

BUDDHIST MEDITATION IN BURMA

by

Dr. Elizabeth K. Nottingham

//(From a paper contributed by the writer in 1958)//

On a little knoll, in the heart of Rangoon's Golden Valley district stands a small modern Pagoda. Its golden spire and umbrella-//hti// sparkle in the sunlight, while at night its electric lights twinkle against the darkened sky. Unlike most Burmese pagodas, this is not a solid structure; its central chamber is a shrine room, while eight smaller pie-shaped rooms, each topped with its own little //hti//, surround this central shrine. These small separate rooms or "caves" are for the practice of Buddhist meditation. Over the archway which gives entrance to the property a sign reads "International Meditation Centre, founded 1959", while inside there stands a notice board with the further information that this Centre is the property of the Vipassana Association whose headquarters are in the Office of the Accountant General. To an American the idea of a centre for religious meditation being the property of a voluntary association with its central focus in a government department may perhaps seem surprising. Even in Burma, the fact that the Teacher, or //Saya//, of this Centre is a prominent government official rather than a monk, is regarded as somewhat unusual.

U Ba Khin, the //saya// -- or, if one prefers the Indian term, the //guru// -- of the International Meditation Centre is indeed an unusual person. In addition to his purely voluntary and quite time-consuming activities as teacher of meditation at the Centre, he is also a highly responsible government official. As Chairman of Burma's State Agricultural Marketing Board, which handles the rice crop, the export and sale of which is crucial to the country's economic existence, U Ba Khin's responsibility to the government is outstanding and his competence and absolute integrity a matter of public satisfaction. In his former capacity as Accountant General, as well as in present office as Chairman of the S.A.M.B., he has good reason to know how vital are the honesty and efficiency of Burma's civil servants if she is to consolidate and maintain her existence as an independent state.

The Centre sponsors each month meditation courses of ten days' duration under the personal direction of the saya. The courses are geared to the needs and the capacities of the individual, whether he be from the East or from the West. They are engaged in by a wide variety of people, ranging from an ex-president of the Burmese Republic to an attendant at a gas station. Senior and junior officials of the government services, mainly from the offices of the Accountant General and the S.A.M.B., furnish the majority of the candidates, with a sprinkling of university professors, foreign visitors, including one member of the American Foreign Service, and other Burmese householders and housewives.

At the beginning of every course, each trainee takes a vow of loyalty to the Buddha and his teaching -- a vow which is modified in the case of non-Buddhists -- and promises not to leave the Centre during the training period and in other ways to be obedient to the direction of the Teacher. He also promises to obey eight of the ten Buddhist Precepts, three more than the usual five precepts that are considered to be binding on all devout Buddhist laity. The Five Precepts require that the individual refrain from taking life of a sentient being, from taking what is not given, from fornication, from speaking falsely and from intoxicating liquor. Those who abide by the eight precepts are also

required, as are all monks, to refrain from eating after twelve noon each day. Trainees at the Centre are also required to hold a strict vegetarian diet for the period of the course. During the training period foreigners are provided with sleeping quarters, as well as all meals, free of charge.

The routine may seem exacting to those unacquainted with the schedule of meditation hours that are common in the East. The hours allotted to relaxation and sleep are more generous at the International Meditation Centre than at some other meditation centres in Burma. U Ba Khin believes that a prerequisite for all successful practice in meditation is good health. Trainees get up each morning a little after four, and are in meditation from 4.30 to 6.00 A.M. Breakfast at 6.00 A.M. is followed by a second period of meditation from 7.30 to 10.30 A.M. after which lunch, the last meal of the day, is taken. 12.30 to 5.00 is the afternoon meditation period, and at 5.00 P.M. there is a period for rest and relaxation, followed by an informal talk from the Teacher from 6.00 to 7.00 P.M. The evening meditation period from 7.00 to 9.00 P.M. ends the day and most of the trainees are ready to take to their beds -- or rather their mats -- at 9.00P.M.

The training the student undergoes is thought as essentially a process of purification or refinement of the moral, mental and spiritual perceptions. The Buddha admonished his followers, "Cease to do evil, learn to do good, purify the mind." The training at the Centre is directed towards the fulfilment of this injunction. In line with the classic Buddhist tradition the requirements for such training fall into three parts, //Sila, Samadhi,// and //Panna//. These three Pali words might be regarded as the watchwords of the Centre. //Sila// signifies morality, the purification of conduct; hence at least formal or temporary adherence to the Five Precepts are a minimum essential for all who would proceed to further mental and spiritual training. //Samadhi// is concentration, a mental discipline that has much in common with //yoga//. Though training in //Samadhi// may take place in a Buddhist context, it is not in itself necessarily Buddhist. It is merely a means, though an exacting and essential one, whereby the student learns, in the words of the Teacher, to "put a ring through the nose of the bull of consciousness," and so harness that wayward will-o'-the-wisp, the faculty of attention. //Panna//, wisdom or insight, is the product of Vipassana, or Buddhist meditation properly so called.

//Sila, Samadhi,// and //Panna// are thus stages in the achievement of spiritual proficiency and, according to Buddhists, in the process of detachment from the craving that binds all living things to the wheel of existence and rebirth. They constitute a grouping into three parts of the eight requirements of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path for the realization of the Cessation of suffering.

About the practice of //Sila//, little needs to be said. It is taken for granted as a basic requirement for all trainees. The Westerner may have to exercise conscious control in refraining from swatting mosquitoes, but he soon learns to regulate his hunger and otherwise fairly readily adapts himself to the routine. //Samadhi//, however -- the practice of concentration -- demands patience and persistent endurance, just how much only those who have attempted to practise it can know. There are a number of techniques used by a Buddhist in the practice of concentration. The beginner at the Centre is taught to concentrate on the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. In doing this he must be tireless in excluding all other thoughts and at the same time learn to relax his body and gradually to narrow the focus of his attention until he is eventually aware only of a tiny "spot" at the base of the nose. Little by little all conscious awareness of breathing stops and he is mindful only of a minute point of light and warmth. It may take four or five days of practice to achieve this result, though some students succeed within a much shorter

period. Other systems of Buddhist concentration may adopt slightly different means -- some begin the practice by concentration on an external object, such, for example, as a neutral-coloured disc. But no matter what the precise means employed the aim is the same, namely the attainment of //one-pointedness// -- the power to gather up the attention into a single powerful lens and to focus it at will upon any object, material or ideational. //Samadhi//, then, is a technique that can be practised by members of any -- or of no -- religious faith. A developed power of concentration is, needless to say, of inestimable value in the ordinary, everyday business of life. It may well make the difference between an efficient or an inefficient public servant or professional worker. Of this fact the //saya// is well aware. //Samadhi//, however, is essential for the practice of meditation, and without the strong "lens" of concentration the student can never hope to attain //Panna//; that is, wisdom or insight.

The practice of //Vipassana//, the heart of meditation, the means by which //Panna// or insight is attained, is something to be experienced rather than described. A non-Buddhist, and a non-adept, can say but little and should perhaps be content to say nothing at all. Nevertheless, an attempt will be made to describe its underlying principles.

//Vipassana// is grounded in the Four Noble Truths, the outstanding contribution of the Buddha to the world's religious thought. The First Noble Truth, that suffering is basic to all existence, is not regarded as requiring merely a cool intellectual assent from the devotee. The reality of this First Noble Truth must be faced and experienced subjectively before the other Truths, which locate the cause and point out the method of release from suffering, can be realized. Suffering, in the Buddhist sense, is not simply something to be "accepted" as a preferably temporary condition of one's own being or as a more permanent state for the world's unfortunates. Rather it is to be viewed as an integral part of matter and mind (//Rupa // and //Nama//), the very stuff of existence itself. The //Pali// words //Anicca, Dukkha// and //Anatta//, which may be translated as Impermanence, Suffering and the Non-Self -- or perhaps as the illusion of the separate self -- are the key themes in this meditation. These themes are to be experienced introspectively -- in accordance with his capacity -- by the meditator as on-going processes of his own organism. He must endeavour to become //aware// of his mental and bodily components in the process of change, to experience impermanence as suffering, and to perceive with his inward eye the illusory nature of the separate self.

Only when suffering is thus faced and realized can the way to release be opened. In meditation the student should develop a sharpened consciousness of the imperious nature of his desires and of his attachment to them. This is what the Buddha meant by //Tanha//, or craving, which he saw as the cause of all suffering, and so enunciated in his Second Noble Truth. If the trainee longs with an intense desire for release from this condition of craving and for the calm of Nirvana, or the Great Peace, he may then gain some insight into the Third of the Noble Truths, namely, that to free oneself from craving is the way to be released from suffering. In so far as his desire to detach himself from craving is sincere and deep he will act upon the Fourth Noble Truth and follow more closely in the Eightfold Noble Path. By so doing he should experience, even in his present life, some measure of the great Peace.

It is a challenging experience for a Westener to undergo a course in meditation at the International Meditation Centre. He not only may explore new realms of consciousness, but he can scarcely avoid the attempt to rephrase his experiences, where possible, in terms of his traditional religious beliefs. Furthermore, certain incidents, certain expressions in both the Old and the New Testaments spring to life, so to say, and take a new vivid meaning. For instance, the Biblical verse "If thine eye be

single thy why whole body will be full of light" may be experienced subjectively as almost literal truth by one who in practising //Samadhi// is able to approach one-pointedness in his concentration. Indeed, many biblical phrases that to a Westerner may have seemed vague or merely allegorical take on specific meaning, thus recalling the fact that Judeo-Christianity is a faith of eastern rather than western origin.

Even a Westerner who does not accept the major premises of the Buddhist faith will, if he follows instructions given at the Centre faithfully, experience a deep and invigorating calm, a calm possibly deeper than anything he has previously known. He may or may not enter into the more rarefied forms of consciousness -- Jhanic states in Buddhist terms -- for individuals vary very much both in their capacity and in their willingness to do this. Nevertheless he will almost certainly learn to tighten his control of his mental processes to experience a feeling of cleansing, strengthening and relaxed peace. He may also learn something of the technique for inducing such peaceful states at will, an accomplishment not to be despised in these days of hurry and of strain. To do so, as it seems to the writer, what is required is not a willingness to renounce one's traditional religious faith -- or even one's agnosticism -- but an open-minded determination to experience something new. There is no compulsion exercised at the Centre to make Buddhists out of Christians or Jews. The //saya// invites his students freely to take and use what appears to them to be good and, should they so wish, to leave the rest. The atmosphere of tolerance and of active loving-kindness that surrounds the western visitor to the Centre does much to strengthen the appeal of the mental and spiritual discipline.

Apart from any possible meaning that the meditation Centre might have for Westerners is the question of its actual present meaning for those Burmans who make up the bulk of its membership. Most of those who come to receive training, or who, having received it, frequent the Centre are broadly speaking, middle class people in active middle and young adult life. Almost without exception they are old enough to remember the war years and the Japanese occupation, the tragic murder of General Aung San and the stormy years of the birth of the new republic. They remember, too, the period of post-independence insurrection, when at the height of the Karen rebellion the government was in effective control only of Rangoon. If it is true that stress and suffering are generating forces in religious revival, there is no doubt that Burma's responsible middle classes have had their fill of both. Few Americans appreciate the suffering and destruction that the war and postwar periods have witnessed in Burma, or the amount of dislocation of communications and of economic life that still prevail. The leading members of the International Meditation Centre, therefore, have been led by many vicissitudes of fortune to learn how to live in good times and in bad, in safety and in peril. In the quest for that calm of spirit that would enable them not merely to exist with the unawareness of mere animals, but to turn their experiences to positive account, some have been discovering anew the ancient truths of their Buddhist faith.

Furthermore, most of those who attend the Centre are occupied in business and in the professions, and the program at the Centre is geared to their needs. It is a fellowship of laity, under lay leadership, and Buddhist meditation is presented to them not as something that may be practised only in the seclusion of the monastery but rather as an activity for Buddhist "householders," those who are immersed in family cares and public responsibilities. For these people the Centre affords a Fellowship of the like-minded. For Buddhists are not organized in congregations as are most Western religious groups -- indeed, the need for such organized gatherings is hardly felt in the country districts where a whole village may, in effect, compose the community of faithful laity which supports and frequents a particular monastery. In a big city, however, where

territorial bonds are less strong, there would seem to be a growing need for voluntary religious associations with some congregational features. Each Sunday, for instance, the Centre is open from seven in the morning until late in the afternoon to all who wish to take advantage of a quiet time for meditation, of informal instruction and advice from the Teacher, of a communal lunch and the companionship of friends. The degree of devotion which the Centre, in turn, inspires in some of its supporters may be judged from the number of volunteer workers always on hand to supervise the kitchen and the housekeeping, to initiate new students and take care of foreign visitors and to keep watch over the premises during the night. The increasing numbers of those who came for instruction, and the spontaneous manner in which funds are supplied for new building, seem to show that the Centre fulfils a growing need.

To what extent are such meditation centres typical developments in the Buddhist practice of Burma today? Granted that the individualistic tendencies within Buddhism are very strong, so that in important respects the International Meditation Centre must be considered as unique, nevertheless, there seems to be a definite tendency in the contemporary emphasis on Buddhism in Burma to place especial stress on the practice of meditation. Meditation occupies a central place in orthodox Buddhist practice, and though in popular Buddhist observance it has at times played a minor role, it has always been a main activity of those monks who do not specialize in scholarly pursuits. Today, however, the government, acting through the intermediary of the Buddha-Sasana Council -- a body drawn from monks and laymen which is responsible for the well-being of Buddhism in Burma and its extension both within the Union and also in foreign lands -- claims, in a report issued on the //Situation of Buddhism in Burma// since 1955, that there exist at present some 216 meditation centres within the Union as of November, 1956. Of these centres, some under monastic and others under lay leadership, a total of 142 were recognized by the Sasana Council and received government subsidies. Other Centres, like the International Meditation Centre, depend entirely on voluntary support. The Council also sponsors a central meditation centre in Rangoon, where those who wish to undergo training as teachers of meditation and who are approved by the Council will receive a small monthly stipend to defray their maintenance expenses while receiving such training in meditation in Rangoon. In addition, a certain number of students from overseas who have expressed a wish to receive training in meditation in Burma have also been subsidized by the Council. During the period covered by the report, eleven foreigners from nine different countries received such subsidies.

Though the numbers of those actually practising meditation systematically in Burma today may well be small indeed in proportion to its total population of Buddhists, nevertheless meditation enjoys the prestige of government support and more particularly the interested support of Prime Minister U Nu himself -- so that to a degree it has become almost fashionable. Shrines for meditation are sometimes to be found in government offices, and official leave may be granted for the practice of //Vipassana//.

While a number of Westerners would probably admit that the extension of relaxation and mental control -- perhaps even of meditation itself -- might furnish a needed corrective to the frenetic activity and hypertension attendant on living in their own countries, what shall be said as to the social value of today's emphasis on the practice of meditation in a country such as Burma? Does this overt attempt to foster it by governmental and other agencies merely accentuate an existing over-strong tendency to withdraw from social responsibilities either for religious reasons or out of downright idleness? Or, on the other hand, may it not be possibly to help to create a reservoir of calm and balanced energy to be used for the building of a "welfare state" and as a bulwark against corruption in public life? Such questions are far easier to ask

than to answer. Both possible alternatives would appear to exist, and any accurate assessment must necessarily depend on the situation -- or even the individual under consideration. Undoubtedly U Nu and U Ba Khin combine the practice of meditation with the exercise of exacting public responsibilities. If it is actually true that //meditation// "keeps them going," then the promotion of the means whereby other such individuals may be produced could be important for Burma's national existence.

Can meditation, then, be viewed not only as a means of self-development -- a development that must be regarded by Buddhists not in terms of one short lifetime but against the almost timeless background of thousands of rebirths -- but also as this wordly task? Do there exist elements in the broad tradition of Buddhism itself, which, if now emphasized, might furnish the moral motive power that Burma needs? Perhaps there is this much that may be said: if one of the effects of meditation on its practioners is to strengthen and deepen their adherence to the Five Precepts here and now, both public and private life would be benefited. And there is also the positive example of the Buddha himself, who for forty-five years after his Enlightenment, instead of withdrawing from the world to enjoy in peace and solitude the liberation he had won, laboured on as a Teacher of a struggling humanity.

APPRECIATION

Dr. Nottingham was quite modest when she wrote in the Guest Book that she had learnt from the Centre how to find a deep pool of quiet in the midst of the activities of a busy life, although she might not have been able to learn very deeply about the Dhamma. It was an agreeable surprise when I read her paper on "Buddhist Meditation in Burma" to find that she understands Buddhism very deeply indeed.

Her expressions (1) of one-pointedness of Mind with a minute point of light and warmth at the base of the nose (//Citta-vissudhi//), (2) of the awareness of mental and bodily components in the process of change (//Anicca//), (3) of the experiencing of impermanence as suffering (//Dukkha//), and (4) of perceiving with the inward eye the illusory nature of the separate self (//Anatta//) are really very commendable.

I congratulate Dr. Nottingham very warmly for the paper which deserves worldwide attention and interest.

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