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THERAVADA BUDDHIST MEDITATION AS TAUGHT BY SAYAGYI U BA KHIN
by Sayagyi U Chit Tin

"Strictly speaking, Buddhism is a system of philosophy co-ordinated with a code of morality, physical and mental. The goal in view is the extinction of suffering and death."

This definition was given by my teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, in a series of lectures entitled //What Buddhism Is//. In these lectures, he laid great emphasis on the fact that theoretical knowledge is not sufficient. We must discover for ourselves the truth of the Buddha's teachings. Sayagyi points out that the Buddha taught that the human body is composed of //kalapas//, which correspond to the subatomic particles being studied by scientists today. Studying these particles from the outside is one thing, but experiencing the perpetual change inside our own bodies is something else again. "What will be the repercussion on the mental attitude of the man who introspectively sees that his own body is mere energy and vibration?" Sayagyi asked.

In his answer, he said that by realizing the perpetual change within, a person would understand the first of the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha: the Truth of Suffering. Strange as it may seem, experiencing the conditioned world as suffering does not make life miserable. On the contrary, once sensual pleasures are seen as they really are, they will no longer be clung to. Sensual pleasures do not last for long and cannot be controlled.

"Pleasure born of sensuality," Sayagyi pointed out, "is nothing compared with the //piti// (or rapture) born of the inner peace of mind which can be secured through a process of Buddhist meditation."

Sayagyi U Ba Khin was a layman in Myanmar (Burma) who was able to lead a busy professional life and at the same time progress in his practice of the Buddha's teachings and teach others to do the same. After its independence in 1948, he became the Accountant General of Myanmar. A few years later, in 1951, a Vipassana Association was founded in his office where a number of people had begun to meditate under his guidance. This association founded the International Meditation Centre in Yangon (Rangoon) where many foreigners came to meditate. Before he died in 1971, Sayagyi U Ba Khin instructed a number of his students outside Myanmar to teach others what they had learned.

Eventually, this led to the founding of the International Meditation Centre in the United Kingdom in 1979 and to many associations in countries all around the world. The English Centre is run by the Sayagyi U Ba Khin Memorial Trust which invited my wife and me to take up residence there. So, Heddington is now the headquarters for this tradition throughout the world. Through the hard work and sacrifices of dedicated meditation students from all over the world, the Centre is now able to offer two ten-day meditation courses each month and a number of related activities. In the last few years, many Regional Teachers have undergone training at the Centre and begun to hold courses in their own countries. Other meditation centres have been started in Western Australia, Eastern Australia, the United States, Austria, and groups working under our guidance exist in

Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, and Switzerland.

Students who are at the Centre on a long-term basis and students who live near the Centre participate in study groups which help them to deepen their understanding of Buddhism. The emphasis in these study groups is on Buddhist texts which help the students put the Teachings into practice. There is also an informal class for children.

The English Centre has a publication series. All of Sayagyi U Ba Khin's publications in English have been gathered into one book. Two booklets about his life have been published. Other publications include a booklet on the coming Buddha Ariya Metteyya, the discourses written by me to be used on ten-day meditation courses, five booklets on the ten perfections, two booklets brought out in connection with the first two International Conferences in the Tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, several editions of a booklet on the Pagoda of the Light of the Dhamma, a collection of discourses by Venerable Webu Sayadaw, and booklets on specific Buddhist topics.

The Centre is open to all who sincerely wish to give Buddhist meditation a fair trial. Sayagyi U Ba Khin taught people from many different backgrounds and adherents of the major world religions. The many letters of gratitude from these students are an indication that everyone can benefit from this technique to train the mind. This is because the first steps in Buddhist meditation are compatible with other religions. Even those who are not ready to work for the highest goal of total release from all suffering can find a certain measure of peace of mind through what is taught at the Centre.

I would like to give you a brief introduction to this technique. The Buddha taught several types of meditation, adapting the technique to the temperament and conditions of the student. The technique taught at the Centre, following in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, is particularly appropriate for laypeople who still lead active lives.

We respect the traditional approach and begin each ten-day course with formal statements, in Pali, the language of the earliest Buddhist texts. These statements are a sort of contract which the students agree to follow during the period of training in order to derive the maximum benefit from it. The students take refuge in the Buddha or the Awakened One, the Dhamma or the Teachings of the Buddha, and the Sangha or the Community of those who practise the Teachings. In the texts, the Buddha is said to be like a good guide, the Dhamma is like a good path leading to a land of safety, and the Sangha is like those who enter the path and reach the land of safety.

Next, the students undertake the keeping of the moral code. The five precepts, which new students follow, include moral concepts common to most religions. These include refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct (which means total celibacy at the Centre), from lying, and from the use of intoxicants. Old students take an additional three precepts, for a total of eight precepts. They are: abstinence from eating food after midday, from partaking in shows or other entertainments and the use of items to beautify the person, and abstinence from the use of high or luxurious seats. These five or eight rules are the basis of all that follows, for a person who is immoral will find his mind is agitated and it will be impossible to control it.

Next, the students surrender to the Buddha and teacher. The Buddhist commentator, Ashin Buddhaghosa, points out in his important work on Buddhist meditation, //The Path of Purification//[1], that this step is important because otherwise, the student will not respond to correction;

it will be difficult for the teacher to speak to him, he will not follow the teacher's advice and will do as he pleases. If, on the other hand, the student has dedicated himself to the Buddha and the teacher during the period of training, the teacher will be able to help him make progress in controlling his mind and eventually to experience Ultimate Truth.

Finally, the students request the teacher to instruct them in a meditation subject. Being sincere is important, as Ashin Buddhaghosa points out. It means that the student is working to overcome greed, hatred and delusion, and that he is ready to renounce momentary sensual pleasures, undertake the seclusion from the everyday world that is necessary if the mind is to be calmed down, and he is ready to relinquish his desire to remain caught up in the vicious circle of the world of cause and effect.

I have already mentioned the first of the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha, the fact that everything in the conditioned world is suffering. Even momentary pleasures are unsatisfactory because they do not last. The Second Noble Truth is the cause of suffering, which the Buddha said is craving. The Third Noble Truth is the fact that there is a way out of this suffering -- craving can be stopped. The Fourth Noble Truth is the Noble Eightfold Path leading to this end of suffering, and the teachings at the Centre are based on this Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path is divided into three parts: morality (sila), concentration (samadhi), and wisdom (panna). The taking of the precepts at the beginning establishes the students in the three aspects of morality: right speech, right action and right livelihood. Another convention at the Centre is that the students refrain from talking except when it is absolutely necessary. This is in accordance with the practice of the monks during the time of the Buddha and in its highest development can be the Noble Silence of the mind when all discursive thinking has stopped. Our goal, however, is not to stop our thoughts. We are working to develop our concentration to the point where we can move on to the contemplation of the reality of our conditioned existence. So, by not talking, the students need not worry about whether their speech is correct or not. And distractions are reduced to a minimum.

During the first part of the course, the students build on this foundation of morality by working to control their minds. This is the second part of the Noble Eightfold Path: Concentration. Three steps of the Path are included: right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. The technique used is mindfulness of the breath. The students are taught to sit with their back and head erect, to fix the attention below the nose above the upper lip, and to be aware of each in-breath and each out-breath. At the beginning, it is helpful to breathe slightly harder to help the mind settle down, but aside from this intentional breathing, there is no conscious changing of the normal breath. With practice, the students are able to feel the touch of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils.

The technique of mindfulness of breathing -- called Anapana in Pali -- is easy to explain. But it is very difficult to do. The mind is used to wandering wherever it pleases, and it usually takes some time for a student to learn how to bring it back quickly when outside distractions pull it away or when thoughts make it wander. This is why it is so important to work under proper guidance.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin saw that after a few days, students were able to develop their concentration to a point where they could move on to the last part of the Noble Eightfold Path: Wisdom. This part includes two steps: right view and right contemplation. Wisdom is developed through Vipassana Meditation, that is to say, through developing insight.

The Buddha taught that conditioned phenomena have three underlying characteristics. These are impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and lack of a controlling self (anatta). They are like three legs holding up a stool, if any one is removed, the stool falls down. If a meditator can fully understand any one of these three characteristics, the other two will be understood as well, and there will no longer be any wrong view or ignorance.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin found that working to understand impermanence is especially appropriate for laymen, and of the many ways in which impermanence can be understood, the best was through bodily sensations. This is because the physical sensations in the body are very easy to appreciate in comparison to the very subtle impact of stimuli on the other senses. So the students spend the major part of a ten-day course systematically passing the attention through the body, being aware of whatever sensation arises in a given part. At the same time, they strive to maintain a balanced mind. Their task is to observe how the sensations arise and pass away, without reacting negatively to an unpleasant sensation or clinging to a pleasant sensation. This equanimity is the key to success. Without it, no progress can be made.

My wife and I have been privileged to carry on Sayagyi's work. And we find that students today are discovering that Anapana and Vipassana Meditation are of great benefit to them. Let me quote from a student who draws attention to how better concentration and a proper appreciation of impermanence can help a person lead a more meaningful and happier life.

He writes:

When I took my first meditation course over ten years ago, I knew that I had found what I had been looking for. Vipassana Meditation is something more than a therapy that would make me feel better for a brief period. It is something that I can continue using for the rest of my life, continually growing in my understanding of a seemingly meaningless world, and becoming stronger and stronger with regards to my ability to lead a moral life. The longer I practise these teachings of the Buddha, the better I am at improving my own life and helping those around me.

Like many people in the West, I had been upset about injustice in the world for a long time. I was also aware that there was very little I could do to combat this injustice. As I strive to control my mind, I learn to understand it better. It does not want to stay still. It has a strong tendency to take pleasure in immoral actions. It is very clever in finding ways to excuse and justify wrong speech and wrong actions.

I know that I am not alone. I can see all around me people whose words and deeds show me that their minds function in the same way. It is not surprising that there is so much injustice in the world. Personal experience over the years has proved to me that if I am not able to live up to what I know to be right, I will not be able to help other people do so. I must be able to practise what I preach.

At times I have found it difficult to keep up my meditation. And I have seen how easy it is at those times to become confused. At such times, my mind is not sharp and I play with the idea of doing things I know to be against my own interest. But once I get back on the path and keep up my practice, the cobwebs in my mind are swept away. When I am able to think clearly, it becomes easier to lead a good life.

Better concentration has been a great help in my life. I am able to work better and more efficiently and this leaves me the time needed for regular meditation in my day-to-day life.

A very down-to-earth example of how my meditation has helped me is how I have learned to cope with a noisy neighbour. My neighbour likes to play music very loudly. At first, I reacted very negatively. I would call her up and protest angrily. The more I complained, the louder the music. I looked into the possibility of taking legal action. It soon became clear that this would be difficult, even though I was in the right.

One day, a friend mentioned that he used ear plugs because of the loud traffic noise where he lived. I realized I could do the same for the loud music, but it seemed unfair that I should have to take such precautions. I suppose I wanted to prove to my neighbour that I was in the right. I wanted to reinforce my pride. Finally I faced up to what was happening to me. I was generating a great deal of hatred and anything that would reduce that would be for my own good. Because of my anger, I was agitated, both mentally and physically. I was making myself very unhappy. Since then, I have had a reasonable discussion with my neighbour, I regularly use my ear plugs, and the situation has greatly improved.

So we can see that Buddhist Meditation can be of benefit to all and the benefits can extend to all aspects of one's life. It is our fervent wish that you will all be freed from suffering and experience for yourselves the Nibbanic peace within.

May you all be happy,
May you all be established in sila, samadhi, and panna,
May you all be Fully Enlightened!

Sayagyi U Chit Tin

[1] Chapter III, 123-129.

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