

VARIOUS WAYS OF DEALING WITH SENSATION BY DIFFERENT MEDITATION TRADITIONS IN MYANMAR¹

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Introduction

It was found that there were more accomplished meditators in Myanmar in the early period of the twentieth century than nowadays despite the fact that there were less meditation centres at that time. Among the great meditators, **Venerable Kitti** better known as **Pakhukku Theponceti Tawya Sayadaw²**, **Venerable Medhāvī** known to his followers as **Nyaung Lunt Tawya Sayadaw³**, **Venerable Sumana** noted as **Moenyin Tawya Sayadaw⁴**, **Venerable Kavi** renowned as **Soonlun Sayadaw⁵** and **Anāgāmi Saya Thetgyi⁶** were the most

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² He is a classmate of Ledi Sayadaw. Three years after his fully ordination, he became a teacher. At the age of thirty, he stopped teaching, went to the forest and started to practise meditation. He observed '*nesajjikāṅgaṃ*' i.e. he did not lie down on bed nor on floor. He spent the rest of his life meditating, without sleeping in lying position. He expired at the ripe age of eighty-six in a sitting position.

³ He started to meditate at the cemetery since he was a novice. When he became a fully-ordained monk, due to his teacher's request, he had to teach *Abhidhamma*, so he could not practise freely. But at the demise of his teacher, he made the education centre into meditation centre, and practised intensively. He passed away at the age of sixty-six.

⁴ He began to practise meditation seventeen years after his fully ordination. He stayed alone in the forest and devoted to meditation for ten years successively. After that, he conducted countless meditation courses all over the country and passed away at the ripe age of ninety-three.

⁵ As a lay man, in spite of his wife's unwillingness, he practised meditation under U San Tin, a disciple of Ledi Sayadaw. Since he practised meditation day and night, his wife disturbed him in several ways. At the age of forty-three, he became a novice, and devoted himself in meditation. Due to his lack of knowledge in Buddhist Canons, not only monks but also lay people felt doubtful in his accomplishment in meditation. However, these doubts did not last long as he could answer all the questions without any mistakes raised by many monk-scholars.

⁶ He was the foremost lay man meditation master appointed by Ledi Sayadaw. Though he was illiterate in *Pāḷi*, even some monks learnt how to practise meditation from him.

prominent ones. Of them, the last three were the disciples of **Ledi Sayadaw**, the most eminent and widely respected monk-scholar at the turn of the century, who was conferred the title of *Aggamahāpaṇḍita* by the British Government and later Doctor of Literature by the University of Rangoon for his skillful compilation of more than seventy manuals.

By the middle of the twentieth century, meditation centres arose one after another all over the country. Currently there are more than five hundred meditation centres where meditation masters are capable of giving meditation instructions in accordance with the Pāḷi Canon. Some of the well-known meditation masters are **Venerable Sobhana (Mahasi Sayadaw)**, **Venerable Vimala (Mogok Sayadaw)**, **Sayagyi U Ba Khin** and *Saccādīpaka Sayagyi U Kyi*. Here again, the last mentioned three masters directly or indirectly followed the meditation instructions of **Ledi Sayadaw**.

Here, in this presentation, the focus will be on “Contemplation of Sensation” (*Vedanānupassanā*) given by four of those: Mahasi Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw, Sayagyi U Ba Khin and *Saccādīpaka Sayagyi U Kyi*.

Mahasi Sayadaw’s technique

In Mahasi Sayadaw’s technique, sensation is usually observed together with a primary object. The primary object of meditation given by Mahasi Sayadaw is the movement of rising and falling, the expansion and contraction of the abdomen.

Since meditators have to continue contemplating for at least one hour in sitting position, an intense feeling, or sensation of pain, or discomfort is likely to be experienced. When this happens, the meditators must make a mental note on the specific part of the body where such sensations occur, and go on noting ‘pain, pain, pain.’ The pain may gradually decrease or increase. If the pain decreases, the meditators have to go back to the primary object and keep on contemplating the abdominal movement. In case the pain increases and becomes almost unbearable, the meditators are allowed to change posture but with the mental notes of the intention to change and the changing itself.

However, tolerance is recommended by the Sayadaw since painful feeling is similar to the key to open the door to *Nibbāna* and changing the posture is like breaking the key. Mahasi Sayadaw proclaimed that if the meditator is tolerant of heat, cold, pain, discomfort etc., enlightenment is within reach. Moreover, he mentioned that ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*) is concealed by body-posture. If the meditator changes the body-posture very often, it is not easy to comprehend the ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*). With the continual development of contemplation of pain, the time will arrive when the meditator can overcome painful sensation for a certain period of time.

Mogok Sayadaw's technique

The most Venerable Mogok Sayadaw, who was believed to be an accomplished meditator by his devotees, explains that sensation arises whenever there is the impact of the three phenomena, i.e. sensory organ, objects and consciousness. The impact of these three is called '*phassa*'; depending on *phassa*, there arises sensation (*Phassapaccayā vedanā*).

He lays great emphasis on sensation for sensation is the proximate cause of craving; dependent on sensation, there arises craving (*Vedanāpaccayā taṇhā*). In order to eradicate craving which is the cause of suffering, it is very important to observe the arising and perishing of sensation. The importance of the realization of the true nature of sensation becomes very clear when Sayadaw pointed out that according to the 'Law of Dependent Origination' (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), sensation is the most critical point where one either remains bound to suffering or frees oneself from it.

Furthermore, Sayadaw repeatedly reminded the meditators not to personalize or identify 'feeling, or sensation' with the notion of 'I' which does not really exist. It is 'feeling', or 'sensation' that feels good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. Sensation must be cognized and realized with insight that each sensation is transient, impermanent, and never remains the same for two consecutive moments. The meditators should make every endeavour to comprehend the arising and perishing of sensation by means of constant mindfulness. As the meditation gets mature and deeper, he highlights that sensation is simply a process of the arising and vanishing of mental phenomena. This constant change realized through direct experience indicates impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and voidness of self or soul.

Sayagi U Ba Khin's technique

Sayagi U Ba Khin, who founded the International Meditation Centre in Rangoon and taught insight meditation not only to local people but also to foreigners, is another figure in the field of sensational contemplation. He founded He was the student of *Anāgāmi* Saya Thetgyi and the teacher of S. N. Goenka. What is unique in this tradition is that the meditators are taught to be aware of the physical sensations by scanning it from head to toe, and from toe to head, without leaving any part of the body.

He highlighted that through physical sensations; the meditators can easily and quickly understand the impermanent nature of mind and matter. Apart from that, the sensation by contact of touch with the component parts of the body is more tangible than other types of sensation. Awareness of impermanence can also be developed through sensation by contact of visible object with the eye-base, sound with the ear-base, smell with the nose-base,

taste with the tongue-base and thought with the mind-base. With constant mindfulness and strong concentration, the meditators will come to realize that no sensation is permanent; every sensation arises just to pass away. The contemplation of impermanence will lead to the arising of the higher levels of insight understanding. With this understanding, the mind becomes purer and purer as the ego gets weaker and weaker.

***Saccādiṭṭhika* Sayagi U Kyi's technique**

The last method in this paper on sensation is that of *Saccādiṭṭhika*⁷ Sayagi U Kyi. Sayagi U Kyi, an ex-monk, was a skillful meditation master who gave meditation instructions in plain language, i.e. without using many Pāli words and sentences so that even illiterates could easily and clearly understand the profound teachings of the Buddha.

The uniqueness of Sayagi U Kyi's instruction on sensation is that meditators are taught to neglect the concept or designation (*paññatti*) like pain, stiffness, numbness, sadness, happiness etc. but to observe the true nature of sensation, i.e. arising and perishing. It is because Sayagi firmly said that penetrative wisdom will not occur by contemplating the concept (*paññatti*), but by uncovering it and only by observing the real nature of psycho-physical phenomena (*paramattha*). If the meditator realizes the changing nature of psycho-physical phenomena, the wrong perception of 'I' or 'Personality Belief' (*Sakkāyadiṭṭhi*) will be kept away from him or her during meditation. Only then, successive higher insight knowledges will appear.

When a meditator undertakes insight meditation in one position for a long period of time, unbearable painful bodily sensation may be experienced. When this happens, according to Sayagi U Kyi, if the meditator tolerates and keeps on practising, agitation or anger will arise knowingly or unknowingly. He pointed out that due to physical pain, there appears mental pain, and consequently no concentration can be established and thus the meditator is far away from enlightenment.

He furthermore added that tolerating unbearable sensation and keeping on contemplating such sensations is a kind of self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*) and thus the meditator deviates from the middle way. Therefore, he gave guidance to the meditators to observe the changing nature of sensation without paying any attention to pain. In the same way, with regard to pleasurable sensation, the meditator must ignore pleasure, happiness or delight, but must observe the arising and dissolution of that sensation. If the meditator avoids the two extremes, i.e. pain and pleasure, he or she is on the middle way.

⁷ Elucidation of the Truth, or ultimate realities

In addition, Sayagyi U Kyi emphasized on 'indifference or equanimity' (*upekkhā*) which brings calm, peace and serenity to the meditator. And it is equanimity that makes the meditator get rid of mental defilements which are very gross in nature. Therefore, in order to eradicate mental defilements, a meditator should develop equanimity. Equanimity can be developed by observing the nature of sensation instead of contemplating pain or pleasure, sadness or happiness. When a meditator sees a pleasant visible object, greed will arise. On the other hand, if the visible object is unpleasant, hatred will come up. If the object is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, delusion will occur. In order to stay away from greed, hatred and delusion, he taught the meditators to be aware of 'equanimity'. And he also claimed that this equanimity is related to 'Knowledge of Equanimity towards Formations' (*saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇa*) which has the neutral attitude to mind and matter.

Conclusion

Now a clear conclusion can be drawn that Mahasi Sayadaw taught to watch the specific part of the body where sensation occurs and to observe the degree of pain, numbness, discomfort, etc., closely and attentively because it helps to understand how unsatisfactory this so called being is. Unlike Mahasi Sayadaw, Sayagyi U Ba Khin taught to be aware of the body sensations by scanning the whole body. The instructions given by Mogok Sayadaw and Sayagyi U Kyi are more or less the same because both of them taught to contemplate on arising and perishing of sensations. But while Mogok Sayadaw emphasized on the cause and effect, Sayagyi U Kyi put stress on ignoring the concept or designation (*paññatti*).

Briefly speaking, all the above mentioned meditation masters taught how to eradicate mental defilements, to overcome pain, grief, sorrow, lamentation and to attain enlightenment based on the instructions given in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Even though they adopted a different approach in dealing with sensation, each approach brings good effect depending upon the temperament of a meditator.

End

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