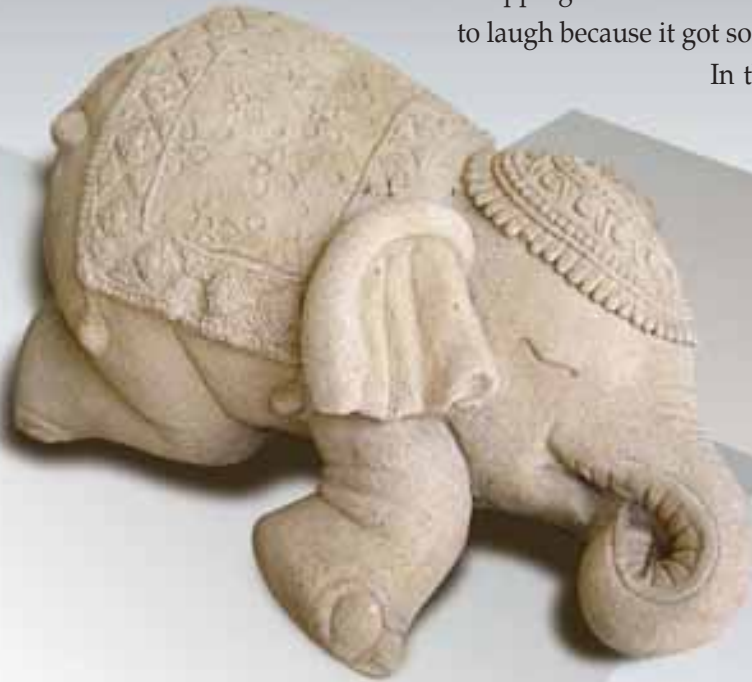
manto and me to this fete, and we had to

sit up all night with the raucous

sounds of the loudspeak-

ers—and monks giving talks

all night long! I kept thinking,



‘Oh, I want to get back to my cave—green-skinned monsters and ghosts are much better than this.’ I noticed that Satimanto, who was *incredibly* serious, was looking really angry and critical and very unhappy. We just sat there looking miserable. I thought, ‘Why does Ajahn Chah bring us to these things?’

Then I began to see for myself. I remember sitting there think-ing, ‘Here I am getting all upset over this. Is it that bad? What’s really bad is what I’m making out of it. What’s really miserable is my mind. Loudspeakers and noise, and distraction and sleepiness, I can put up with, but it’s that awful thing in my mind that hates it, resents it and wants to leave—that’s the real misery!’

That evening I saw what misery I could create in my mind over things that actually I could bear. I remember that as a very clear insight into what I thought was miserable, and what *really* is miserable.

At first I was blaming the people, the loudspeakers, the disruption, the noise and the discomfort—I thought that was the problem. Then I realised that it wasn’t; it was my mind that was miserable.

If we reflect on and contemplate Dhamma, we learn from the very situations which we like the least—if we have the will and the patience to do so. **M**

