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PRACTISING WHAT WE PREACH
Sayagyi U Chit Tin

//Pamojjakaranam thanam etam hoti vijanatam
Yadidam bhavitattanam dhammajivinam.
Te jotayanti saddhammam bhasayanti pabhankara
Alokakaranan dhira cakkhumanto rananjaha.
Yesam ve sasanam sutva sammadanjaya pandita
Jatikkhayam abhinnaya nagacchanti punabbhavam.//

This is the state of those who cause delight, that is to say, those who discriminate, those with developed self, living according to the doctrine.

They make it shine, they have the true Doctrine proclaimed. Bringers of light, producers of sight, they are firm, those who have vision, who abandon sense desires.

Truly, all those who hear the teaching, (who become) wise men of perfect knowledge, knowing the destruction of birth, do not go to a new life.

Itivuttaka, 108f.

The Right Teacher

These verses conclude a discourse by the Buddha to a group of bhikkhus (monks) in which he describes the qualities of good teachers and the advantages of following them.[1] A good teacher is endowed with virtue, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, and the vision and knowledge of deliverance. A good teacher admonishes, makes others understand, instructs, incites, fills others with enthusiasm, gladdens, is competent as a teacher, and is able to see and experience the true doctrine. It is of great profit to see such a teacher, to hear him teach, to meet with him, to sit down and be instructed by him, to remember what he teaches, and to go forth with him. If we join him in practising the teachings, we will be able to grow in and fulfil virtue, concentration, wisdom, and the vision and knowledge of deliverance.

There is a saying in English, "Do as I say, not as I do." This is the refuge of those who believe they know the right way to act, but who excuse themselves for not being able to put what they believe into action. It may be that what they teach is good. But how can you be sure? If what they say you should do is true, why do they not make the effort themselves? Obviously, their understanding is not complete. The Buddha said that a person who is sunk into the mud cannot pull out another person sunk in the mud, but a person who is not sunk into mud can do so.[2]

The Buddha was not that kind of teacher. In speaking of himself, he said, "Bhikkhus, as he speaks, so he does; as he does, so he speaks. This is why he is called a Perfected One (Tathagata)."[3] In other words, he practised what he preached, and he preached what he practised. It is important that those who pass on his teachings do the same. The Buddha said that there are three types of teachers: [4]

(1) There is the teacher who bases what he teaches on tradition, hearsay, report, on the authority of texts. Such a teacher may remember or understand certain parts of what he has learned correctly, but other parts he will not remember or understand correctly.

(2) Other teachers put their faith in logic and investigating. They teach their own system which they have worked out through reasoning and testing. Part of what they teach will be correctly worked out through logic, but part will be incorrect.

(3) The third type of teacher fully understands the truth, the Dhamma, on his own. He directly experiences the truth, which no one has taught him. The Buddha was this third type of teacher.

The Buddha is the teacher in the full sense of the word for those who put his teachings into practice. All other teachers after him depend on him in the sense that the Buddha needed no one to teach him the path to the discovery of truth. Fortunately for others, he was able to teach the way to achieve the final goal of liberation from all suffering. Through following the Buddha's Teachings, others are able to experience the truth for themselves and not depend on tradition or logic. Those who do not realize the truth directly for themselves will, of course, depend on tradition and on logic. Buddhist teachers who have not reached the final goal can make mistakes. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that they practise what they are teaching. They will have to continually examine themselves and be open to correcting their mistakes. They must deepen their intellectual understanding and, more important, their personal understanding through experience.

How to Teach

The Buddha pointed out that it is very difficult to teach the truth, and he gave five things which a teacher should summon up in his mind when giving a discourse on the doctrine to others:[5] (1) The teacher is intent on giving a gradual discourse -- one in which the listener will be introduced to the doctrine in a progressive way, with each step clearly following the other. (2) The teacher is intent on explaining well -- using appropriate illustrations, for example. (3) The teacher is intent on teaching with compassion. (4) The teacher is intent on not wishing for material gain. The teachings are freely given without any ulterior motive. (5) The teacher does not give a teaching that will be harmful to himself or to others.

There are many teachers of all sorts of subjects in this world, but there are very few who will fulfil all five of these criteria. This is not necessarily a criticism, of course. People who earn their livelihood by teaching in schools will need to earn enough to live on, so they will be intent on material gain. The other four points, however, could help guide their approach to teaching. Teaching the Dhamma that the Buddha discovered and taught to others is different from ordinary teaching, however. It is very important that the Teachings not be distorted or changed. A teacher who is ever mindful of presenting the Dhamma in an intelligent manner and in a way that is easily understood by his listeners, who is full of compassion for others, who is not looking for riches or personal glory, and who desires that all beings -- including himself -- be free from harm, such a teacher will help to keep alive the Buddha's Teachings.

In the world today, just as in the time of the Buddha, there are many different teachings, all claiming to lead to ultimate truth. A person who is in search of the truth will need to be very careful if the right path is to be chosen.

Finding the Right Teacher

There was a young Brahman who asked the Buddha about how to recognize the right teacher.[6] Kapathika was only sixteen years old, but he had already learned the three Vedas of his own religion. He realized when he was listening to the Buddha in conversation with his elders that the Buddha would be able to teach him more. The Buddha pointed out to the young man that a person could have faith in some teaching, be inclined to it, accept it through report or through consideration of logic, or by reflecting on and approving of an opinion. The person may preserve the teaching he learns, but this is not enough for concluding that it alone is truth and all else is false. What is necessary, the Buddha said, is that the person awaken to the truth. For this, one will need a teacher who is free from greed, aversion, and ignorance.

If we are to find the right kind of teacher, we must know what qualities to look for. The Buddha advised the young man to examine a prospective teacher. Thus he will see by the teacher's actions and speech if he is greedy, or full of aversion, or ignorant and confused. It will not always be easy for us to judge correctly, however, as the Buddha pointed out to one of his lay disciples, King Pasenadi of Kosala.[7] The king asked the Buddha if some passing ascetics were fully Awakened (Arahats) or on the path to full Awakening. The Buddha replied that it would be difficult for someone like the king to know this, because, as a layman, he was still surrounded by sensual pleasures and tied down by a family. He still used perfumes and garlands of flowers and handled money. Even so, the Buddha explained how to judge another person.

To know about another person's virtue (sila), you must live together with that person over a long period of time. To know whether another person is pure of thought, you must have dealings with that person for a long time. To know another person's steadfastness, you must see that person in times of trouble over a long period of time. To know another person's wisdom, you must have conversation with that person over a long period of time. All this is possible only if you pay careful attention and if you are wise yourself.

So we can see that it is not an easy matter to recognize a good teacher. You will note the emphasis the Buddha puts on being able to be attentive and understand what is right. In his advice to a group of laymen, the Buddha gave instructions similar to the ones he gave to Kapathika.[8] He told the Kalamas that they can know for themselves that greed, ill-will, and delusion will work against their own interests. Because of these three things, people do unwholesome acts such as killing, stealing, adultery, telling lies, and encouraging others to reach such states which cause loss and sorrow for a long time. And he tells them to reject such things through seeing for themselves that such states are wrong.

Freedom from greed, ill-will, and delusion will lead to avoiding unwholesome acts and to encouraging others to reach such states which will work for their profit and happiness for a long time. The Buddha told them, "When you know for yourselves that these things are profitable, blameless, and lead to profit and happiness when put into practice and undertaken, then, Kalamas, you should undertake to observe them and live in that way."

The Wrong Kind of Teacher

We can look for the right teacher through recognizing the right qualities. We can recognize the wrong teacher if he possesses the wrong

qualities. One of the two chief disciples, Venerable Maha-Moggallana, gave a discourse in which he outlined ten qualities which show that a person has come to a halt halfway on his way to the goal.[9] If a person possesses these qualities, they will become evident over a period of time, for even if a person is imitating what he considers to be the conduct of a good person, there will be times that his true nature will show through. Thus, we should not follow a person who shows anger, who is grudging, who questions other people's virtues, who is spiteful, envious, stingy, crafty, a trickster, of wicked desires, or who is confused. One of the leading disciples, Venerable Maha-Cunda, gave another list of ten qualities which indicate that a person is not to be followed.[10] If a person is immoral, an unbeliever, of little learning, foulspoken, wicked, slothful, confused, a fraud, difficult to support, and weak in wisdom, then that person is regressing rather than progressing in the Teachings.

Then Ven. Maha-Cunda gave an illustration. If a person says to us, "If you ever need money, my friend, ask me and I will give it to you." But when the time comes and you ask for the money, he says, "Dig here." You dig, but you do not find any money. When you reproach him, saying, "You told me a lie," he tells you to try elsewhere, then finally he pleads that he was out of his mind, distracted when he made his promise.

Following the Teachings

Once we have found a teacher, the Buddha advised the young man Kapathika, we should then have confidence in him or her, approach the teacher, sit down near by, and listen attentively to the teaching. We should remember what we hear and put it to the test. By testing the teachings, we approve of them and this leads to a desire to make an effort. Then we consider our effort and strive further. Finally, through being self-resolute, we will eventually realize for ourselves the highest truth itself.

There was a man who applied the sort of examination we have described to the Buddha. The brahman Brahmayu, who was very learned in his own religion, heard of the reputation of the Buddha.[11] As he was a hundred and twenty years old, he sent his student Uttara to see if what he had heard was true. This young man followed the Buddha like a shadow for seven months and then reported back to Brahmayu. Uttara's report includes many details on the physical appearance and deportment of the Buddha. Let us simply quote a few remarks that tie in with the qualities of a good teacher. Uttara says that the Buddha "does not strive after hurt of self, he does not strive after hurt of others, he does not strive after hurt of both. The revered Gotama sits down striving only after his own good, the good of others, the good of both, the good of the whole world." [12]

When the Buddha came to the district where Brahmayu lived, Brahmayu went to see him. The Buddha gave him a talk on generosity, morality, and how to attain rebirth in the higher realms. He explained the peril, vanity, and depravity of sensual pleasures and the advantage in renouncing them. Then the Buddha saw that Brahmayu's mind was receptive and he taught the Four Noble Truths that are discovered by all the Buddhas: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

The Example Set by Sayagyi U Ba Khin

It is because the Buddha's Teachings have been practised and taught for over 2500 years that we can continue to do so today. The Community of Bhikkhus (monks) has been especially important in this continuation of the

Teachings, and we today are very fortunate in being able to come into contact with them. But laymen, too, have been instrumental in keeping the Teachings alive.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin was just such a layman.[13] When he learned of the possibility of practising the Dhamma, he risked his career to have a taste. He made rapid progress in his meditation under the guidance of another layman, Saya Thetgyi. His teacher had practised under one of the foremost scholars of his time, the monk Venerable Ledi Sayadaw. Ven. Ledi Sayadaw was well known not only in Myanmar but also in the West, where many of his texts were translated and published.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin was also very successful in lay life, rising to the post of Accountant General of Myanmar. He was so effective, the government appointed him to four posts with the status of Head of Department at one time. At the same time, he taught meditation to others. At first, he taught in a room at his office. Then, he formed a Vipassana Research Group which founded the International Meditation Centre in Yangon.

Those of us who were closely associated with Sayagyi over the years were able to appreciate how scrupulously he followed the Buddha's Teachings himself, and we benefited from the Teachings through his guidance. Sayagyi described himself as an experimentalist, a student of practical Buddhism. He was constantly verifying the results obtained through Buddhist meditation, aware that it is all too easy to deviate from the true path.

The path taught by the Buddha can be summed up under three main headings, which are found in the good qualities a teacher must possess that we have already mentioned. The path includes: (1) virtue or moral action (sila), (2) concentration or purity of mind (samadhi), and (3) wisdom or understanding (panna). Sayagyi U Ba Khin was outstanding in all three of these.

As a layman, Sayagyi always observed the five precepts of refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, or taking intoxicants. In addition, he was often able to observe ten precepts for two weeks each month. The ten precepts are the hardest set of rules for laymen to keep as they include not eating after noon and not handling money. This last precept might sound impossible for an Accountant General, but Sayagyi was able to delegate such responsibilities to others.

His honesty was well known in Burma, and it is thanks to the good example which he set that he was able to check corruption and inefficiency in the various departments under his charge. Indeed, a special law was passed, allowing him to continue work long after the mandatory retirement age.

Virtue is the basis on which all other achievements are founded in Buddhist meditation. Without good morals, we cannot hope to attain good concentration -- the essential requirement if we are to understand reality. We were constantly reminded of this by Sayagyi, who knew this not only in theory but also through personal experience.

We can best appreciate Sayagyi's command of concentration and wisdom through his teaching. Only a person who had a high level of achievement could teach others to make good progress in these domains.

The Buddha taught many different methods for concentrating the mind. Sayagyi selected the one which is especially appropriate for laypeople. That is not to say that it is easy, but the success of so many of his students, both Burmese and foreigners, showed Sayagyi that this was an appropriate method for laymen. We do not say it is the only method, of

course. As we saw, a good teacher does not waste his time disparaging others. At times, when Sayagyi saw that a person was already following a different method and was very committed to it, he would discourage them from mixing methods. Everyone, however, who approached this meditation with an open mind, ready to follow instructions, was welcome. Sayagyi was not interested in personal glory for himself. He was only concerned that the method he used be correct with regard to the Buddha's Teachings, and that those whom he taught would benefit by it.

Some of the other methods which lead to concentration are more appropriate for those who have decided to go forth from lay life and become monks. These methods, if practised correctly, lead to very powerful states of mind -- so powerful, that a person who has not adequately cut off attachment to the temporary pleasures of this world will fall into very dangerous traps. In only extremely rare cases can these high states of concentration be attained and correctly maintained by a layman or laywoman.

Sayagyi knew that laypeople could develop insight into the truth of reality if they attained a certain level of concentration -- one lower than the exalted states more appropriate for monks. What was needed was a level of concentration allied to a calm attitude, an equanimous attitude, which enables us to observe the true nature of the sensations in our own bodies objectively. Through observing their constantly changing nature (anicca), we are put into contact at the same time with their unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) and the lack of a controlling, eternal self (anatta).

Many people worked under his guidance and found that the practice was effective, and that it conformed to the Teachings of the Buddha. Even those who did not make significant progress in their meditation were able to experience the benefits that can be enjoyed here and now.

Today, those of us who carry on the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin are very aware of what an important responsibility rests on our shoulders. We must constantly examine ourselves and correct any distortions we may have allowed to creep in, and strive with all our might to live up to the example set by Sayagyi.

It is our fervent wish that others will continue to put these Teachings into practice, find true happiness for themselves, and come out of all their suffering.

Sayagyi U Chit Tin

FOOTNOTES:

[1] MA II 191f.

[2] MLS I 56.

[3] GS II 25; MA II 198. Also translated in Bhikkhu Nanamoli's //The Life of the Buddha//, p. 184.

[4] LS II 400 (cf. 199-201).

[5] GS III 136.

[6] MLS II 360.

[7] MA II 79, KS I 104.

[8] GS I 170-175.

[9] GS V 106.

[10] GS V 107f.

[11] MLS II 317-332.

[12] MLS II 325.

[13] For more information, see //The Anecdotes of Sayagyi U Ba Khin//
and //Dhamma Texts//, both published by the Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial
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