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THE IMPORTANCE OF
TRUE BUDDHIST MEDITATION TODAY

by
Saya U Chit Tin

We prepared the answers to the questions in this booklet in August 1986. Since then, we have revised the text so it can be printed and distributed to our students around the world -- especially new students who are just getting interested in the Buddha Dhamma (the Doctrine taught by the Buddha). They are interested in both the theory and the practice of the Buddha-Dhamma and want to know the most effective approach.

We do not want to mislead people, and we do not want to misrepresent the Buddha-Dhamma, because that would be very harmful both to us and to them. We are true Buddhists. We teach the true Buddha-Dhamma and no other Dhamma (doctrine). We want this to be clear to all prospective students. If they decide not to come because of this -- even if no one comes -- we will be happy. We are happy, of course, if people do come, for, as our teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin said, we are givers. Students who work under our guidance are taught the true Buddha-Dhamma. They benefit from these Teachings, and we are able to accumulate good (kusala) actions.

We have never been interested in trying to attract large numbers of students. We follow Sayagyi's example in never distorting the Buddha's Teachings and in never catering to what the students would like to do or like to hear. Seeking popularity and fame are against the principles we follow. It may be that some of the answers we give here do not fully satisfy some people. We have made very effort to keep what we say in line with the Buddha's Teachings as preserved in the Pali texts (the canon, commentaries, and sub-commentaries). As we work to keep the Buddha-Dhamma alive in all its pristine purity, we have never knowingly compromised the Buddha's Teachings in order to appeal to the latest fad or the most up-to-date trend in modern thought. To be precise, our motto is, "We preach what we practise."

We approached Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, the editor of the Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka, for his advice, and we are very grateful to him for pointing out certain passages that were perhaps not in line with the spirit and the letter of the Pali texts. We have rephrased those passages. We thank him for his wise and instructive suggestions. We, of course, are entirely responsible for the final version published here.

We only have limited time available for writing Dhamma talks, Dhamma essays, etc., for we have travelled extensively around the world, teaching Buddhist meditation courses and setting up Buddhist meditation centres. We are still travelling today. As in the past, we often find some time even while teaching to work on talks and publications. These answers to

questions raised by Mr Flavio Pelliconi were first written at a course-site in the Netherlands (August 26, 1986, Kastel "De Wijchert," Oude Kleefsebaan 119, 6572 AK: Berg en Dal). An Italian translation of that first version was published in Paramita: (Quaderni di buddhismo). Revisions were made exactly five years later on another course in the Netherlands (August 29, 1991, t Zonnehuis, Beekbergerweg 23-25, 7371 EV: Loenen [Gld.]).

Our aim is to share the true Buddha-Dhamma with others. We know from experience that it will bring real benefits and instil true objective values in people's hearts and minds (see our answer to question 6). We do not go around the world trying to convert people of other religions, cultures, etc., to Buddhism. We have something to offer that can help bring the peace and prosperity that the world so desperately needs. We want to share this with everyone who is open to receive it.

Greed or lust (lobha), ill will or anger (dosa), and delusion or ignorance (moha) are more prevalent in the world today than ever before. If they can be reduced somewhat through the practice of the Buddha-Dhamma -- even if only by a tiny fraction -- then we will be happy. We will feel our efforts have been worthwhile and amply rewarded.

Last but not least, we thank Dr William Pruitt for the untiring assistance he has given us throughout all these years in all our efforts of preparing this and other publications in the Dhammadana series and the Dhamma Text series of the International Meditation Centres in the Tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin.

May Peace Prevail in the World!
May the Pure Buddha-Dhamma Long Endure!
Truth Will Prevail!

Saya U Chit Tin
Loenen, the Netherlands
August 29, 1991

1. What kind of meditation do you teach?

We teach Theravada Buddhist Meditation. I say "we" because my wife, who is popularly known as "Mother Sayamagyi" among the students, also teaches with me.

2. Who was your teacher?

Our teacher was a layman named Sayagyi U Ba Khin. He was the first Accountant General of independent Myanmar (Burma) when the country regained independence from the British in January 1948. He was able to fulfil his responsibilities with distinction as well as discharge his duties towards his family and teach meditation. At one time, he was able to work simultaneously at four full-time posts as head of four departments. Few people will ever be able to live up to such an example, but meditators do find that, thanks to their practice, they are able to function to the best of their ability.

3. How did you come to teach meditation?

My wife and I were privileged to be closely associated with Sayagyi U Ba Khin at the International Meditation Centre in Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma). I worked under him in the Accountant General's Office as an accountant, and he started teaching Vipassana in his office in 1951. I was fortunate to learn this practice under his guidance. Many others meditated under him also and in that same year he formed the Vipassana

Association. I was one of the ten founding members of this Association, which still functions today. In 1952, the Association founded the International Meditation Centre, Yangon, and began holding ten-day meditation courses each month at the Centre.

My wife and I helped Sayagyi during the ten-day courses -- especially my wife, who, unlike the rest of us, was free without official duties. She was able to assist Sayagyi by taking charge when he went to work at his office. The Burmese students were so appreciative of her teachings that they called her Mother teacher ("Sayamagyi" in Burmese), and Western students have continued to use this name for her.

After Sayagyi's demise in January 1971, we continued to teach at the Centre in Yangon together with the other members of the Vipassana Research Association. The Association is responsible for the Centre as well as for the training.

4. Why have you come to the West?

When our teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin was teaching at the Centre, many people from around the world came to do meditation courses under his instruction. After his death in January 1971, many foreigners continued to come to IMC-Yangon to work under our guidance. They were mostly Westerners and of the younger generation rather than more mature people, as had been the case during our teacher's time. Each year they would visit the Centre three to six times, staying seven days in Yangon and travelling back and forth to Bangkok, Thailand. This was because they could only get seven-day tourist visas at that time. They seemed to be competing with each other to see who could meditate the most, and they would spend everything that they managed to save each year in coming to the Centre. Finally, they requested that Mother Sayamagyi and I come out of Burma to teach abroad. "We could easily support you," they said, "and take care of your living expenses and any expenses involved in teaching courses. In this way, we will be able to save some of our earnings and meditate more as well." They were very eager to put forth as much effort as possible in their practice of meditation.

In October 1978, having taught for eight years at IMC-Yangon after Sayagyi's death, we came to the West. When we came out, I was properly accommodated with an appropriate job for my right livelihood. Today, we are based at the International Meditation Centre in the United Kingdom, and we travel to many countries to give courses. [Since this article was written, other bases have been established at the International Meditation Centre in Western Australia, and the International Meditation Center-U.S.A. in Maryland. International Meditation Centres are also being set up in Eastern Australia and Austria.] We have dedicated our lives to passing on the Teachings of the Buddha (the Buddha-Dhamma), and it is very satisfying to see how many people all over the world are benefiting from these Teachings. Sayagyi U Ba Khin saw how important the Buddha-Dhamma is in the world today, and he was anxious that the technique he taught and which proved to be of so much use to lay people, be available to all who were sincere students.

5. How was the International Meditation Centre, U.K., set up?

When we came out of Myanmar in 1978, we conducted ten-day meditation courses, which were organized by the students, at places like the Buddhist Centre in Oxford. Although this site was very good, some of the other places that served for various summer courses were not ideal for our use. So in 1979, the International Meditation Centre, U.K., was founded when the Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust (registered in Britain under the Charities Act of 1960) acquired a piece of land with an eighteenth-century country house known as Splatts House. This is located on the edge of a quiet Wiltshire village. It has become a centre for people from all over

the world who are seeking enlightenment, awakening, that is to say, "Nibbanic Peace Within."

The purpose of the Centre is to promote the practice of true Buddhist meditation according to the Teachings of the Lord Buddha. The Centre operates under our guidance with the assistance of a number of our regional teachers who were trained at the Centre under us.

There are many volunteer students who come from various countries of the world to meditate and serve by helping with the various types of work at the Centre. They do everything from cooking, gardening, painting, etc., to managing and secretarial jobs. We are both resident teachers, and we conduct ten-day residential courses which run from Friday evening through Monday morning and which begin on the first and third Friday of each month.

The students and Regional Teachers are from all walks of life, professions, religious backgrounds, races, countries, and cultures. When we are away, teaching courses abroad, one of the volunteer regional teachers will lead the ten-day course. In this way, the Centre can give two ten-day courses each month. There is no fee for the teaching, but students are asked to contribute towards food and accommodation for the ten days. Wholesome and tasty vegetarian food in ample quantity is provided, and those who follow a diet for medical reasons will be accommodated as far as possible. IMC-UK is a direct off-spring of IMC-Yangon, Myanmar.

6. What benefits can be derived from this practice?

I will answer this question in two parts: (A) what Theravada Meditation is about, and (B) the benefits to be derived from this meditation.

(A) Theravada Buddhist Meditation has as its goal gaining insight into the true nature of existence. It should be preceded by a readiness to place trust in the Buddha's formulated teachings on the true nature of existence in terms of the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, and the three characteristics of existence (impermanence, suffering, non-self). (1) It means practising the Noble Eightfold Path as it was taught by Buddha Gotama over twenty-five centuries ago in his very first sermon, the Dhamma-cakka-pavattana-sutta: "Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dhamma." This Eightfold Path can be divided into three parts: (1) the higher training in Morality (sila), (2) the higher training in Concentration (samadhi), and (3) the higher training in Wisdom (panna).

(1) Morality is the common denominator of all religions. At the Centre, everyone observes the five precepts which all meditation students must follow during ten-day courses. These five precepts are the basic morality for all sincere Buddhists. They include refraining from the five major sorts of wrong actions. We refrain from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct (at the Centre and on courses, complete celibacy), from lying, and from the use of drugs or intoxicants. By diligently observing this morality, we develop purity of physical and verbal actions. This is the base and without it there cannot be good concentration. A person who lives a moral life will find that he is not distracted by feelings of guilt or worries that his misdeeds will be discovered. A moral person will be able to work effectively at gaining control over his mind.

(2) Concentration: After beginning with this base of morality, training in concentration is taught. The method used is Anapana Meditation-mindfulness of breathing. Through learning to calm and control the mind during the first four days, the student quickly appreciates the advantages of a steady and balanced mind. If your concentration is not

good, you can never obtain insight or wisdom (panna).

(3) Wisdom, Insight: The third part of the training is acquiring wisdom or insight through Vipassana Meditation, and this is practised throughout the remainder of the ten days. Once the mind is concentrated, the meditator can use his mind to develop wisdom. Vipassana is a process which enables the student to develop concentration and awareness, and, through personal experience, to gain an understanding of the truths of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta). Practised with diligence, the gradual process of material and mental purification will lead to the end of suffering and to full awakening or Nibbana. This is, in brief, what Buddhist Meditation is about.

The emphasis is on experiencing directly the truth for oneself by practising the technique. Noble Silence (no unnecessary talk) provides an atmosphere conducive to working correctly, and discourses given in the early morning and evening by the teachers help to clarify the practice. There are also daily interviews with the teachers for more instructions and explanations to clarify the technique.

(B) The benefits to be derived from this meditation: My wife and I have been in this tradition for over thirty years and our many years of experience in teaching meditation, both in Myanmar and abroad, have shown us that true Buddhist meditation can bring innumerable benefits to one and all. In order to explain the benefits or the fruits of meditation, I can best do so by quoting from our teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin. In his text, *The Real Values of True Buddhist Meditation*, (2) he says:

"The fruits of meditation are innumerable. They are embodied in the discourse on the advantages of a Samanera's life, the Samannaphala Sutta. The very object of becoming a Samanera or monk is to follow strictly and diligently the Noble Eightfold Path and enjoy not only the Fruition (phala) of Sotapatti (the first fruition stage), Sakadagami (second fruition stage), Anagami (third fruition stage) and Arahatta (fourth fruition stage), but also to develop many kinds of faculties. A layman who takes to meditation to gain insight into the Ultimate Truth also has to work in the same way, and if his potentials are good, he may also enjoy a share of those fruits and faculties.... With the development of the purity and power of the mind, backed by insight into the Ultimate Truth of nature, one might be able to do a lot of things in the right direction for the benefit of mankind. There are, therefore, definitely many advantages that accrue to a person who undergoes a successful course of training in meditation, whether he be a religious man, an administrator, a politician, a businessman or a student."

My own case may be cited as an example. If I have to say something here about myself, it is with a sincere desire to illustrate just what practical benefits can accrue to a person practising Buddhist meditation, and with no other motive whatsoever. The events are factual and, of course, one cannot deny the facts. I took up Buddhist meditation seriously in January 1937. My life sketch in "Who Is Who" of the Guardian Magazine [Myanmar], December 1961, gives an account of the duties and responsibilities of government which I have been discharging from time to time. I retired from the service of the government on March 26, 1953, on attaining the age of 55, but was re-employed from that date till now (3) in various capacities, most of the time holding two or more separate sanctioned appointments of the status of Head of Department for nearly three years, and on another occasion, four such sanctioned posts simultaneously for about a year.

In addition, there were also a good number of special assignments either as a member of Standing Committees in the Department of the Prime Minister and National Planning or as chairman or member of ad hoc

committees. [Then Sayagyi gives a statement showing all the posts held by him. Also appended are the statements showing the facts and figures of his success in various undertakings. He continues:] The results of these undertakings will surely illustrate what "a reservoir of calm and energy" one can create with Buddhist meditation to be used for the building of a "welfare state."

7. Can Buddhist meditation be practised without having Nibbana as the goal?

Sayagyi U Ba Khin taught meditation to people of many different religions. He did not insist that anyone renounce his own creed. The Buddha also taught people according to their capabilities and understanding, and he always suited his discourse to his listeners.

Some of our students come to their first course with rather exotic ideas about meditation -- expecting some mystic visions or unusual emotional experiences. They find that the technique is very down-to-earth and simple. If they have unusual experiences, with the help of the teachers, they soon discover that these are distractions rather than the goal.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin pointed out that Hindus, Muslims, and Christians work to see the Divine Light through developing their concentration (samadhi). In Buddhism, this is known as a mental sign of a concentrated mind. Most people consider this to be very difficult. Sayagyi wrote, "Our experiments, however, show that under the proper guide, the inner peace and purity of mind with light can be secured by one and all, irrespective of their religion or creed. All that is needed is sincerity and a willingness to follow the instructions of the teacher during the period of training."

Here, I wish to quote from the letters of two non-Buddhist students of Sayagyi: (1) Mr A.N. David, Deputy Accountant General, Burma, a leader of the Christian community, wrote in his letter to Sayagyi, dated Sept. 24, 1954:

"The Peace which the world now seeks can be realized to a great extent if each man, woman, and child would seek and achieve peace of mind within themselves. This will contribute to the general peace of mankind. Your supreme desire to teach us the method of attaining purity of mind and to secure inward peace through your system of meditation, which does not affect my religious beliefs, enabled me (i) to realize also the Truth of ever-changing existence; (ii) to constantly secure inward peace through meditation when contaminated in my daily life by the evil forces of this world. For all these invaluable benefits, more precious than gold, I am deeply indebted to you, and also for the guidance you have given me."

(2) Mr A. Muthia, Deputy Accountant General, Burma, a leader of the Hindu community, wrote in his letter to Sayagyi, dated May 30, 1949:

"I pen you these few lines with grateful thanks for your guidance in the matter of spiritual life by showing me the 'Divine Light.' I must confess at the outset that despite all the knowledge (of course not very vast) I may claim to possess in the spiritual field, I was never aware that one could see the light before one's very eyes as I did under your spiritual powers. I was always aware of one fact, viz., that when the spiritual knowledge is translated into practice, mankind can see before the mind's eye the 'Divine Light.' This, I would say, was always theoretical and no one has yet told me that light was seen and that the same could be shown to others.

"Wherever I went, right from Hardwar (near the Himalayas which I visited in October 1942) to Cape Comorin (which I visited in January 1949,

while on pilgrimage), I have heard only harangues on philosophy, divinity and metaphysics, but never a word about showing the 'Divine Light.'

"Before approaching you for enlightenment [i.e., to see the light], I questioned myself so many times, whether I was really worthy of it and whether I would succeed. But I was emboldened when I learnt from you that you have succeeded for your disciples, men even of lesser attainments than myself. I therefore took courage to apply to you and I was shown the light...

"Let me conclude by saying that you are doing very useful service for humanity at large -- a contrast with the rest of the human race which is after materialism and self-aggrandizement."

8. What kind of people are your students?

Our students at IMC-Yangon, IMC-UK, IMC-Perth, IMC-USA, and on courses all around the world come from all races, creeds, and many different walks of life. In Yangon, the students ranged from the president of the country to an ordinary office boy, and they were all treated equally and given equal attention in the training. Just as a high-ranking official who has the potential to reach the highest stage in spiritual attainments will reach that state, so too, an office boy with the same potential will reach that stage. In fact, one of Sayagyi's outstanding students was an office boy.

We follow in the footsteps of our teacher, who adhered to the principles discovered by the Buddha, followed by him, and taught by him. Our Western students range from senior citizens to school children, and they are from all walks of life: professors, lecturers, doctors, nurses, teachers, students, businessmen, politicians, administrators, and religious men, etc. As I mentioned already, they are from various religions, races, countries, and cultures. They all come with an open mind and the necessary sincerity and willingness to follow the instructions of the teacher during the period of training. As a result, they all respond well.

9. Do you teach to Eastern and Western people in the same way?

Our ten-day training course is the same everywhere, for the Path to Happiness is the same today as in the time of the Buddha. As I said earlier, students on our courses come from all races, creeds, and many different walks of life. The Buddha taught over 2500 years ago, but his detailed analysis of Ultimate Reality and how to attain it are very modern. We can see from the Buddhist texts in the Pali language that human nature is still the same. People then and now, people from East or West are caught up in the net of suffering because of their ignorance, desires, and aversions. They are looking for happiness. And the Path to Happiness is the same today as in the days of old.

10. Do you think that this technique is apt for the Western mind?

As I said, the technique is the same for Eastern and Western minds. No modifications are needed to adapt the technique to the Western mind. The fundamentals of human nature are the same for people all over the world. The Buddha pointed out that some people could live anywhere from one year to a hundred years free of physical illness. But the person who is free of mental illness even for a moment is rare indeed. It is only through learning to control the mind and then using that control to discover the true nature of our own existence that we can come out of our mental illness.

11. What kind of difficulties do Westerners usually encounter during the practice?

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is an essential preliminary to practising the Buddha's Teachings. This is the aspect that can be the most difficult one to accept by Western students. As Sayagyi said to a Westerner who wished to come meditate under his guidance:(4) taking refuge is "a prelude to the goal of meditation. It is here that the setback comes for not a few. A strong determination is therefore necessary to discard the religious elements which are rooted in him, if he means to go the whole way in Buddhist Meditation, and you should be prepared for this." Many students are willing to give Buddhist meditation a fair trial, and they repeat the words for taking refuge when they are asked to do so at the beginning of a ten-day course, but this does not mean that they are fully committed and have placed complete trust in the Triple Gem. Many of them, however, go on to do several courses. Gradually, their attitude changes and they become true Buddhists. We can see the change, for example, when they give their religion as Buddhist on their registration forms. A number of the men among our students have also ordained in Yangon and in the West as Bhikkhus (monks) for short periods, as is the custom for Buddhist men in Yangon.

I have said that the practice is the training in Morality, Concentration and Insight or Wisdom. To get good concentration, morality has to be perfect, since concentration is built upon morality. For good insight, through appreciating the changing nature in the body and the mind, concentration must be good. If concentration is excellent, awareness of the changing nature (anicca) of all conditioned phenomena will also be excellent. That is how our teacher Sayagyi explains the practice in one of his talks.

From this, we can see how morality plays an important role, as it lays the foundation for building up good concentration. The background of many of the Western students is weak in morality. They do not know the importance of observing the five precepts. Just as it is impossible to construct a huge building without a proper strong foundation -- for without the proper foundation, the building will not stand -- so too concentration cannot be developed without strong morality. The first part of the training is working on mindfulness of breathing (anapana-bhavana), and for this the students find they have difficulties.

To begin with, they have problems with the sitting posture. They cannot sit cross-legged. We provide them with cushions to sit on, and if they are sick or elderly, we allow them to sit on a chair at the back of the room to avoid disturbing the other students. But after a few days' training, they are able to overcome these difficulties.

Secondly, people in the West find it difficult to refrain from communicating with each other through conversations. So when they are told to observe Noble Silence, some are against it. At one time, we were teaching in a country like Italy and the students came to us and said, "How can we live without talking! It is impossible; we can't observe this rule." After saying this, they tried talking quietly behind our backs, and we pretended not to see them. And that worked, though they found their meditation was not good. They complained at our checking time that their minds were always wandering and that there was a lot of chattering in their minds all the time. When you talk too much and think too much, your talk and thoughts will come back when you meditate. The students understood through their own experience and stopped talking and thinking and thus got good concentration after much struggle.

During Vipassana meditation, most students find it easy to work, unlike Anapana, because the technique used in this tradition is to concentrate on each part of the body in a systematic fashion and to note whatever sensation, if any, is occurring in that part of the body. At the same time, you must be aware that the sensation is impermanent (anicca).

We move the attention through the body, being aware of the sensations from head to foot.

Under the guidance of a qualified teacher, it is possible that the student will learn the technique quickly and feel the sensations throughout the whole body together with the appreciation of their inherent changing nature (anicca). For the average, normal person, the technique works very well, and there will be no difficulty. But those who have previously followed other practices, spiritual or otherwise--especially those concerning pseudo-sciences, low arts, wearing or adorning themselves with special amulets such as beads and strings, etc. -- can find the technique difficult. If they can give up their previous practices and surrender or leave at home any special amulets, then they can enjoy the fruits of the practice. These instructions, like all our instructions, apply for the period of training when the students put themselves under our guidance. After that, it is up to each individual to decide how much of what they have learned they will put into practice in their day-to-day lives. All we ask is that the students come with an open mind and give a fair trial to the technique. This means having a certain amount of confidence and working without entertaining doubts; otherwise, the students will not benefit from the training.

Success depends on these four qualities: (1) Concentration of Intention (chanda-samadhi), (2) Concentration of Energy (viriyā-samadhi), (3) Concentration of Consciousness (citta-samadhi), and (4) Concentration of Investigation (vimamsa-samadhi). We need strong intention, zeal, to reach the goal. It takes a great deal of energy, good concentration, and we must use our concentration to discover the truth for ourselves.

For progress in meditation, the following are the essential requirements: (1) Confidence in the teacher, (2) Strict adherence to the instructions and the rules of discipline at the meditation camp, (3) The ability to work hard in a balanced way, and (4) The capacity to appreciate and understand the Teachings in practice. When these qualities are present there will be no difficulty and you will obtain the benefits of the practice.

12. Do Eastern students encounter similar difficulties?

In answer to question number ten I told you that the fundamentals of human nature are the same for people all over the world -- so most of the difficulties are the same. People in the East are used to getting up early in the morning, so they will find it easy to get up at 4 A.M. each day on the course. Westerners may have a little difficulty with this at the beginning, but they soon adapt to the training. A Westerner may find it a little difficult to sit cross-legged on the floor at the start, but we have found that for this too adjustment is quick. Sometimes vegetarian food can be a problem for students with stomach troubles, but this problem is common to both those in the East and in the West. Adjustments in the diet to accommodate the students can be made. So you can see that the differences are very few -- not enough to say that they are of any real importance.

13. There is a certain tendency to separate the practice of meditation from the practice of morality. What do you think about this?

What we are practising is the Noble Eightfold Path, which I have already pointed out is divided into three parts: Morality, Concentration, and Wisdom or Insight. Sayagyi U Ba Khin wrote, "Sila or virtuous living is the base for samadhi, control of the mind to one-pointedness. It is only when Samadhi is good that one can develop panna. So, sila and samadhi are the prerequisites for panna ..." Now, how could this Noble Path be separated?

The Buddha taught the Middle Path. This Middle Path is clearly laid out in his first sermon. If we are to walk along the Middle Path, which leads to true happiness, we must find the correct path. The Buddha taught that the Middle Path avoids two extremes that must be given up by anyone who has gone forth in search of Awakening or Enlightenment: (1) There is the extreme that is connected with sensual desire, including sensual pleasures such as taking intoxicants, sexual misconduct, etc. (2) The other extreme is subjecting oneself to rigorous austerities. So we can see that the Middle Path does not mean we can indulge in unwholesome actions in moderation -- only drinking intoxicants from time to time, for example. Nor should we fall into the trap of thinking that the more difficult and painful our practices are the better they are. We must correctly identify the two extremes and find the balanced approach in the middle.

If a person tries to separate the practice of meditation from the practice of morality, that person is distorting the Teachings and misrepresenting the Buddha. This is very serious indeed. Such a person will earn great demerit and will come to ruin.

The Buddha said:

"There are some foolish men who study the teachings but do not examine the purpose of the teachings wisely. In such cases, these teachings will not give insight. Such people study the teachings only to use them for criticizing or for refuting others in disputation. They do not experience the true purpose for which they ought to study the teachings. For those who wrongly grasp the teachings there will be harm and suffering for a long time."

And then the Buddha taught the Snake Simile:

"Suppose a man who wants a snake goes in search of a snake. And then when he sees a big snake he grasps it by its body or by the tail. The snake will turn back on him and bite him. Because of that, he will suffer death or deadly pain. All because he grasped the snake incorrectly. In the same manner those who wrongly grasp the teachings will suffer for a long time due to their wrong understanding of the teachings.

"But there are those of good families who study the teaching and having studied it, they examine wisely the purpose of the teachings. To them the teachings will bring insight. To them the teachings will bring welfare and happiness for a long time because they grasp them correctly."

The Buddha goes on with the example of the man who catches the snake correctly by the neck. It may coil around his arm or hand, but he will not suffer death or deadly pain -- all because he grasps the snake correctly. Those who grasp the Teachings correctly are like that man. Then the Buddha concluded this example by saying, "Therefore, monks, if you understand what I have said, you should keep it in mind. But if you do not understand, you should ask me about it or ask those monks who are wise." So, this is a very good question, and we should let ourselves be guided by the words of the Buddha.

14. Can one practise Vipassana Meditation and maintain one's own creed?

In your seventh question you asked whether it is possible to practise Buddhist Meditation without having Nibbana as the goal. As you know, Nibbana is the goal of every Buddhist, so those who do not have Nibbana as their goal are not Buddhists, of course, and they can maintain their own creed. The answer given to question seven is relevant to this question. As you can see from the two letters that two of Sayagyi's disciples sent him, they clearly stated that they benefited through this

practice (especially Anapana meditation), even though they still maintained their own creeds. As the Christian leader said, he was able to practice Buddhist meditation as taught by Sayagyi, working for purity of mind and inward peace without it affecting his religious beliefs. He was able to obtain a certain degree of appreciation of the truth of "ever-changing existence" and "to secure inward peace, constantly (meditating) when contaminated in (his) daily life by the evil forces of this world." This positive statement is a good testimony to the confidence a member of another religion can have in Buddhist Meditation, and it shows it is possible to practise it without giving up one's own creed.

A person from another religion will especially be able to practise in order to attain good concentration (samadhi). When a person begins to develop an appreciation of the true nature of conditioned existence through insight (vipassana), progress will be limited by any beliefs they may hold that go against what they are experiencing. Sayagyi's approach, which is in accord with the way the Buddha taught, was to explain to students of meditation that they would only be able to make limited progress if they did not take unconditional refuge in the Triple Gem.

Some of Sayagyi's students from other religions were happy with limited success. But some students gained good insight into the three characteristics of conditioned existence. Such people understood for themselves that they needed to take refuge only in the Triple Gem. When you see for yourself why taking refuge is essential, you will do so. Only then will a person be able to realize his or her full potential. We saw such cases ourselves at IMC-Yangon working under Sayagyi's guidance.

15. What is your advice to Italian readers?

In answer to your question, let me quote from an article which I contributed to the Guardian, a Burmese magazine, in the issue dated January 19, 1972, the first anniversary of the demise day of our teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin. The title of the article was "Can Buddhism Provide the Answer?"

In my article, I said that everyone in the world is looking for ways and means to be happy -- they are in quest of happiness. I said that affluence and the attainment of success in life are not the real answer, nor can drugs and alcohol provide a panacea for aching hearts.

Young minds in the Western world are now probing for a satisfactory answer. Disillusioned with war, tired of the hypocrisy of politicians, dissatisfied with the weakness of the conventional forms of worshipping, some young people have experimented with Zen, some have toyed with Yoga, some simply turned into angry young men, and others just fell by the wayside, hugging their pot and pep pills. Quite a few turned into hippies, yippies, pseudo-philosophers, barefooted nomads-unshaved, unbathed, and sometimes unclothed. And they have picked up hashish, which only the down-and-out coolies (manual labourers) used to smoke in pre-war days in Burma, and imagined themselves to be "groovy people doing their own thing."

Burma does not need pot and pep pills to face the vicissitudes of life. For centuries we have had our religion -- Theravada Buddhism -- to give us equilibrium, equanimity, and endurance in life ... So, isn't it about time that our country should give to those unhappy people in the West some of our tranquillity and the peace which our religion has bestowed upon us?

This reminds us of the efforts of champions among the Burmese Sangha and laymen who were pioneers in spreading the light of the Dhamma to other countries. Among these "missionaries," the late Sayagyi U Ba Khin, founder of IMC-Rangoon, who died on Jan. 19, 1971, really blazed the trail when he

trained a chosen handful of Westerners and Easterners in Vipassana and sent them out to disseminate Buddhist Meditation.

One of Sayagyi's disciples, who was a professor of philosophy and religion at Grinnell College in the U.S.A., and who took a meditation course under Sayagyi in 1958, put it in a nutshell when he described U Ba Khin thus: "He was thoroughly Burmese and truly Buddhist. As to his Burmeseness -- he loved Burma and felt at home there. In his love of Burma there was no disparagement or disdain for other countries, peoples, or cultures, only a joyful and willing acceptance of his own karmic destiny-- he was thankful to have been born in a country where one could encounter the Buddha Dhamma."

I concluded my article by saying that most Burmese people think as Sayagyi U Ba Khin did. Like him, once they have enjoyed the experience of Vipassana, as Burmese Buddhists, they would dearly love to share that experience with those in other parts of the world who are seeking true happiness.

The best advice I can give to Italian readers is from a text written by Sayagyi U Ba Khin himself. In his booklet, The Real Values of True Buddhist Meditation, Sayagyi wrote about the by-products of meditation:

"What I am going to state here concerns the very minor by-products of meditation relating to physical and mental ills. This is not the age for showing miracles, such as rising into the air and walking on the surface of the water which would be of no direct benefit to people in general. But if the physical and mental ills of men could be removed through meditation, it should be something for one to ponder."

He goes on to explain that according to the Teachings of the Buddha, each action -- by thought, word, or deed -- leaves behind a force of action that goes to one's credit or debit account, depending on whether the actions are good or bad. Through Buddhist Meditation, we can develop the "sparkling illumination of Nibbana Dhatu" which is a power that dispels all impurities or poisons.

Among those who have taken courses of meditation at the Centre [in Yangon], there were some who were suffering from complaints such as hypertension, T.B., migraine, thrombosis, etc. They became relieved of these even in the initial course of ten days. If they maintain the awareness of Anicca [impermanence] and take longer courses of meditation at this Centre, there is every likelihood of the diseases being rooted out in the course of time.

And Sayagyi says that Nibbana Dhatu removes the root cause of suffering. Thus, he made no distinction between this or that disease.

Mankind today is facing the danger of radioactive poisons. If such poisons absorbed by a man exceed the maximum permissible concentration (m.p.c.), he enters the danger zone. I have a firm belief that the Nibbana Dhatu which a person in true Buddhist Meditation develops is Power that will be strong enough to eradicate the radioactive poison, if any, in him.

In conclusion, I may state here that the ultimate goal of our practice is Nibbana. The Teaching is a gradual practice, a gradual training, a gradual doing, step by step, or, a gradual Path (anupubbi patipada) that is progressive in nature (opanayiko). As you walk along the Path, you will come to enjoy the fruits of Liberation. It is to be experienced and not to be taken for granted. And it is this dynamic aspect of the Teaching that invites one to come and see (ehi-passiko) its immediate results (akaliko). My Dhamma partner and I are privileged to be able to help people all over the world to work to overcome their

suffering, and thus we carry on the mission of our teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin.

We join him in the following wish:

May All Beings Be Happy!
May Peace Prevail in the World!
Truth Will Prevail!

See also the following files in this library:

IMCINF.TXT Information about the International Meditation Centres and the course structure there.

WEBUS.ZIP Selected Discourses of Webu Sayadaw, 17 discourses of a highly respected Burmese Bhikkhu.

WHBUIS.TXT What Buddhism is, a talk outlining Buddhism and it's concept by Sayagyi U Ba Khin, given in 1951 in a Methodist church in Rangoon.

and there are more publications to come from the International Meditation Centres.

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FOOTNOTES:

(1)These remarks are adapted from a letter by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi.

(2)Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust, U.K., Dhamma Text Series 1.

(3)This paper was read on Dec. 12, 1961 -- he finally resigned in August

1967, due to old age and poor health.

(4)Dhamma Texts, p. xv.

Saya U Chit Tin

The Importance of True Buddhist Meditation Today

[end]