

## The Practice of Compassion: A Brief Reflection on Some Theravada Buddhist Meditation Traditions

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**T**HERE is a popular opinion which assumes that Theravada Buddhism teaches less compassion in the path to enlightenment. I wish to briefly consider the structure of some meditation mindfulness—based insight meditation practices in the Theravada tradition today and ponder on it here if there is a point to this perception. In so doing, I refer, not so much to the canonical texts, but to some Theravada meditation traditions current these days.

To become enlightened, the majority of the meditation traditions in the Theravada today argue, that one must realize impermanence through contemplation of the process of mind and matter. Tried and tested experiences of the teachers are used to formulate meditation techniques. Relevant passages from the canonical and commentarial literature are usually considered to give authority to those techniques.

### **Some Mindfulness Practices in Myanmar and Thailand**

#### **Staying at the Present Moment**

One of the prominent Theravada meditation masters of our time, Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982), who founded in 1947 one of the main vipassana meditation traditions, Mahasi, in Myanmar today, writes in his meditation manual:

While seeing, hearing, smelling, eating, touching, walking, standing, sitting, sleeping, bending, stretching and thinking, one should contemplate on the experience at the present moment so that one can see mind

and matter, impermanence, suffering and lack of unchanging self.

Should one fail to contemplate on the experiences at the present moment this way, one may wrongly perceive them as “being permanent, pleasant, good, attractive and the unchanging essence capable of providing lasting happiness and then become attached to them.”<sup>1</sup>

[My own translation]

In the normal meditation retreat in around four hundred Mahasi centres in Myanmar, all efforts of a meditation practitioner are dedicated to developing mindfulness in all postures throughout the day and using mindfulness to constantly observe the process of mind and body and see their nature. Even for a beginner, there is a routine of an hour of sitting and walking practice taking place alternatively for as many as eight sessions a day. Retreats of various lengths, ranging from seven days to three months, are held throughout the year in those centres.

Many people have benefitted from this mindfulness practice of Mahasi Sayadaw, who uses the Satipatthana-sutta of the Pali canon as the core instruction. There are Mahasi branches in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Nepal and the West. Some well-known western meditation teachers such as Nyanaponnika Thera (1901–1994), Joseph Goldstein (1944– ), Jack Kornfield (1945– ) and Sharon Salzberg (1952– )<sup>2</sup> have been trained in this tradition. Nyanaponnika Thera’s book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* describes meditation practice as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw and his teacher, Mingun Sayadaw (1868–1955); this book has been one of the main sources for western scientists engaging in mindfulness and research, from Eric S. Fromm, a German social psychologist, who recommends Nyanaponnika Thera’s book as “[a] work of unique importance ... written with great depth, extraordinary knowledge, deep humanity... I do not know of any book which could be compared to this work as a guide to meditation”, to the pioneer of MBSR, Prof. Jon Kabat-Zin of MIT and of MBCT, Prof. Mark Williams of Oxford University.

### **“From seeing impermanence, clinging is eradicated”**

Another Burmese vipassana meditation tradition equally popular inside the country, is Mogok vipassana meditation. Mogok Sayadaw (1899–1962), the founder of this tradition, emphasized a similar approach and this can be seen in one of the instructions given to his students as below:

*Mogok Sayadaw* (MGS): Something which is dear to you most, maybe your own physical body or that of your spouse and children, or any-

thing from material property to philosophy of life... everything should be contemplated through vipassana; this way you will see their birth, decay and death, their coming and going. This is to see impermanence. To see the arising and ceasing of something is to see suffering as it is. Isn't suffering of the nature of arising and ceasing?

*Students:* Yes, sir.

*MGS:* Even, anattā is... ?

*Students:* Impermanent, sir.

*MGS:* The truth of suffering is also... ?

*Students:* Impermanent, sir.

*MGS:* When one sees the arising and cessation, what would happen to their habit of attachment? It ceases.

*Students:* Yes sir, it does.

*MGS:* When attachment ceases, *taṇhā* (thirst) and *upādāna* (clinging) cease. The process of karma also ceases; if this is the case, would there be any no more rebirth?

*Students:* No more, sir.....

*MGS:* From seeing impermanence, clinging is eradicated.

*Students:* Yes sir.

*MGS:* Similarly, if you see suffering?

*Students:* Clinging is overcome, sir....

*MGS:* [If] you see the absence of non-changing self?

*Students:* Clinging is overcome, sir....

*MGS:* [If] you see the truth of suffering?

*Students:* Clinging is overcome, sir.<sup>4</sup> [My own translation]

Mogok Vipassana Association which has more than four hundred centres around the country preserves the meditation techniques as taught by Mogok Sayadaw, also known as U Vimala. He centres his teaching on mindfulness of breathing and the law of dependent origination. He argues that a theoretical understanding of the law of dependent origination is necessary, and its twelve links are considered in the light of the four noble truths, emphasizing how the cycle of suffering is enforced or brought to an end. The theoretical teaching of the dependent origination is provided daily at least for an hour to the meditators during the retreat. Concentration and mindfulness are established using the awareness of breathing. Once concentration is achieved to a certain level, the meditator is asked to observe the arising and passing away, impermanence, of their experiences at the present moment.

One other well-known meditation tradition in Myanmar, Pa Auk, named after its founder, Pa Auk Sayadaw, U Acinna (1934– ) also

stresses seeing impermanence in the practice. This tradition differs from the previous two in that it requires the student to go through various techniques and steps of samatha meditation to calm and steady the mind at the jhana levels before beginning vipassana practice. After establishing concentration, also through mindfulness of breathing, student has to contemplate the many aspects of the four elements, the *kaṣiṇa*, the 32 parts of body<sup>5</sup>, then *kaṣiṇas*<sup>6</sup> again before proceeding to the four types of protective meditation, some of which will be explained more later. Once the student has been through this process to the satisfaction of the teacher, they are introduced to vipassana meditation; from here they change their focus to impermanence, the realization of which will lead the practitioner to enlightenment. The Pa Auk tradition is one of the only two to practice jhāna in Myanmar, the other being Mye-zin tawya (Mye-zin forest meditation tradition); the rest follow the dry vipassana method.

### **“To destroy attachment to personality view”**

In Thailand, Ajahn Chah (1918–1992) is perhaps the best known forest Thai meditation master to the westerners. He seems to combine both samatha and vipassana approaches in his practice and teaching. He has around two hundred branches world-wide, including five monasteries in England and a few others in Europe, USA, Australia and New Zealand. Ajahn Chah describes the process of meditation practice like this:

The calm mind is the mind that is firm and stable in Samadhi.... There is awareness of the impermanent but it's as if you are not aware. This is because you let go. The mind lets go automatically. Concentration is so deep and firm that you let go of attachment to sense impingement quite naturally. ... Investigating from within a state of calm leads you to clearer and clearer insight... The clearer and more conclusive the insight, the deeper inside the mind penetrates with its investigation, constantly supported by the calm of Samadhi. This is what the practice of *kammatthāna* involves. Continuous investigation in this way helps you to repeatedly let go of and ultimately destroy attachment to personality view.

The Four Noble Truths are things to be realized through insight.... Understanding of each Noble Truth emerges at the same place within the mind. They come together and harmonize as the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path; ... As the path factors converge in the centre of the mind, they cut through any doubts and uncertainty you still have concerning the way of practice.<sup>7</sup>

From these excerpts, one can see how Theravada meditation practices popular nowadays in Myanmar and Thailand stress the development of mindfulness, concentration and insight. Needless to say, they all pay sufficient attention to the importance of morality as described in the Five Precepts for lay people and the Pātimokkha monastic disciplines for the monks and nuns. In the general sense though, those moral codes (*sīla*) give weight to what to refrain from rather than what to develop.

## **Brahma-vihāra as the Practice of Compassion**

One particular practice that seems less obvious, if not absent, from their teachings is Brahma-vihāra, one of the four practices usually considered as protective meditation and not as core practice. It is in the Brahma-vihāra where the practice of compassion is found. Brahma-vihāra is translated in the Pali English Dictionary (P.E.D.)<sup>8</sup> as “sublime or divine state of mind”; Gombrich translates it as “living with Brahma”. This is a form of meditation that has four in one package, namely *mettā* (benevolence), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (joy) and *upekkhā* (balanced mind/balanced emotion). I shall say more about them shortly.

One of the reasons for the absence of the Brahma-vihāra may be that many Theravadin practitioners classify Brahma-vihāra as a Samatha type of meditation and place it below Vipassana in the path to liberation. All the teachers in Theravada Buddhism agree, as just observed above, that *mettā* is only a protective meditation, which is what we find in the Visuddhimagga. It is there to protect the insight meditation.<sup>9</sup> Brahma-vihāra, the Theravadins say, has conventional reality or concept (*paññatti*) and not ultimate reality (*paramattha*) as its focus of meditation. Pa Auk Sayadaw writes:

“[t]his meditation (*Mettā*) takes concept (*paññatti*) as the object, not ultimate reality (*paramattha*)”.<sup>10</sup>

As we have seen earlier, for enlightenment to be realized, Theravadins insist, the pure process of mind and matter has to be discerned as impermanent (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and not unchanging self (*anattā*).

Among the publications of the four teachers I have discussed here, only Pa Auk Sayadaw has some teaching on the Brahma-vihāra, and that is also in the context of Jhāna development; and for that reason, one is not supposed to cultivate *mettā* for oneself as one would do for others (i.e. respected person, relatives, neutral ones and enemy) because it is believed that cultivating *mettā* for oneself does not lead to jhāna. This is

likely to put us in contradiction with the teaching of the Buddha, as found in the Dhammapada verses Nos. 129–130 which require us to put ourselves in the place of others, in order to develop consideration and compassion. This instruction which is similar to the practice of *tong liang* in the Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice is certainly present in Theravada scripture, but it has not been developed as a practice among many of the current meditation traditions. Besides, in Theravada practices it seems that metta, not the other three factors of the Brahma-vihāra, is given more attention to. Perhaps it may be due to this that upekkhā is much misunderstood in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. More of this will be discussed later.

**“Without contemplating dukkha, it is difficult to arouse compassion”**

Although there is evidence that these great meditation masters have practiced a great deal of metta meditation themselves and indeed they often recommend it to their students who have an aversive character<sup>11</sup>, I am yet to find the record of their teaching on the Brahma-vihāra as elaborate as they have done with vipassana. Pa Auk Sayadaw has written a five-volume meditation manual, running 3,320 pages; Mahasi Sayadaw’s *Vipassana Shu-nee Kyan* runs 1,122 pages; Ajahn Chah’s *The Collected Teachings* is 744 pages and Mogok Sayadaw’s collected talks, as published, are more than the last two combined. Pa Auk Sayadaw has only around ten pages on the Brahma-vihara practice. The practice does not usually feature prominently in the teachings of Mahasi Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah, as recorded by their pupils. And, nor is the metta meditation practice prominently featured in Nyanaponnika’s deservedly well-acclaimed book.

Here before I explain the Brahma-vihāra, I wish to point out that as we have seen from the excerpts the entry point to insight for those meditation teachers is contemplation of impermanence, which is one of the three characteristics of the world (ti-lakkhaṇa). I personally think that it is possible to enter from any one of the three and then connect it with the other two through contemplation. For example, in the Dhammacakka-pavattana-sutta, considered to be the First Sermon of the Buddha, if we read it as it is, dukkha, suffering, is the central point of contemplation. The realization, however, when expressed by Koṇḍañña, is formulated in terms of seeing impermanence. This shows the relationship between the two. And in the Anatta-lakkhaṇa-sutta, traditionally thought of as the Second Sermon of the Buddha, also has the most obvious aspect of dukkha, suffering, of the five processes of our

experience as the starting point for contemplation. From this easily noticeable dukkha, one goes on to contemplate anattā. Here anattā seems to mean that no one has real control over these five processes of experience because they are subject to affliction.

The second section of this sutta proceeds to draw our attention to impermanence of the same five processes of experience, and link that insight to the understanding of dukkha and anattā. Here, the meditator is urged to inquire three aspects of those experiences: *is this mine, is this me and is this my unchanging self?* These inquiries awaken the mind to its impurities, namely attachment, conceit and wrong view concerning non-changing self, respectively.

The reason for making this point concerning the entry to the three characteristics is to draw our attention to the Theravadins' own understanding that without contemplating dukkha, it is difficult to arouse compassion in our heart. This is to say that when suffering is not sufficiently contemplated, there is less opportunity for the mind to develop compassion. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is the quality of the heart that is moved and shaken when in touch with suffering. As we have seen from this brief discussion, even when suffering is contemplated in those meditation traditions, it is only as an extension of the contemplation of impermanence; this is true also of the contemplation of anattā.<sup>12</sup>

### **How we can replace anger with compassion and desire with joy**

Now, let me return to the four Brahma-vihāra. I consider this set of teaching by the Buddha to be for emotion development. The Visuddhimagga describes six stages of the Brahma-vihāra practice, that is to begin with oneself and then extend it to family members, friends, neutral persons, enemy and finally the unspecified people. I think these steps really help us recognize the boundaries we set up in our own mind between each of these groups. Those boundaries limit our ability to connect with the suffering as well as the joy of others; in that limited emotional state, we tend to see our suffering or joy as being unique, and not universal. It is within those emotional limits that human beings develop negative emotions, become selfish and at worst commit atrocity. By gradually extending the Brahma-vihāra outward we work on our automatic judgmental minds which are an emotional state and the deluded perception associated with it.

Usually, Theravada teachers follow the sequence of the four: *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*, in both theoretical explanation and practice. P.A Payutto, a highly respected Thai scholar monk, explains *mettā* as a friendly attitude wishing to see the happiness of others; *karuṇā* as

the quality of mind that is shaken when one sees someone in trouble; *muditā* as joyous feeling when seeing others doing well; and *upekkhā* as the ability to remain neutral or indifferent, when examining with wisdom, with regard to the trouble someone immoral has put himself in.<sup>13</sup>

However, P.E.D. defines *upekkhā* as “hedonic neutrality or indifference, zero point between joy and sorrow; disinterestedness, neutral feeling, equanimity. I think the P.E.D. interpretation of *upekkhā* is questionable. I can, however, understand the P.E.D.’s point when it equates *upekkhā* with the “feeling which is neither pain nor pleasure”. That is to include *upekkhā* in *vedanā-kkhandha*, the aggregate of feeling; this is true only to *upekkhā* as part of *jhāna* factors. In fact, *upekkhā* in the *Brahma-vihāra* is part of *sankhara-kkhandha*, which it is about intention, thought and emotion.

I think *upekkhā* is somewhat different from that. To me, it is the state of balanced and a more stable mind between two seemingly contradictory emotions: compassion and joy. Contradictory, because they focus on different objects: suffering and happiness respectively; and, without being closely supported and sustained by mindfulness and concentration, when one contemplates suffering, it is possible that one becomes angry or depressed; and when facing a happy situation, one may feel jealous and insecure. As repeatedly described in the *Satipatthāna-sutta*, one uses mindfulness (*satimā*), effort (*ātāpi*) and understanding (*sampajāno*) to address those hindrances, usually summarized as two: covetousness (*abhiññhā*) and destructive mind (*domanassam*). On overcoming those hindrances to compassion and joy, one reaches the state of *upekkhā*. The Buddha was the embodiment of all the *Brahma-vihāra*; he was not disinterested in people’s sorrow and joy; indeed, he was moved by them and spent all his life helping people to overcome them. *Upekkhā* is how to stay connected with suffering and joy while not being overwhelmed by them but preserving your own calm and objectivity.

It should be stressed here that *upekkhā* is one of the most misunderstood concepts in Theravada communities of Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka. As in the P.E.D.’s interpretation, people usually take it as being indifferent or ignoring someone’s pain or joy, especially pain. I think the problem may have arisen like this. In many suttas, *upekkhā* is described with *jhānic* states and in that situation; even happiness (*sukha*) is absent in the state of *upekkha*. But I think this is true only when one is in a *jhānic* state. Otherwise, *upekkhā* is accompanied with rapture (*pīti*) and calm (*passaddhi*) just as it is with mindfulness (*sati*), investigation

of nature (dhamma-vicaya) and concentration (samādhi) as one of the seven components of enlightenment (bojjhanga).<sup>14</sup> The jhānic state of upekkhā is, however, what many in the Theravada tradition take it for the quality of upekkhā at any time. So, I agree with Nyanatiloka's interpretation of upekkhā when he says of upekkhā in his *Buddhist Dictionary* as "equanimity, also tatramajjhataṭā, is an ethical quality belonging to the sankhara group and therefore should not be counted with indifferent feeling (adukkha-masukha-vedanā). Upekkhā is one of the four sublime states and one of the factors of enlightenment".

Here, I wish to argue that it is for this kind of situation to purify and refine emotion that one should develop mindfulness first before practicing Brahma-vihāra, not using Brahma-vihāra as merely protective of mindfulness. This is actually what suttas such as the Sāmaññaphala-sutta and the Tevijja-sutta suggest. First, one establishes oneself in morality (sīla), before following the practice of guarding the senses (indriya-samvara) and mindfulness in all postures (sati-sampajañña); both are commonly recommended by most vipassana meditation masters today as part of vipassana practice. These three practices are supposed to help one deal with desire (abhijjha) and aversion (domanassa), two strong emotions that all forms of the four Satipatthana mindfulness practices are designed to overcome (vineyya loke abhijjhā-domanassam).<sup>15</sup> When these two emotions are overcome at their gross level, contentment arises and the five hindrances can be managed because they are one way or another rooted or manifested in these two.

At this point, according to the Sāmaññaphala-sutta and the Tevijja-sutta, emotions become largely positive; qualities such as satisfaction (pāmojja), rapture (pīti), calm (passaddhi) and happiness (sukha) develop. They in turn condition concentration (samādhi) to arise. This is the time to develop the Brahma-vihāra, according to the suttas. The concentration achieved at this level is conducive to the development of jhāna. So, this is how the suttas describe the practice of the Brahma-vihāra with jhānic states.

Here a crucial point should be repeated: because mostly current vipassana meditation traditions use Brahma-vihāra only as a supportive meditation for vipassana, many do not dedicate enough time to the Brahma-vihāra practice. Contrary to this trend, many of the suttas in the Sīlakkhandha-vagga of the Digha-nikāya seem to suggest that practices such as the satipatthāna or mindfulness, should come first in order to deal with two dominant negative emotions: desire (abhijjhā) and aversion (domanassam), which I have translated as covetousness and destructive mind earlier.

My own personal view is that *karuṇā* (compassion) based on mindfulness manages and finally eradicates aversion; in other words, it transforms the habit-energy of aversion into compassion; and *muditā* (joy) established on mindfulness transforms the energy of desire into pure joy. In brief, the practice helps one to replace aversion and desire with compassion and joy, respectively. To have achieved a stable and balanced point between these two emotions is *upekkhā*. *Upekkhā* obviously requires more concentration and mindfulness; it is about responding to suffering with compassion without diminishing the ability to feel joyous when necessary, and about responding to good fortune of oneself and others with joy without diminishing the ability to feel the pain of others as the occasion arises. To be able to do that at the most difficult situation and for the most difficult person i.e. enemy is to have finally overcome ego.

From this brief discussion, one can see that Theravada Buddhist canonical literature is endowed with a comprehensive way of practice for compassion that at the same time transform selfish energy into selfless one, based on a worldview that sees things as they are. However, the practice tradition in many cases may not have given sufficient attention to the development of compassion.

So, it is clear to us that if we take *Brahma-vihāra* not on its own, but as part of the whole meditation practices as in the suttas, or to put it the other way round, if we take *vipassana* as part of the whole meditation process that firmly includes *Brahma-vihāra*, we will avoid what Gombrich describes as the problem of “literalism” in Theravada Buddhism. And, it may also make sense that “compassion and kindness” can be considered “a means to enlightenment”, whether or not we go as far as taking “living with Brahman” in the *Tevijja-sutta* to mean nirvana as he suggested in his famous Gonda Lecture at the Royal Netherland Academy of Arts and Sciences.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Vipassana Shu-nee Kyan* (A Manual on the Techniques of Vipassana Practice), Vol. 1, 2008; p. 232. This two-volume work contains the vipassana meditation techniques and their explanations as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw. It has been translated into English under the title *A Practical Way of Vipassana* and published by the Buddha Sasana-nuggaha Organization, Yangon in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> She has been practicing and teaching metta meditation more than many others in the Theravada tradition in the West.

<sup>3</sup> I follow Richard Gombrich’s translation here and use non-changing self, instead of self. In the suttas, the word *atta* is usually accompanied with words such as *nicco*, *dhuvo avipariṇāmadhammo*.

- <sup>4</sup> Mogok Sayadaw, *Thitsar laypah tayah-daw* [The Four Noble Truths]. Pp. 242–3.
- <sup>5</sup> Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin; flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys; heart, liver, membranes, spleen, lungs; bowels, intestines, gorge, dung, brain; bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat; tears, grease, snot, spittle, oil of the joints and urine.
- <sup>6</sup> Earth, water, air/ wind, fire, blue/ green colour, yellow colour, red colour, white colour, enclosed space and bright light).
- <sup>7</sup> *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*. Pp. 406–10.
- <sup>8</sup> “sublime or divine state of mind”, blissful meditation (exercises on a, altruistic concepts; b, equanimity; see on these meditations).
- <sup>9</sup> There are four protective meditations (caturā-rakkha): loving-kindness meditation (metta), meditation on the loathsome nature of the body (asubha), meditation on the Buddha (Buddhānussati) and meditation on death (maranassati).
- <sup>10</sup> Pa Auk Tawya Sayadaw, *Light of Wisdom: Meditation in Pa Auk Forest Monastery*, Kuala Lumpur: Wisdom Audio Visual Exchange, 1997. P. 52.
- <sup>11</sup> “You must use loving-kindness. When angry states of mind arise in meditation, balance them by developing feelings of loving-kindness”. *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*. P. 271.
- <sup>12</sup> “Examine these five khandhas as they come and go. You will see clearly that they are impermanent, that this impermanence makes them unsatisfactory and undesirable, and that they come and go of their own—there is no ‘self’ running things”. *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*. P. 221.
- <sup>13</sup> Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), *Khun pitah martah* (The Gratitude of Parents). Pp. 26–7; *Phum tham chao phut* (The Foundation of Dhamma for Buddhists). Pp. 14–8. Pa Auk Tawya Sayadaw, *Light of Wisdom*. Pp. 50–57.
- <sup>14</sup> Some take upekkhā in the seven factors of enlightenment to mean a special state in the Vipassana meditation process, that is the feeling of indifference towards the conditioned phenomena, sakhārupekkha. By this, one seems to remove upekkhā from the Brahma-vihāra.
- <sup>15</sup> Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta, DN.

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