

# Somboon Interview

📅 March 20, 2021 ⌚ 37:07

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

elephants, Uttaradit, Thailand, truth, karma, reincarnation, self love, Buddhism, monk, interfaith, group meditation, elephant training, five precepts of Buddhism, Theravada, temple, Arlington, Texas, missionary, healing, Non-self

## SPEAKERS

Aysha Moneer, Somboon

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- A** Aysha Moneer 00:01  
This is Aysha, interviewing Somboon in Arlington, Texas. Today is March 20, 2021. Thank you so much for being here. To start, tell me about what your upbringing was, your childhood - as a child, where you lived, what you did - when you were little.
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 00:32  
I just stayed in the jungle. I was living in the jungle.
- A** Aysha Moneer 00:40  
Where were you?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 00:42  
North Thailand
- A** Aysha Moneer 00:45  
And what did you do there?

- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 00:48  
I just did normal kid things. I played with animals. I was an elephant trainer. My family had elephants - I got one - I would just train and play with the elephants.
- A** Aysha Moneer 01:05  
How old were you when you started training the elephants?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 01:10  
Eleven year[s] [old]
- A** Aysha Moneer 01:15  
What did you do? What was that like?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 01:21  
I was very good friends with the animals. I would just play with them and they would enjoy. [I would] love to go to the mountain. I loved to live in the jungle [and] learn to know myself. I have the trainer, I had a leader training me [on] how to be a good person - [the] same [as] normal people.
- A** Aysha Moneer 01:53  
What kind of animals were you around?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 01:58  
I mean, I lived in the jungle - tiger, bird, monkey - any animal in the jungle.
- A** Aysha Moneer 02:05  
And all close to your home?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 02:07  
Yes, my hometown in the jungle - no light, no electronics, no phone.

- A** Aysha Moneer 02:15  
And when you say your leaders taught you how to be a good person, what did that mean?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 02:29  
Before you speak, you have to think first - that's a truth or not? Does it hurt yourself or hurt others, or not? Knowing before you do - they training me to be careful. In the moment - very dangerous - you can kill the person you love and you can hurt yourself. You can kill your dad and mom because in the moment thought [can be] very dangerous.
- A** Aysha Moneer 03:04  
Especially dangerous because as a child you're living around all these dangerous animals?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 03:14  
Old people they just telling what they know. Before I never came to a Buddhist temple, I was just living with animals and living with the people. In my home town we have more than 250 elephants. We just go get the wild animal and train it - and use it like a horse.
- A** Aysha Moneer 03:49  
And then what happened to the elephants after training them?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 03:53  
We use them to carry the log, bring the log to the company because we have order from the government. We have permit to cut the log and bring it up to the wood company.
- A** Aysha Moneer 04:09  
And you started doing that at eleven you said? At that time, was your dad by you or were elders watching you when you were training elephants at eleven years old?
- S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 04:27

My dad

A

Aysha Moneer 04:34

And were there other people your age also in your town growing up training elephants as well or were you are you early for your age?

S

Somboon 04:49

Yeah, I was early for my age. My group had 30 people. I had a team, like a football team. My team had 30 elephants.

A

Aysha Moneer 05:16

How old were you at that point?

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 05:29

I was still eleven. I started at eleven and I did that for 10 years.

A

Aysha Moneer 05:37

How was that responsibility at that age?

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 05:42

I just loved it. I quit the school, I not finished school. I just leave school and leave my mom. I did that for ten years in Thailand. When I was nineteen, close to twenty years, after that, I left home to become a monk.

A

Aysha Moneer 06:07

Tell me about that.

S

Somboon 06:11

First, when I decided to be a monk - I love mom - because in my culture, we believe if a mom's first son become a monk then mom go to heaven. I wanted to apologize for mom

because I leave mom when I was eleven - I leave school too - so, I just go, "Sorry mom, forgive me please," only asking, I cannot make my mom forgive me. But always mom forgives. I just hugging [her], [saying], "I'd like to wear a yellow robe, be a monk for you, for one week." [laughs]. At first I decided for one week. This was at twenty years old. After that, my dad came [and said], "Can you stay three months for dad?" I say, "Okay." After that mom say, "Can you make more for me?" My mom is asking me. Three months. This is all in Thailand.

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Somboon Rattanawerapong 07:44

After six months - for mom three months, for dad three months - no one made me be a monk, I just love to do it because I know something, before I don't know. I just do what I wanted to, I just fight if [someone] fights [with me]. But after that, I learned the Buddhist teaching: "Forgive." You don't need to hurt someone because that thing will come back to you later on. The reason a bad thing happens to you is because your old karma means I did it before. Someone hurt me, talk bad to me - that is my own karma. If I decide to talk back or fight back, that's my new karma. That's what my teacher was teaching me. After that, I just try to limit my anger, but I cannot limit all my anger. I can only limit - rebuild only - still in here [points to heart], and try to let it go and let it be. I still have anger. I still have greed. They cannot get away from me. They are always with me. I just limit and reduce, I cannot control. I cannot say "Stop." I just try to do the good, to do the best I can because I cannot make the good or bad go away from me. The only thing you can do is hide. People die, reborn, die, reborn, die, reborn. We cannot end. For the Buddha teaching, we have three things. You can have this life, but you have to be single all your life. You cannot get married, that's why I love it. Ever since I was young, I just loved to stay alone. The truth is, I [have] never slept with a woman because I just don't like it. I just love to be me.

A

Aysha Moneer 08:36

You said when you were twenty you would only go for a week. Then your mom and dad asked you to stay longer. Did you have these realizations then or did it take more time to realize this?

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 11:07

I just love to do it. The truth - after I been a monk past five years - I see something. I cannot tell you what it looked like. Only you have experience by yourself. You cannot explain that to anyone. If I ask you, "Are you hungry," no one can answer that. Only you. The truth means everything is temporary, including my body. Not different from a leaf, not different from a flower, not different from a fruit or a tree. One day we all go back to mother earth. We all have the same mom - mother earth. Christian,

Islam, Hindu, any religion has the same Monday, Tuesday, Friday, Saturday. They have only 24 hours. Nothing different - only their thinking. After I know that - I just love to be a monk and telling the people what I know, what I learn from my teacher. Teacher always telling me, "I am only telling. I cannot do nothing for no one. You'll be what you think, you get what you done. Just be happy." You never know how much time you have left, you are on your own. That's it. That's when I decide to live one day at a time - it becomes 34 years next year. Now I'm 53, but I still love to do. Like I have only one day left in this world. I don't know when I leave. I don't know how I die. I don't know where I die.

A

Aysha Moneer 13:30

How long did you stay at the one temple in northern Thailand until you left? Or did you move?

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Somboon Rattanawerapong 13:37

The first temple I live one year, the second two year and the first two years again and number four almost three years and then come to USA in 1995.

A

Aysha Moneer 13:56

Why did you come here?

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Somboon Rattanawerapong 13:57

I'm a Buddhist missionary. I come to talk to the people. Buddhist people here, they need a monk for teaching the truth. The truth has no name. When you put the name [on something], that's not the truth. Number one not the truth, ABCD not the truth. You just copy all - Monday, Tuesday, Thursday - the Earth is not the truth - the water is not the water - the wind is not the truth. You just put a name on it. Four elements - no earth, no water, no fire, no wind. You just put a name on it for the study only. In the end, we go back. If you grow an onion in the earth, the earth transforms. If you grow a strawberry, the earth transforms to the strawberry. And they come back again. Same today - morning, evening - it come again, but you put the name on it. Your house also you just put the name on it. A house never walks behind you, same with school or airport. The same with mountains and sea, they just stay there. Your footprint in the sea, you just step on, and it disappears. You and me are not different from footprint in the sea. We are all one. I am not different from an acorn. I am not different from a bluebonnet flower. I am not different from you. After I die, I am in no nation, no religion. The same - you come here, you born in the world, you don't bring no name with you. They give you after the birth. After you die, they give you one. They don't let you take body, bones. Same if you go to airport, they don't allow you to take your home or the land.

You cannot take land because the land does not walk behind no one. The land does not belong to me, does not belong to you. We all belong to the earth - that's what I believe is the truth. The cycle.

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 14:27

If you compare you and me, nothing different. Water not the water - you just name on it. The wind also not the wind, you just name on it for the study. Everyone know. Before, you were one cell, I was one cell. Mom and dad - they changed the name to the sperm and after that they change - same school - preK - school stays there, never ends. One million people study - can you tell which one original which one copy? [laughs]. We cannot tell, but we copied - that's not the truth.

A

Aysha Moneer 16:42

Right. When did you start speaking more at temples and to groups of people? When moved to America?

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Somboon Rattanawerapong 18:38

I already do in Thailand. I am teacher before going to the missionary overseas. I learned English by book and learn from people come. My English no good because I don't love to go school. That's why I'm so stupid. [laughs] I loved to stay in the jungle and love to play with the animal because that was my family.

A

Aysha Moneer 19:17

What did you learn growing up and playing with those animals? Because those were not easy animals to play with [laughs]. You know you mentioned tigers - what do you think you learned from that?

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 19:34

I learned from the nature law. Tiger they don't want to be tiger. The dog don't want to be a dog - because the karma make them be. The cat don't want to be the cat, because karma make them be. dangerous don't anymore. Anything, another animal because I am also animal too. I'm not training because I can hurt other, I mean I already do, if you're not training your mind. If you do not limit. If you do not reduce. Another one - if you do not respect. The reason I [listened] to the Buddhist teacher - because he said five precepts. "Do you like it if someone is killing you? Then don't do to others." This means respect. The second one, "Do

you like it if someone is stealing from you? Then don't do to others." Third one, "Do you like it if someone sleep with your wife, your sister, your daughter, your mom your dad. Then don't do to others." Number four, "Do you like it if someone is lying to you? Then don't do to others." Number five, "Do you love yourself. Then don't drink too much. Don't hurt yourself." That's the reason I learn - respect - don't do anything to hurt others, but you cannot stop other people hurting you.

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 20:23

You cannot stop other people from killing you. No way, only you. You can make all the people love you, but you can love all the people. I always say, "I don't have time to borrow. I don't have time to worry about who doesn't love me. Because I spend all my time loving the person who love - that's all I can do. I mean, I cannot change morning. I cannot change evening. Just accept, learn to live with, learn to deal with it. That's all. You cannot make people be what you want them to be. No way. You have your personal happiness. Just like no one can use your personal eye, your personal hand, your personal leg - you have personal mind, personal being. No one can download your wisdom from you. Only if you're telling them and they want to be happy by themselves. The same - I prepare food for you or I take you to the airport - I hope you enjoy this flight, that's all [laughs]. I hope you enjoy the food. I hope you enjoy the beach. Me, not different from the flower. Me, not different from the mango. Me, not different from you. Only thoughts are different. Yesterday cannot happen without today. Noon cannot happen without morning. And I never seen more than that. Morning without evening? Any religion, people born, teenager, older, and die. Again and again. That the reason I be a monk. If have a woman, one day I have a kid. When you have a kid, one day you have to make money to pay for school. But for the Buddhist, if you want to end this life not killing, you have to train your mind to purify. Same water, you can mix with everything, and no one can block water. You block water like this, if it cannot up, it go down. If it can't down, it make steam, up.

A

Aysha Moneer 20:35

How many people come to you for guidance? How many people you feel do speak to at the center?

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 23:00

Before COVID, more than 100. Now, when COVID came, I don't allow them to come.

A

Aysha Moneer 24:12

So you went from 100 people coming to what now? In the pandemic?



**S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 25:18  
We do every week. Before, we did every week, every month. We have normal quarter, four times a year, learning how to mediate, learning how to limit, how to reduce, how to respect other people and other religions. We are a family, we are all in one. You cannot without those people, because we need all those people.

**A** Aysha Moneer 25:55  
A lot of what you were saying just now helps people in their everyday life. What do you tell people that might be more stressed during the pandemic?

**S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 26:20  
For me, for the Buddhists, I am like a big tree, I cannot go telling people. If those people need the shade of the tree, they have to come by themselves. If I say - mountain, we cannot move to other people. We cannot tell people, "Come." I am just like a flower. If people say, "Oh beautiful," I just [lift his hands with a smile on his face]. I am not happy. I am not angry. If someone comes killing me, I just enjoy. I have to die anyway, "Thank you so much." I am so sorry if I hurt someone. The same tree just stand there. The same mountain just stays there. That is the Buddhist way to teach. We never walk, we never tell people. The same as apple on the tree. If you want it, you have to come and pick it by your own. We don't tell people, "Come and see," we don't do. My teacher don't allow you to. The same is with school, if you want you have to come by your own.

**A** Aysha Moneer 28:17  
And the people that are coming for guidance right now, during the pandemic. What does that look like?

**S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 28:26  
I don't understand

**A** Aysha Moneer 28:28  
During the pandemic, if someone wants to come to the temple? Are they allowed to see you for a little bit? Is it closed down completely right now?

**S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 28:41  
No, not closed down completely. They can come and talk, but they have to wear a mask and come one at a time. No more group because very dangerous. I scared too because this not safe for groups. Because some people come in - we didn't know we don't see the COVID. We have to protect.

**A** Aysha Moneer 29:07  
So, people that are coming during the pandemic right now and seeking guidance. Really hard time for a lot of people. What do you share with them?

**S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 29:21  
I just bloom. People come see or not, I do my job. And when the season gone or bloom, all the tulips are gone. And next year come again, something like that.

**A** Aysha Moneer 29:40  
What do you think of the pandemic? Has it affected you?

**S** Somboon Rattanawerapong 29:50  
For me, I accept. I mean, I just enjoy because I just do what I have to do. I mean I have my job. I just done my job. One day I have to leave this world. I am here for temporary stay. Everything, I just borrow, including this body. Temporary to use. But what I am doing - action, that belongs to me. My spirit does go somewhere - maybe to be flower, water, snow - somewhere. I cannot get out. The same hand of time, tick tick tick, minute and hour. Just learn to know the truth and accept and enjoy because you cannot get away and you cannot change. You cannot make morning come or stay. It just come and go, come and go. I just really happy to see you. I enjoyed it. If you love them all, the same you love yourself. If you talk really nice to a Buddha, that means you are talking really nicely to yourself. When you offer the food to the Buddha, that mean you offer the food to yourself. If you grow an onion, you get an onion. If you grow the garlic, you get a garlic. If you grow the corn, the corn comes up.

**A** Aysha Moneer 32:01  
Well to wrap, I just want to open this up for anything else you want to share or anything we didn't cover, anything that I didn't pose a question to - I just want to give you that space.

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 32:36

Non-self means you concentrate yourself. Before you are small baby, everyone have to pass and you'll continue and until the end - you turn to the ash. If you understand that is the truth, you free yourself. Heaven in here, heaven in your thought and also hell in here, not after you die. When you happy, that mean you in heaven. When you do something good - you speak good to mom and dad, who take care of you, who give you food before, who let you stay home before. Nansao means just the name. Every religion - all the same, for Buddhists - same calendar, same numbers. We just reuse. They have only nine number, and zero. The day, you only have day time few hour, night time few hour. But the year have 365 day. You have to go back to this, and after that, you see yourself. Non-self, because no name. Also, superego is more deep, you have to take time. It is not easy to explain to the baby, "This is not the water." Also, not easy to tell the pre-K student [that] one week, they have only one day, one year they have only one day, because they believe in the calendar. But the truth - what Monday look like? What Tuesday look like? You just put the name on it. The same - number one not different from number two, or daytime no different than the nighttime - they don't believe it. You have to let them learn for themselves. Non-self is easy to talk, but hard to understand. Me learn for the past 33 years, but still don't understand, but I know what it looks like. But I cannot get away, because I still have it. If someone hurt me, maybe, maybe not [makes fist gesture]. You never know what will happen. I am not perfect yet. The main thing for Buddhists - we are just living for today, one day at a time. Be happy, you never know how much time you have left and enjoy yourself. You're on your own. That's what the Buddhists daily do - wake up in the morning, some 3:30, some 4:00 in the morning - sitting, mediate - walking, mediate - knowing before you take, knowing before you talk, knowing before you talk: truth or hurting others? If it's not the truth, don't tell it, just leave it. Just limit, reduce [your anger] and respect [others].

A

Aysha Moneer 37:01

Well thank you so much.

S

Somboon Rattanawerapong 37:04

Thank you for having me [laughs].