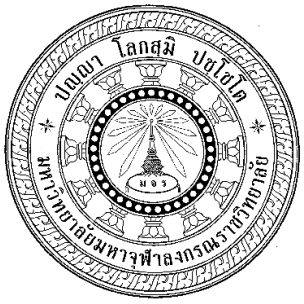

Research Report

Meditation Masters of Thailand and Myanmar: Their Teachings and Methods of Practice for Awakening

พระวิปัสสนาจารย์: วิถีคำสอนและแนวปฏิบัติเพื่อการตื่นรู้ของชาวพุทธไทยและเมียนมาร์

by

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dipti Visuddhangkoon

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus

B.E. 2559

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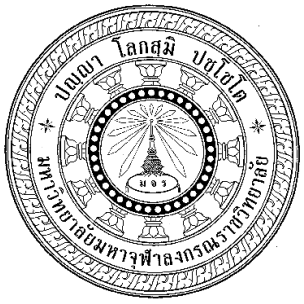

รายงานการวิจัย

เรื่อง

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โดย

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มหาวิทยาลัยมหาจุฬาลงกรณราชวิทยาลัย วิทยาเขตขอนแก่น

พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๙

ได้รับทุนอุดหนุนการวิจัยจากมหาวิทยาลัยมหาจุฬาลงกรณราชวิทยาลัย

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Research Title: Meditation Masters of Thailand and Myanmar: Their Teachings and Methods of Practice for Awakening

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed at an analytical study of the teachings and methods of practice of meditation masters from Thailand and Myanmar with three main objectives – i) to do an analytical study of the unique features in the teachings of six outstanding meditation masters of Thailand and Myanmar, ii) to trace the trajectories of their spiritual roadmaps and methods of practice, and iii) to understand their unique role and assess their impact in terms of psychological benefit and mental development.

This is a qualitative research using the ethico-spiritual, philosophical and literary perspective. The scope of the research is limited to the study of six outstanding meditation masters from Thailand and Myanmar. The study encompasses the survey through documents/texts as well as participatory observation of the aspects of preservation and propagation of the great traditions of meditation practice in the monasteries founded by the masters.

The research provides an in-depth study of the teachings and meditation methods of three Thai meditation masters namely, Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and Somdet Aj Asabhamahathera. All the three masters' teachings, mode of practice as reflected in and through their dhamma practice, way of life, meditation methods and dhamma talks are taken into consideration for an analytical exegesis. It has been found that the great teachings of the Thai meditation masters are bereft of ritualistic excesses and have helped preserve Buddhism in its pure and pristine form. At the same time the teachings seem to go beyond certain contemporary philosophical outlook in their

rigorous dismantling of binary thought constructions, especially in the teachings of Ajahn Chah. On the Burmese side, the research makes an in-depth study of the teachings and meditation techniques of Mingun Sayadaw, Taungpulu Sayadaw, and Mahashi Sayadaw. Different meditation techniques of the three masters that are discussed are – the focus on Satipaṭṭhāna by Mingun Sayadaw, the 32 body parts by Taungpulu Sayadaw and the mindfulness cultivation through the focus on the movement of the abdomen and the mental noting of the falling and rising of the movement by Mahasi Sayadaw. It has been found that each of the different techniques is unique and is a powerful way to train the mind to develop mindfulness. Just like the Thai meditation masters, the Burmese masters' great teachings too are bereft of ritualistic excesses and have greatly helped preserve Buddhism in its pure and pristine form, both in the context of *pariyatti* as well as *patipatti*. The research provides some concluding remarks on the benefit the world can reap from the teachings and different meditation methods of both the Thai and Burmese meditation masters and winds up with suggestions for further research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Most Venerable Assoc. Prof. Dr. Suthito Aphakaro, director of the Buddhist Research Institute, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, for approving my research proposal and providing a research grant for the fiscal year 2016 (BE 2559). Without his words of encouragement and the grant it would have been very difficult to undertake this research. I would also like to thank Venerable Chutipak for showing interest in the project and also answering my numerous research related questions from time to time. A special word of thanks goes to Asst. Prof. Dr. Khamhaeng Visuddhangkoon from Khon Kaen University for providing great help in locating research documents and accompanying me on numerous visits over the last few years to many Thai forest tradition monasteries in northeast Thailand. As I listen and read the dhamma talks of the forest tradition monks, deep in my heart I feel an immeasurable sense of gratitude to Thailand. Many well-wishers and pious Buddhists were very kind to lend me many books on the teachings and meditation practices of both the Thai and Burmese lineages. A few of my Buddhist friends and colleagues from Thailand and abroad were extremely helpful in answering my questionnaire very promptly. I remain grateful to each and every one of them.

And finally a word of appreciative thanks to my children Fronk and Frank for being patient and bearing with my tight schedule. May the Triple Gem bless them both!

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dipti Visuddhangkoon

Contents

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and rationale

Buddhism teaches that to understand the Four Noble Truths – suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to its complete extinction – is to see reality as it truly is. From the Buddhist perspective, reality is marked by the all pervading three-fold characteristics of existence that is called *tilakkhaṇa* in Pali and which comprises of impermanance, (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-substantiality (*anattā*). In order to understand reality, the practitioner needs to practice meditation since reality is grounded on the perspective of non-substantialism and is understood not in terms of subjectivism of the individual self and its interaction with the world, but rather the objective understanding of the network of interdependently arising cause and effect continually coming into existence and subsiding.

Science and technology have brought tremendous changes in our society and our overall approach to life to the extent where we tend to fail to internalize the truth of reality in the Buddhist sense. Today, at the click of a small electronic device or a mere touch on a screen we can instantly know what is happening in the other end of the world, but not necessarily the effect it has on our thinking. Due to rapid changes ushered in by the application of science and technology, some of the beliefs and traditions that were once cherished by people in the past have gradually lost their significance. In our own society, the trend is to compete for ever new avenues of adapting to the ways of science and technology – under the guise of modernization, development and advancement along the trends set in the developed countries. While the adaptation to a westernized way of life has brought certain developments in the infrastructure, convenience and standard of living, there is also a darker side to it, which involves a gradual erosion of certain socio-cultural values that were once tied to deep-rooted Buddhist way of practice and living. So, it is obvious that although majority of the population in such ASEAN member countries like Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar believes in Buddhism, a relatively small section of the population these days truly understands the value and observes the core Buddhist

teachings on the Five Precepts and the Noble-Eightfold Path. Trapped in the race for a highly consumerist and neo-capitalist trend, a *communal amnesia* is likely to set in that would in course of time adversely affect the Buddhist *weltanschauung*, as pristine religious and socio-cultural values are seen to be drifting away and being abruptly replaced by a new set of values that places the cult of adoring the individual ego and its material success at the forefront. The culture of many Buddhist countries is fetishized and exoticized to meet the ever-growing demands of the tourism industry, while simultaneously putting people's true commitment and solidarity towards their own identity at stake. Such a trend also harbors the perils of viewing and judging oneself and one's own culture through the lens of others that in the long run might subsequently give rise to an ambience of diffidence and pseudo imitation.

The situation being such, it is rather difficult to gauge the future trend. Before it is too late, it is perhaps wise to take a look at some of the outstanding meditation masters of ASEAN, the ASEAN Buddhist cultural origins and how it has nurtured great minds, who put into real practice the Buddhist way of life and have become perennial sources of inspiration and spiritual guidance through their determination, perseverance and reflective understanding of the Dhamma. Spreading Buddhadhamma means not only talking about Buddhist ideas, and suttas, but also revealing the spirit of dhamma in daily life, and expanding and illuminating dhamma in society. This is the real meaning of spreading the Dhamma.

When we take a close look at the unique teachings, trajectories of the spiritual paths and methods of teaching and various dhamma propagation projects and activities of some outstanding mediation masters of ASEAN, especially Thailand and Myanmar, what immediately comes to our notice is a persistent effort at reviving, restoring and revitalizing Buddhism despite the restrictions imposed by time and situations on the dhamma dissemination work of monastic leaders. In our study we will include some of the most outstanding meditation masters who have had great impact not only on Thailand and Myanmar and the ASEAN countries but also on the global community, for instance, the Theravada Forest Tradition meditation masters like Mingun Sayadaw, Taungpulu Sayadaw, Ajahn Chah, on the one hand, and monks with strong foundation of both canonical studies and vipassana, on the other hand, like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Somdet Aj Asabhamahathera from Thailand, and Mahasi Sayadaw from

Myanmar. Most of them were the founding abbots of well-known monasteries that have flourished as centers of insight or vipassana meditation. All of them are today recognized as highly respected meditation masters in their tradition for their multi-faceted and strategic dhamma propagation measures. Their charismatic personalities and multifarious dhamma dissemination projects have inspired both the younger and the older generation alike. To sum up, through decades of hard work and dedicated efforts each of them have successfully set the trend of reviving, restoring, reinvigorating and revitalizing Buddhism in their specific countries and across the globe, especially in overseas monasteries and meditation centers directly founded by them or by their monastic disciples.

1.2 Objectives of the research

The present research entitled "Meditation Masters of Thailand and Myanmar: Their Teachings and Methods of Practice for Awakening" had three main objectives – i) To do an analytical study of the unique features in the teachings of outstanding meditation masters of Thailand and Myanmar; ii) To trace the trajectories of their spiritual roadmaps and methods of practice; iii) To understand their unique role and assess their impact in terms of psychological benefit and mental development.

1.3 Scope of the research

The scope of the research is limited to the study of the lives in brief, trajectories of spiritual paths, dhamma talks and various meditation techniques and methods of the aforementioned six outstanding meditation masters from Thailand and Myanmar. The study encompasses the survey through documents/texts as well as participatory observation at different monasteries of the aspects of propagation, protection and preservation of the great traditions of meditation practice for the significant role of enhancement of both the local as well as the global community's understanding of the timeless teachings and practice along the paths set forth by the six outstanding meditation masters with a prime focus on the cultivation of ethical values, concentration, wisdom and overall enhancement of quality of life.

1.4 Review of Literature

Many scholars have taken interest in the socio-political and religio-cultural history of the member countries of ASEAN, but almost none have done any research on the legacy of outstanding individual meditation masters and their distinct contributions in reviving, restoring and revitalizing Buddhism in the present time from the comparative and cross-cultural perspectives. This research aims at merging or filling this academic hiatus. The only book available to date is Jack Kornfield's *Living Buddhist Masters*, in which the writer included well-known vipassana meditation masters from Thailand and Myanmar. In our research we have included three meditation masters from Thailand and three from Myanmar who have practiced in the lineage of Theravāda Forest Tradition in both the countries. However, it must be noted that there is great diversity in the teaching approach of the monks, for example, Buddhadasa while sincerely upholding the core Buddhist teachings on *tilakkhaṇa*, have simultaneous maintained a very distinctly eclectic approach, drawing inspiration from the Theravāda and Mahayana traditions as well as current socio-cultural ideologies and doctrinal theories.

Yet at another level, while some monks like Mahashi Sayadaw were fluent in many languages, others like Ajahn Chah were uniquely monolingual delivering dhamma talks mostly in the Isan dialect of Northeast Thailand interspersed by few central Thai words and had no access to any Western language when he was a young novice. In spite of this linguistic barrier, Ajahn Chah had turned out to be one of the most successful meditation masters of the twentieth century whose teachings spread far and wide across the globe[1] and whose ordained monastic disciples and those joining later after the demise of the Master are from all the six continents – Europe, North America, South America, Africa, Australia and Asia. This study, therefore, will delve deep into such matters of subtle differences as well as uniqueness in the teachings, trajectories of the spiritual paths, diverse teaching methods of the masters and the impact of their teachings at the regional and global scale.

[1] His dhamma talks, originally delivered in Thai-Isan, are earlier being translated into thirteen different languages. The Khonkaen Campus of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University takes the pride to contribute the fourteenth language translation by undertaking the project of translating his timeless teachings from the book "Living Dhamma" into Khmer under the initiation of the present researcher.

Recently, some interests have been shown by scholars to undertake comparative studies of linguistic, philosophy and Buddhism. However, most of the published books and articles invariably focus on a comparison between deconstructionist mode of linguistic and philosophical practice and Mahayana Buddhism. Robert Magliola in his book *Derrida on the Mend* argues the correlation of "Derridean differentialism" and "Buddhist differentialism" as reflected in Nagarjuna's explication of the concept of *sunyata*[2]. In his article "Derrida and the Decentered Universe of Chan/Zen Buddhism" Steve Odin offers a comparative study of Derrida's critical strategy of decentering and the differential logic of acentric Zen Buddhism. Similar studies have been undertaken by a few Chinese, Korean and Japanese scholars. Jin Y. Park, for instance, in her latest book entitled *Buddhism and Postmodernity*: *Zen, Huayan, and the Possibility of Postmodern Ethics* while comparing French postmodernism seeks to develop the radical implications of a Zen/Huayan dependent co-arising for a global ethic. Arguing from Buddhist causality's *inexhaustibility* Park brings the full impact of Buddhist openness to bear, so that finality is abrogated and compassion privileged. In another of her edited text, *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, the essays seriously engage the philosophical parallels between Buddhism and deconstruction by focusing on the profound and subtle implications of the Buddhist notions of dependent arising, emptiness and the two truths, by bringing them together with deconstruction to address such problems as self and identity, language, and referentiality. In Youru Wang's edited *Deconstruction and the ethical in Asian Thought* effort has been made by each of the contributing authors to focus on the ethical turn within deconstructionist theorizing and comparing it to South and East Asian philosophical texts in the light of the later Derrida and Levinas, exploring the ways in which strategies of deconstructive or "aporetic" ethics have been in operation for centuries in Asian thinking.

In Thailand, although no serious comparative study of Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa and Somdet Aj from the philosophical perspective vis-à-vis the Sayadaws of Myanmar has yet been undertaken; a few post-graduate student-monks of the

[2] Robert Magliola, **Derrida on the Mend**, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1984).

Buddhist University have shown some interest lately in the works of the forest tradition monks, especially Ajahn Chah. Phramaha Somphorn Abhakaro (Laochalad) in his master's dissertation entitled *Kan Sueksa Upama Upamai Nai Khamson Khong Phra Bodhiyana Thera* (A study of the simile discussion of Phra Bodhiyanathera) has discussed four outstanding characteristics of simile discussion style of Phra Bodhiyanathera. The findings from the research suggest that there are four emphases – 1) the way into the real purpose of Buddhism, 2) explanation for deep understanding, 3) it involves applied teaching depending on place, chance, environment of individual, personal manner and behavior, 4) the method of simile is easy to understand and has concrete evidence besides being beautiful, polite and profound.

Phramaha Amornwich Jagaramedhi (Bootsorn) in his master's dissertation entitled *Sueksa Technique Kan Phaiphae Phra Buddhasana Khong Phra Bodhiyanathera (Chah Subhaddo)* (A study of Ajahn Chah's techniques in propagation of Buddhism) has discussed five important techniques namely – 1) delivery of discourse, 2) setting examples, 3) use of metaphors, 4) question-answer style of teaching and 5) encouraging western monks to teach westerners. Ajahn Chah would usually deliver a discourse from an actual experience using simple language and there would always be a challenge to put it into practice. He would held to the principle of "do as you teach and teach as you do" (*yathavadhi tathkari*) by creating models favourable for practicing the religious precepts and led his disciples in performing the routine known as "act to be followed, live to be seen" throughout his life of propagation.

The outstanding feature of Ajahn Chah's teachings is that they are easy to understand and have concrete evidence. This is because he would always raise similes and metaphors about people and animals, and things from the closest proximity and events whenever he delivered dhamma talks. The question-answer style of his teaching is similar to those used by other teachers with the only difference that he had an outstanding and unique method i.e., he had a stratagem in asking a question and answering a question. From my close reading of Ajahn Chah's dhamma talks, I have realized that this unique stratagem of Ajahn Chah's anwering and re-questioning arises from his observant and vigilant character. His sincere and consistent practice of

vipassana meditation had made him mindful of all conditioned phenomena, be it mental or physical and this mindfulness was used as a tool to probe deep into his own thoughts as well as those of others. That is why when questions were posed to him on various aspects of the practice, he could respond spontaneously in a way that made even the most difficult aspect of dhamma crystal clear. While the aforementioned books in English played the pioneering role of opening up vistas of fruitful deconstructionist mode of reading and dialogue between the East and the West, no endeavor is yet made to extend the comparative outlook to encompass the Theravadin tradition directly and the great diversity in approach of many of the lineage's great Masters.

1.5 Methodology and research tools

This is a qualitative research that has used the ethico-religious, literary and philosophical perspectives in analyzing the dhamma talks, spiritual trajectories, teaching methods, and dhamma propagation of the Venerables with a focus on the following research materials, tools and methods – i) Related texts on Buddhism and literary theory in general and Buddhist philosophy and literature in particular, ii) Interviews of the Venerables and their well-known disciples available in books and different websites, iv) Interviews of academics, lay practitioners and devotees, and v) Survey visits, observation of practice and participation in meditation retreats at some of the main monasteries and branch monasteries of the meditation masters of the Thai Theravāda Forest Tradition (although not all the masters are included in the research) namely, Wat Pah Suthawat (Ajahn Mun), Wat Pah Buritthata Thirawat (Ajahn Mun), Wat Pah Don That (Ajahn Sao), Wat Pah Phu Kham (Ajahn Thate), Wat Hin Mark Paeng (Ajahn Thate), Wat Nong Pah Pong (Ajahn Chah), Wat Pah Nanachat (Ajahn Chah), Wat Baan Taad (Ajahn Maha Buwa), Wat Pah Rattanawan (Ajahn Sumedho) Wat Suanmokkhabalarama (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu), Wat Mahathat (Somdet Aj Asabhamahathera), Mahasi Monastery, Yangon (Mahasi Sayadaw), Myanyinzu Pagoda in Tezu (Taungpulu Sayadaw), Panditarama Forest Meditation Center, Yangon (Sayadaw U Pandita), Pa-Auk Tawya Meditation Centre (Pa Auk Sayadaw) and many monasteries in and around Mandalay and Bagan.

Minute attention being given to the dhamma talks from a literary perspective leading to a clear exposition of all the different figures of speech such as similes, metaphors etc., especially in the teachings of Ajahn Chah and Taungpulu Sayadaw both of whom use simple but profound metaphoric language.

1.6 Expected benefit from the research

This research will be of much benefit in understanding the contributions, timeless teachings and the impact of outstanding meditation masters of Thailand and Myanmar in propagation of Buddhism in the region and across the globe. The preliminary result of the research indicates an in-depth understanding of the diverse teachings and method of practice of leading meditation masters of Thailand and Myanmar. The intermediate results have led to a comparative understanding of their teachings and methods. And the final goal results of the research have culminated in the understanding of the core essence of the timeless teachings and the significance of the methods of practice of the selected Masters, both from Thailand and Myanmar.

Chapter 2

BUDDHISM IN THAILAND AND MYANMAR

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a brief outline of Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar as related to the socio-cultural and spiritual spheres. The strengthening of the foundational base of Buddhism during the reign of different kings and rulers led to the Kingdom of Thailand and Burma (Myanmar) give rise to a unique culture, way of thinking and belief system. The direct effect from the core teachings or principles of Buddhism is manifested in the complacent lifestyle, a sense of self-effacing and self-sacrifice, merit-making in diverse forms, kind-heartedness, broad-mindedness, ready willingness to listen to the reasons of others, all of which have positively contributed towards making the Thai and Burmese people earn great love and respect from others.

Regarding social relationship Buddhism has led to very close psychological ties between the rulers and their subjects through the principles of good governance of the rulers over the ruled. Thus it is evident that the royal portfolios included the preservation of Buddhism through the building of temples and monasteries that has led to the close relationship with the people. In addition, Buddhism played the role of helping the society in diverse ways such as inspirational counseling and general education of the public. Buddhism never experienced any major set-back in Thailand and Myanmar. The monastic community has a very close relationship with society since the binding link between the society and Buddhism is the nation and religion itself in the case of both the countries. The preliminary observations from collected data on Buddhism and its history, culture and social relationship in Thailand and Myanmar show that the historical origin of Buddhism in both the countries has a strong bond with the citizens. The rulers from ancient times had laid the foundation of practice and living in accordance with the Buddhist teachings in an exemplary way that has led to the culture and social relationship go hand in hand. The way of living, culture and tradition followed a unifying pattern and were well preserved from the good old days. In addition, the ordained community of monks and novices adapted itself to changing roles once there were political changes within the countries. The most remarkable factor was that the monastic Order performed a leading role in every

aspect, as for instance, under absolute monarchy the monks and novices preserved Buddhism, offered ethical counseling and inspired the laity in their roles as spiritual leaders. That is why although Buddhism received quite a setback during the colonial era in Myanmar, it could emerge once again as a unifying force in society. From our preliminary observations it can be concluded that despite changing historical tides, political upheavals and crises in Myanmar and Thailand from time to time, Buddhist history, culture and social relationship continued to have a strong bonding link to the people in both the countries. For instance, on weekends in most countries, people engage in recreational activities like watching a movie, partying with friends, having dinner with relatives, going on a ride, and perhaps clubbing or dancing for the younger. But in Myanmar, Saturday night often means visiting the local pagoda, taking the five precepts, paying homage to the Triple Gem and reciting their favorite parittas. People come individually, in families, with neighbors and friends, even with coworkers and colleagues, to pay respects to the Buddha for his timeless and profound teachings. Pagodas are open to all, regardless of income and status – a free place to enjoy a moment of silence amid pristine beauty and cleanliness and concentrate the mind in a moment of meditation.

2.2 The current situation of Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar

Here we present three prevalent orientations, namely, popular Buddhism, meditation or mindfulness-oriented Buddhism and rationalist-humanist Buddhism, and finally discuss the deviated practices in vogue at the present moment, both among the monastics as well as the lay community, especially in the context of Thailand, which the Venerables included in the research greatly opposed and in their role as meditation masters tried to guide the lay community to avoid such practices.

The population of both Thailand and Myanmar mostly follows Theravāda Buddhism, which is amalgamated with elements of animism in some rural areas. It is generally known that the Theravāda Buddhist tradition is composed of many different strands and types of monasteries. Most villages and towns have at least one monastery, which might serve as a place for ceremony, prayer, cultural activity, education and medicine. Monasteries differ widely and express a range of functions

and approaches to monastic life. Some monasteries focus on chanting and ceremonies; some on study and intellectual pursuits; some on healing and blessings; some on practice and meditation; some cater to local superstitious beliefs and magic. In city monasteries, monks are often encouraged to focus on textual, canonical or secular studies and administrative duties, with perhaps relatively less time devoted to meditation practice.

There are several practical orientations in regards to the practice of Theravāda Buddhism in both Thailand and Myanmar. Three main orientations identified and highlighted in our discussion below:

Popular Buddhism

In this form of Buddhism there is a heavy admixture of socio-cultural and religious practices associated with Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism. This form of Buddhism that is practiced at the grassroot level is part of the rural set-up and folk way of life and appears to give great emphasis to faith, worship, rites and rituals. This is seen in such practices as the Buddha-pujās (ritualistic offering of food and other things to statues of the Buddha), worship of relics, chanting of suttas as magic incantations, and dedication and transferring of merit to deceased family members, relatives and ancestors. For instance, the twelve distinct ceremonies of Northeast Thailand (Isan) known as *Prapheni Heet Sibsong* that marks the entire lunar calendar can be categorized as popular Buddhism.[3] Ideally, each of these ceremonies is an occasion for merit-making, observance of the precepts, and cultivation of morality (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Based on Buddhist principles, each ceremony in the entire corpus of *Prapheni Heet Sibsong* points towards a gradual progress along the spiritual path, and has since time immemorial formed the warp and woof of the traditional Isan way of life. Although Isan is generally regarded as the poorest and the most 'underdeveloped' region in the country, a close look at how the northeasterners have entwined their lives with the twelve-month tradition reveals the

[3] Boonkhaokam, Boonkhunlarn, Boonkhaojee, Boonphraves, Boonsongkran, Boonbang-fai, Boonchamha or Boonberkbaan, Boonkhaophansā, Boonkhao Padabdin, Boonkhaosak, Boon Orkphansa, Boon Kathin. For detail description of each of these ceremonies see **Morodok Thai Isan (Heritage of Thai-Isan)** ed. Phrakhrusuthep et.al, (Khonkaen:,Klangnanatham Publication, BE 2544).

richness of the Buddhist ethico-religious and cultural heritage that has remained intact to the present day.

While the ceremonies incorporated within the *Prapheni Heet Sibsong* can be linked to many core Buddhist principles, popular Buddhism in both Thailand and Myanmar has witnessed many other ceremonial rituals that are a direct admixture of a community's interpretation and appropriation of diverse elements from Brahmanism, Buddhism and animism. In the case of Thailand, most Buddhists today confine themselves to ritualistic worshipping and acts of merit-making more than any reflective practice of dhamma in daily life. Across the country great emphasis has been laid on the structural expansion of *Buddhadhamma*, starting from the construction of huge Buddha images, meditation halls, elaborately decorated temples and convenient monastic dwellings. The message of selfless renunciation, which forms the core essence of Right Thought (*sammā saṅkappa*), an essential factor leading to wisdom as incorporated in the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-atthaṅgika-magga*), is at times completely lost from the scene.

Meditation or Mindfulness focused Buddhism

An important focus of this kind of Buddhism is the practice of insight or *vipassanā* meditation in order to arrive at a true understanding of the core teachings of Buddhism. Both Thailand and Myanmar have been the home of many great meditation masters whose strict adherence to monastic disciplinary codes and practice of *vipassanā* or insight meditation bereft of ritualistic excesses has helped preserve Buddhism in its pure and pristine form. In the recent past, Buddhism as a social institution has undergone tremendous changes as Thailand began to adapt itself to the process of modernization under the swaying influence of both capitalism and consumerism while Myanmar under the impact of colonial hardship and post-colonial transition tried to keep Buddhism safe and strong as ever before.

Despite tremendous changes affecting modern-day Thai urban society, Thailand has been rather fortunate to have begotten many great meditation masters like Luangpoo Mun, Luangpoo Sao, Luangpoo Thate, Luangpho Chah, Luangpoo Khao,

Luangta Maha Buwa and others.[4] These monks who underwent rigorous self-training through the practice of insight meditation and close scrutiny of the mind with reflective and rationalistic understanding of the Buddha's teachings of the Four Noble Truths (*ariyasacca*) and the three characteristics of existence (*tilakkhana*) – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-substantiality (*anattā*), have come to epitomize the true Buddhist way of living which is marked by such characteristics as non-clinging, egolessness, mindfulness, equanimity, compassion and contentment.

The praxis of mental well-being that has been developed and nurtured under the aegis of the forest tradition monks have set up the solid foundation for holistic well-being of the individual and the community in relation to the social and natural environment. The universality in the praxis can be applied at any time and situation by any interested person irrespective of religious and cultural background. Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike can gain from the teachings because the underlying messages embodied in them are free from sectarianism. The universal garb of the teachings can be understood from the praxis of mental well-being developed by these monks, the different levels at which their practice benefitted the mind, and their contemplative thinking which can be beneficially put into practice for solving various problems at the global level.

In the case of Myanmar, the Vipassana movement revived and revitalized my such great meditation masters like Ledi Sayadaw, Mingun Sayadaw, Taungpulu Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw and their numerous followers have helped the pristine method of mental development gain renewed interest and gave Buddhism a direction that became widely accepted world-wide. All the Sayadaws dedicated effort helped counter the setbacks Buddhism had once received under the impact of colonialism.

Rationalist-Humanist Buddhism

An important focus of this kind of Buddhism is its secularism and ethical orientation. Monks are seen as Buddhist professionals who could devote their time to

[4] In Thailand, laypeople address a senior monk with such honorifics as *luangpoo* or *luangta* (venerable grandfather), *luangpho* (venerable father), or *ajahn* (variously spelt as *ajarn*, *ajan*, *achaan* and meaning respected teacher).

the intellectual and moral uplift of people and to advance and apply Buddhist thinking into new areas. Rationalist-Humanist Buddhism and Meditation/Mindfulness-oriented Buddhism do not vary much in their ethical approach. But in Meditation/Mindfulness-oriented Buddhism the focus is directly placed on meditation practice only and the effort at spiritual advancement along this path; whereas, Rationalist-Humanistic Buddhism incorporates other practices along with meditation such as the pursuit of canonical or scriptural studies, applying the knowledge from this to solve socio-cultural and political problems, etc Therefore, within this form of Buddhism is incorporated the framework of Buddhist leadership that ideally unites the individual spiritual quest and the ideological commitment of leading this quest to forge social benefits.

The scope of Rationalist-Humanistic Buddhism encompasses Buddhist leadership that operates not on a unidimensional level alone, but rather manifests itself on multidimensional planes along the trajectory of a self-oriented 'gesture' of spiritual search and a socially-committed ideological stance. Within this individual-social nexus the realization of such truths as the *tilakkhaṇa* through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation and the development of a mindset bestowed by the sublime qualities of *mettā, karunā, muditā* and *upekkhā* function in tandem. Besides, strict conformity to Vinaya is the hallmark of Buddhist leadership that is clearly reflected in the life and ideological standpoint of Venerable Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera, a well-known monk from Thailand who genuinely tried to strengthen the Thai Sangha's administrative role by creatively fusing the two monastic tasks namely, the task of learning or *gantha-dhura* and the task of meditation practice or *vipassanā-dhura*.

The core essence of Buddhism is manifested at a very high level firstly, in Meditation/Mindfulness-oriented Buddhism and secondly, in Rationalist-Humanist Buddhism. Regarding popular Buddhism, it cannot be claimed that the core essence of Buddhism gets expressed at a spirituo-intellectual level, since a close observation of the canonical texts vis-à-vis the practice of rites and rituals at the popular Buddhism level draws a rather contradictory picture. Yet, it cannot be denied that through popular Buddhism the faith and generosity of many Buddhists get manifested in it own

unique way.[5] The essence of Buddhism is that it is a middle path, not advocating irrational adherence to any particular extreme or positioning oneself in an either/or situation. While Buddhism at the fundamental level emphasizes the ethical, scientific, and humanistic aspects, however, it depends on the Buddhists themselves to strike the right balance keeping in mind that the essence of Buddhism is the search for enlightenment and the elimination of the roots of all unwholesome mental states and actions.

2.3 Transformation in the structure of Buddhism

At present, the state of Buddhism in Thailand has changed significantly due to external factors such as the tremendous impact of the materialist culture upon the way of life of many people. Much time is devoted to worshiping the sacred relics of the Buddha, chanting the *Suttas* as 'magic incantations' and transferring of merit to deceased ancestors instead of meditation practice and contemplative understanding of the core teachings of Buddhism. In some monasteries there are a lot of Hindu deities such as Lord Ganesh, Lord Brahma and other objects of worship and veneration mixed with cultic faith from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the maintenance of which have been mostly supported by the rich Sino-Thais.[6] Contrary to the Buddha's teachings, there is thus the worshipping of the Buddha images to acquire wealth, power, position, and advancement in career and all kinds of worldly gains rather than the focus on development of internal qualities in accordance with the Buddha's teachings.

As regards to the Dhamma, the Buddha taught the truths associated with the ultimate goal of religion itself, that is, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Dependent Origination, and the Three Characteristics of Existence. The teachings can lead to the attainment of the highest goal for the good of the individual

[5] Visuddhangkoon, Dipti. "Prapheni Heet Sibsong: The Tradition of Merit-making with Ethical Commitment to the 'Other'" in **Gift and Duty – Where Grace and Merit Meet**. ed. Paul H. De Neui, (Oregon: Resource Publications, 2017), pp.194-208.

[6] A very good example of such admixture is the temple "Dhamma Udyan" (Dhamma Garden) in Khonkaen.

and society as a whole bringing both internal and external happiness and peace. In fact, the teachings of the Buddha leads to enlightenment through self-realization.

But the common trend in the community in the present-day society is that people do not really take much interest in what they hear or practice pertaining to the achievement of the highest truth of liberation i.e., Nibbāna. The perusal or chanting from various Buddhist scriptures are intended only to gain pleasure at the surface level with the hope of having a haven in life or ascend to heaven after death. Even though Buddhism teaches a great deal about the release of the ego, identity and pride, cultivation of tolerance, compassion, love, forgiveness, peace, etc., what Buddhists are inclined to practice is more of a contrast to the teachings upholding a highly opinionated arrogance, intolerance to others' ideas, unforgiveness, violence etc.

The effect from globalization and consumerism has gripped many Sangha members' life-style too leading to violation of many disciplinary codes and also the flouting of renunciation. Many Theravada Buddhist monks have taken to pillion riding motor-cycles, driving cars, investing unmindfully on electronic and technological gadgets, etc. Amidst this rampant craze for materialism, many monastics have failed to uphold the Noble Eightfold Path, especially the two factors – Right Understanding (*sammāditthi*) and Right Thought (*sammāsaṅkappa*) that are essential for cultivating wisdom. The overall impact of monks' materialistic orientation has a deteriorating effect on the lay community's faith. To counter such unfortunate situations some forest monasteries like Wat Nong Pah Pong and Wat Pah Nanachat[7] strictly abide by the vinaya codes and have set a very good example in society by preserving the monastic tradition in its pristine form without having succumbed to the global trend of consumerism and materialism.

2.4 Factors affecting traditional religious set-up in Thai society

In the recent past, Buddhism in Thai society is seen to have undergone tremendous changes due to various ontological and empirical problems such as – problem of belief, problem of view and problem of practice. Generally speaking, Thai

[7] See the rules and regulations for practitioners, both lay and monastics, at the website www.watpahnanachat.org.

society is a belief-oriented society and sadly enough to a great extent some people have failed to draw a clear line of demarcation between belief and knowledge or rational thinking. While Buddhism is a rationalistic religion,[8] some Thai Buddhists' lack of rationality is a clear indication of lapses in both practice and thinking along the path upheld by the Buddha. This has an adverse effect on the true understanding and right interpretation of many Buddhist concepts such as *dāna* (merit-making), *kamma* (volitional actions), *upekkhā* (equanimity), humility, etc.

At the mundane level, most Thai people believe that merit can be accumulated through engagement in charitable acts alone. While generosity is highly adored in Buddhism, mere engagement in cash donations and other forms of charitable acts will accrue no benefit if morality is not practiced and the precepts are not willingly kept in daily life.[9] Some people wish to placate their evil deeds through generous acts while relapsing to the forbidden path time and again. It is a moral lapse or ethical blunder to think of charitable acts as substitute or palliative tool for the lack of ethical practice. According to Buddhism, no wholesome *kammic* results can be attained from generous acts if ethical conduct (*sīla*) and charity (*dāna*) do not work in tandem. In present day Thai society, misunderstanding of the law of *kamma* has led to a high degree of fetishization of the concept of merit-making, a trend that is instrumental in severing the ties between *sīla* and *dāna*. Nowhere in the canonical scriptures is there a mention of measuring the act of *dāna* with the actual amount or size of the donation. Hence merit-making and the accumulation of merit is not dependent on the ratio of materiality. Lack of concern for the canonical exegesis of *kamma* and merit-making on the part of the laity and also a large sector of powerful *Sangha* members has led to messing up of true Buddhist concepts with a consumerist tinge that has in a way created hierarchies in society among humble donors and the moneyed class intended on boastful acts of donation.

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[8] The *Kalama Sutta*, for instance, clearly urges the devotees to be rational and not follow the Dhamma with blind faith.

[9] Ajahn Chah comments on this dire situation of merit-making without keeping the precepts in a vivid way through the metaphor of the act of dying a dirty piece of cloth without washing it prior to dipping it into the dye. All one gets from this act of folly is a dirty dyed cloth.

Closely related to the misinterpretation of the concept of merit-making is the lack of clear reflective understanding of the concepts of *kamma* and *upekkhā*. Some people's never-ending craze for the lottery is an example that clearly depicts to what extent the concept of *kamma* has been misconstrued. While there is no room for incidental luck and overnight acquisition of wealth in the true Buddhist teachings, people's ceaseless effort at trying their luck for occasional financial gains through diverse sources of gambling has nurtured a cult of temptation that thrives on ever-growing greed – a trend that is in direct conflict with the wholesome qualities of contentment and moderation that Buddhism emphasizes. Individual greed has led to intellectual ossification and false and absurd logical associations such as: considering a person who wins the lottery as full of merit (*mii boon*). This absurdity pervades the general mindset to such an extent that it fuels the craze for lottery in an unabated manner.

Likewise, when faced with social injustice, at times the predicament is considered as an indication of the result of lack of one's own good *kamma* (*mai-mii-boon*). Such an attitude has a demoralizing effect on the individual since it obfuscates the faculty of decision-making, true judgment and determination to take action against many social evils and injustices. It also makes ineffective the true practice of *upekkhā*, an important dhammic principle which implies both mental balance (*tatramajjhattatā*) and a feeling of equanimity; neither pleasant-nor-unpleasant (*adukkhamasukha*). *Upekkhā* is not inaction or passivity; rather it is an internal quality (a mental force or energy) that renders balance to all our thinking, attitude, judgment and decision. It steers the mind-ship into clear waters, freeing it from many a hindrances arising from biases, prejudices and unwholesome mental formations rooted in a lack of clear comprehension of *anattā* or non-self. But quite contrary to what it should be, *upekkhā* is often misconstrued by some Buddhists as a state of inaction or passive tolerance or indifference to social evils and injustices. This has led to the increase of suffering at the individual level to an alarming scale.

The factors influencing practice are belief and view. According to Buddhism, the influential factors on human behavior are either wholesome (*kusala*) or unwholesome (*akusala*) and the outward human behavioral pattern is threefold; on the

positive side there is the absence of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) and on the negative side there is the presence of all the three qualities in varying degrees. Under the strong influence of both capitalist and consumerist mode of economic growth, the present day society is gripped by the threefold negative pattern with the element of avarice exerting the greatest pressure leading to inter-personal conflict and delusion. For instance, at present there is an insidious trend among some people to regard corruption as acceptable or trading of intoxicants and the sex industry as supportive of economic growth. However, looked at from the Buddhist perspective it is clear that involvement in any form of corruption leads to the breach of the Five Precepts (*pañca sīla*), for example, monetary corruption leads to the direct breach of the second and the fourth precepts namely, abstinence from stealing and abstinence from lying, not to say about the breach of the three other precepts namely, the first precept of abstinence from killing, the third precept of abstinence from sexual misconduct and the fifth precept of abstinence from intoxicants which involvement in narcotics and sex industry inevitably leads to.

Therefore, the present day society's unabashed approval of corruption is an anti-Buddhist stance that is detrimental to human growth and has dangerous repercussions in shaping the mindset of people. For instance, human development has come to be measured by the standard of material possession with wilful disregard for the source of income i.e., whether or not the flow of cash that leads to accumulation of wealth is in conformity to the Ethical Code (*sīla*) of Right Livelihood, Right Action and Right Speech encoded in the Noble Eightfold Path. Along with this has grown the desire for fulfillment in other spheres such as: maintenance of social status and hierarchy, fame, educational achievement by hook or by crook, ultimately leading to a dog-eat-dog situation which is quite contradictory to the Buddhist threefold training (*tisikkha*) that comprises of Ethical Conduct (*sīla*), Mindfulness (*samādhi*) and Wisdom (*paññā*).

The above discussed problems of belief, view and practice of some Thai people that have led to many misunderstanding of the essential teachings of Buddhism in a way have shattered the moral foundation of society and turned the entire edifice

upside down giving rise to a strong sense of alienation. Alienation has become the rule of the day and it is manifested in both religious and secular society alike.

For the ideal lay devotee, religion is thus no longer a source of inspiration or an example of goodness at the fundamental level. The direction in which present day society is heading is reflected in many research findings that clearly indicate that the institutions that have been traditionally sources of inspiration and exemplary goodness such as the family, educational institutions, and religion are today bogged down by internal deterioration and decay. With specific reference to the monastic order or *Sangha* it can be asserted that as long as monks don't strictly adhere to the disciplinary codes (*vinaya*) and cease to purposefully misconstrue the religion for individual gains, the *Sangha* will have no positive role to play in saving the society from the present-day ethical doldrums. In an ideal Buddhist community, the *Sangha* and the laity are not only inter-dependent but also mutually supportive of each other. In present day Thailand, however, the gap between the *Sangha* and the laity is widening with each group totally indifferent to the other. It is high time that the alienation caused by indifference and lack of concern and fruitful ethico-intellectual interactions be recognized as detrimental to both parties.

2.5 Ways to appropriate adaptation of Buddhism to the current situation

The misinterpretation and misappropriation of Buddhism that we have discussed so far cannot be annihilated if there is no concerted effort in the right way (*sammā vāyāma*) and right understanding (*sammā ditthi*) and if there is no appropriate method. All these problems can be solved by – i) the dialectical analysis method ii) reformative thinking and exegesis, and iii) right resolve.

Dialectical analysis – Buddhist dialectical analysis that involves *dhammaññutā* (knowing principles, knowing causes) and *atthaññutā* (knowing objectives, knowing results) is a rational approach. Buddhism upholds this analytical approach based on rationality and critical reflection and composed of diverse methods that rest on investigation of cause and factor, way to classification of composite factors, and the Four Noble Truths or the *ariyasacca* method. The Buddhist dialectical method begins with an investigation of the *origin* of any given problem, then proceeds to find and

verify the *cause* of it, next undertakes the investigative search for the *method* to solve it and finally finding the method and applying it for *solution* of a given problem with effective consequences.

Reformative thinking and exegeses – In order that problem-solving has increased effectiveness it is necessary that the existing problems are interpreted correctly in consistence with the system of nature, without any attempt at falsification or demystification. According to Buddhism, any thought or belief if carried out without realizing the significance or the real meaning is just another chain of exploitation/suppression and will increase suffering. This thought is clearly expressed in many canonical texts such as *Assalāyanasutta, Vāsetthasutta*, *Esukārīsutta* and *Madhurasutta*. The Buddha himself set the trend of new exegesis of many social problems, beliefs and systems of thought. The supremacy of the Brahmin caste was deconstructed by the Buddha by associating the quality of Brahmin to behavioral perfection instead of heredity. Similarly, the concept of worshiping different deities in six directions was re-interpreted in order to inculcate the sense of responsible interpersonal relationship and exchange among laypeople involved in different roles like employer – employee, parents – children, husband - wife.

Right Resolve – There should be full determination to practice along the right path. Once self-improvement is achieved through self-scrutiny, self-analysis and good internal factor (*yonisomanasikāra*) is established upon affixing meaning based on righteousness, real usefulness and ethical value, the next step is right resolve to practice in order to verify the expected result or effectiveness in solving the problem of annihilation of *dukkha*.

From the time Buddhism spread to Thailand it underwent many changes. Since the ancient time there was the influence of both Mahayana and Theravada with the latter coming to be the dominant sect in the present time. For instance, when the Northeast was part of the Lan Xang kingdom, Tham and Thainoi scripts were commonly used in manuscripts that preserved the Buddhist teachings. Later when the Northeast came to be part of the Thai kingdom, these ancient scripts were replaced by Thai. The present scenario has witnessed many different trends and Buddhism can be

seen to have many different orientations – popular Buddhism, meditation-based Buddhism and rationalist-humanist Buddhism. Popular Buddhism, practiced at the grassroot level encompasses great variety and admixture of elements from Brahmanism, Buddhism and animism and does not always reflect the essential teachings of Buddhism in a clear and pure form. Meditational Buddhism, on the other hand, practiced by ascetic monks from the Thai forest tradition has directed its focus on the practice of *vipassanā* meditation and have not deviated from the core teachings, since least attention is given to rites and ritual-oriented practice. Rationalist-humanist Buddhism is the third form of orientation that apart from focusing on meditation tries to emphasize on textual and canonical studies and applies the acquired knowledge to solve social problems.

While the three orientations that we have discussed here give a broad overview of the present-day scenario of Buddhism in Thai society in general, the impact of globalization and consumerism has affected the lay community as well as the monastic community to a great extent. Caught up in this, some monks have taken to materialistic orientation and a craving for power and money. Same is the case with the lay community that is seen to have faulted in belief, view and practice. However dire the present situation might be a rejuvenation of dialectical analysis, new exegesis and determination to follow the right path can help restore Buddhism in its true and pure form. Misinterpretation and misappropriation of core Buddhist teachings have led to many deviated forms of practice, some getting subsumed under popular Buddhism. The proliferation of deviated forms of practices weakens the structure of Buddhism. Faith in Buddhism is ideally expressed through one's refuge in the Triple Gems – Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. If the image of a deity like Ganesha or Brahma is worshipped alongside the Buddha image, the very concept of paying homage to the Triple Gem loses its significance for once and for all. Same is the case with popular ritualistic practices like Kae Kam, Sadok Kroh, Su-khwan that aim at placating the effect of evil actions, bad luck and omens. If one goes by the dhamma, the only way to end an evil action is by recognizing the three defilements – greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) and uprooting these will lead to the gradual decrease and end of any evil action. Ceremonial practices are meaningless and cannot bring any

changes to an evil action and its resultant effect. These are only escapist methods and monks who support them and lay devotees who indulge in such practices are full of ignorance (*avijja*). Moreover, the monastic community too needs to be aware of its role and the importance of adhering to the monastic codes (*vinaya*) before indulging in unnecessary form of materialistic orientation. The three methods of dialectical analysis, new thinking and exegesis and right resolve that are suggested above can help Buddhists adapt themselves in appropriate ways to changing times and situations without having to deviate from the priceless teachings of the Buddha.

2.6 The role of Buddhism in strengthening the relationship between Thailand and Myanmar in the modern era

Although politically Thailand and Myanmar adhere to different policies and ideologies of governance, the two countries' religio-cultural fate goes beyond these modern-day differences and unites the two countries under the canopy of Theravada Buddhism. The laity's devotion towards the Triple Gem and involvement in various Buddhist religious practices and ritualistic performances and many monastic leaders' interactive role with the population of both the countries have made the bond between the two countries intact despite political upheaval confronted from time to time due to differences of power structures and policies of the rulers.

The Northeast Thailand has been the land of great meditation masters like Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Sao, Ajahn Thate, Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Khao, Ajahn Lee, Ajahn Mahabuwa and many others. Similarly, the Sayadaws of Myanmar have been great inspiration not only to the people of Myanmar but also to many Thais, including both the monastics as well as the lay community. As early as 1952, at the request of the Thai Minister for Sangha Affairs, Mahasi Sayadaw had sent Sayadaws U Asabha and U Indavamsa to Thailand for the promotion of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassana.* Very soon Mahasi Sayadaw's method gained wide acceptance in Thailand and just within a decade many meditation centres had been established and the number of lay practitioners and monastics in the Mahasi technique exceeded a hundred thousand.

Again decades ago, soon after attaining Independence, the Government of Burma began plans to hold the Sixth Buddhist Council *(Sangayana)* in Burma, with

four other Theravada Buddhist countries (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos) participating. For this purpose the Government dispatched a mission to Thailand, composed of Nyaungyan Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw and two laymen. The mission discussed the plan with the seniormost ecclesiastical Sangha members of Thailand. At the historic Sixth Buddhist Council, which was inaugurated with great ceremonial grandeur on 17th May 1954, Mahasi Sayadaw played an eminent role, undertaking the exacting and onerous tasks of *Osana* (Final Editor) and *Pucchaka* (Questioner) and inspiring many Thai monks. A unique feature of this Council was the editing of the commentaries *(Atthakatha)* and sub-commentaries *(tikas)*, as well as the canonical texts. In the editing of this commentarial literature, Mahasi Sayadaw was responsible for making critical analyses, sound interpretation and skilful reconciliation of several crucial and divergent passages that paved the path for similar work in the Thai Theravada context.

Intellectual and scholar-monks of Thailand like Buddhadasa, Somdet Aj Asabhamahathera and others have also helped foster the relationship between the two countries through their interpretative understanding of the dhamma, as for instance, Buddhadasa's writings on core Buddhist teachings on Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*) attracted the attention of the Myanmar Buddhist practitioners and readers. In 1957, the Burmese government bestowed upon Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera the title of Aggamahāpandita for his leadership of the contingent of the Thai Buddhist Sangha which participated in the Chatthasangāyanā Assembly in Rangoon. Presently, many monks from Myanmar have come to join Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Thailand at the graduate, post-graduate and doctoral level. The present-day academic Associations like the International Association of Buddhist Universities (IABU) and the International Association of Theravada Buddhist Universities (IATBU) have brought Buddhist monks, scholars, academics, lay practitioners from both the countries into close collaboration in diverse areas of academic exchange and dhamma propagation.

Many a times under the tutelage of monastic leaders the strong ties among people took perfomative ritualistic form as when lay devotees from Thailand go on pilgrimages to Myanmar. Buddhism in a way served as that sacred thread which bound

not only individual to individual at a private level but the entire communities as a whole in the two countries. The unifying bond fostered by Buddhism since time immemorial up until the present era cannot be overstated. Reflective understanding of this deep-rooted relationship forged by Buddhism between the two nations helps cast aside minor embittered moments dotted throughout different historical eras when myopic and unenlightened rulers and power holders from either side tried to subjugate each other with vain pride and prejudices.

Chapter 3

THAI MEDITATION MASTERS: THEIR TEACHINGS AND MEDITATION METHODS

In this chapter we make an in-depth study of the teachings and meditation techniques of a few Thai meditation masters namely, Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadasa, and Somdet Aaj Asabhamahathera. We will take into consideration their teachings mode of practice as reflected in and through their dhamma practice, way of life, teaching methods and dhamma talks.

3.1 Ajahn Chah (1918-1992)

Ajahn Chah (Phra Bodhiñāna Thera) was born on 17 June 1918 into a typical farming household in a rural village in the province of Ubon Rachathani in Northeast Thailand. Following the custom he took ordination as a novice in the local village monastery. After having spent three years in novicehood, learning to read and write and studying some basic Buddhist teachings, he returned to the lay life to help his parents on the farm. However, having had felt an attraction to the monastic life, he decided to take to the robes once again on 26 April 1939, this time as a fully ordained monk having reached the age of twenty.

The first few years of his monkhood were dedicated to studying some basic Dhamma, the disciplinary codes (vinaya), the canonical language, Pāli, and the

scriptures. Life was taking its own simple course, when one day the sad demise of his father suddenly awakened the young Ajahn Chah to the harsh realities of life. The transitoriness of existence left him in deep and brooding thoughts about the real meaning, purpose and value of life. In 1946, he finally decided to abandon his studies and set off on a mendicant pilgrimage (*thudong*). He walked hundreds of miles to Central Thailand, sleeping outside in groves and forested areas and gathering almsfood in the villages on the way. But it so happened that once he took up residence in a monastery where the vinaya (monastic discipline) was strictly maintained. It was in this monastery he first heard about Venerable Ajahn Mun Bhuridatto, a highly revered Meditation Master from Northeast Thailand. Ajahn Chah was keen to meet such an accomplished teacher, and so set off on foot back again to the Northeast. Eventually, he met Ajahn Mun and spent a short but spiritually inspiring period with the Master. Until that time the young Ajahn Chah had acquired all the theoretical knowledge on morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*), but wasn't still aware of the exact way to put that knowledge into practice. Ajahn Mun demonstrated the heart of the teachings in a rather very direct and simple way helping to point out to the truth that although the scriptural teachings are extensive, with mindfulness established one realizes that everything arises in the mind. The mind is the forerunner of every action – mental, verbal, and bodily. Therefore, one needs to constantly train one's mind, and the Path of Dhamma is right there. This succinct and direct teaching was a revelation for Ajahn Chah, and transformed his entire approach to practice.

After a very successful teaching life that inspired many people across the globe, Ajahn Chah passed away on 16 January 1992. But during his last ten years of paralysed, speechless and completely bed-ridden condition and after his death, monasteries in his lineage grew in doubles and triples. The training which he established is still carried on at Wat Nong Pah Pong, the monastery founded by Ajahn Chah in his native village, and its numerous branch monasteries in Thailand and many different countries in the West. Discipline is strict in every monastery which enables practitioners to lead a simple and pure life in a harmoniously regulated community where virtue, meditation and deep understanding or wisdom is skillfully and continuously cultivated. There is chanting and group meditation every morning and

evening and sometimes a talk by the senior resident Ajahn. Great emphasis is given to meditation practice making it the natural way of life within the monastic set-up. Monks and novices do manual work, dye and sew their own robes, make most of their own requisites and keep the monastery buildings and grounds in immaculate shape. They live extremely simple renunciant life following the ascetic precepts of eating one meal a day from the almsbowl and limiting their possessions and robes. At Wat Nong Pah Pong, scattered throughout the green forested area are individual huts where monks and nuns live and meditate in solitude, and where they also regularly practice walking meditation on cleared paths under the tall tropical trees.

3.2 Looking at Ajahn Chah in the context of the Thai-Isan forest tradition

Isan or Northeast Thailand has been the home of many great meditation masters whose lineage has been carried on to the present time. The austerity in the practice of mindfulness meditation that accompanied the strict adherence to *vinaya* or monastic disciplinary codes had made many monks of the forest tradition accomplished meditation masters, whose profound teachings are today widely disseminated across the globe. The collected teachings of such highly venerated monks as Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Thate and others form a corpus of reflective guidelines for the cultivation of mental well-being that is not only conducive to individual moral growth but also for communal spiritual health and mental well-being along the path set forth by the Buddha more than two millennia ago. In today's excessively consumption-oriented ambience that has had many pernicious and adverse effects on the overall mental well-being of people from every stratum of society, the teachings of the forest tradition monks become highly relevant to set the wheel of human progress acquire a balanced momentum. The relevance of the teachings arise from both their profundity and practical applicability, since underneath the teachings lay accumulated knowledge of each of the meditation masters, gathered over years of experiential quest to lead the mind to acquire that level of mindful understanding which is absolutely free from defilements and egoistic clinging. Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike can gain from the teachings because the underlying messages embodied in them are free from sectarianism. The universality in the praxis can be applied at any time and situation by any interested person, irrespective of religious and cultural background.

The great teachings of the meditation masters of Isan that are bereft of ritualistic excesses have helped preserve Buddhism in its pure and pristine form. In the recent past, Buddhism as a social institution has undergone tremendous changes as Thai society began to adapt itself to the process of modernization under the swaying influence of both capitalism and consumerism. As Buddhists, most Thais today confine themselves to ritualistic worshipping and acts of merit-making more than any reflective practice of dhamma in day to day life. Across the country great emphasis has been laid on the structural expansion of *Buddhadhamma*, starting from the construction of huge Buddha images, meditation halls, elaborately decorated temples and convenient monastic dwellings.

The message of selfless renunciation, which forms the core essence of Right Thought (*sammā sankappa*), an essential factor leading to wisdom as incorporated in the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-atthangika-magga*), is at times completely lost from the scene. It is against this backdrop one needs to take a look at the way of life and practice of the *thudanga*[10] tradition of Northeast Thailand that has begotten such great meditation masters as Luangpoo Mun, Luangpoo Thate, Luangpho Chah, Luangpoo Sao, Luangpoo Khao and others.[11] These monks who underwent rigorous self-training through the practice of insight meditation and close scrutiny of the mind with reflective and rationalistic understanding of the Buddha's teachings of the Four Noble Truths (*ariyasacca*) and the three characteristics of existence (*tilakkhana*) – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-substantiality (*anattā*), have come to epitomize the true Buddhist way of living which is marked by such characteristics as non-clinging, egolessness, mindfulness, equanimity, compassion and contentment. The praxis of mental well-being that has been developed and nurtured under the aegis of the forest tradition monks have set up the solid foundation for holistic well-being of the individual and the community in relation to the social and natural environment. The universality in the praxis can be applied at any time and situation by any interested

[10] The tradition of forest monks who voluntarily choose to follow a more austere way of life dates back to the Buddha. Besides Thailand, this tradition still exists in Laos, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

[11] In Thailand, laypeople address a senior monk with such honorifics as *luangpoo* (venerable grandfather), *luangpho* (venerable father), or *ajahn* (variously spelt as *ajarn*, *ajan*, *achaan* and meaning respected teacher).

person irrespective of religious and cultural background. Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike can gain from the teachings because the underlying messages embodied in them are free from sectarianism. The universal garb of the teachings can be understood from the praxis of mental well-being developed by these monks, the different levels at which their practice benefitted the mind, and their contemplative thinking which is a step ahead of Derridean deconstruction that can be beneficially put into practice for solving various problems at the global level.

The main focus of the forest tradition monks has been to strike a balance in their practice by developing mindfulness in every action – verbal, physical and mental – through the practice of *vipassanā* or insight meditation that consists of contemplating the *upādānakkhandha*, the groups of grasping, which manifest at the moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. As faithful disciples of the Buddha, they have demonstrated that the benefits of the practice of insight meditation are tremendous. But before one can enjoy the fruits one needs to make the appropriate and systematic effort. Upon reflective consideration and realization of the Four Noble Truths – the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering and the truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering, the mind needs to focus on the three-fold training (*tisikkhā*) – morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) – as laid out in the framework of the Noble Eightfold Path. The forest meditation monks have not only taught the Noble Eightfold Path but most importantly have *lived* this Path themselves and so their teachings have powerful influence on their disciples and people who take interest in their teachings. These monks are very strict in their adherence to monastic codes or *vinaya* and along with it the practice of insight meditation brought discipline in their lives and practice, rendering morality a practiced reality in life, well encased within the parameters of a mind solidly grounded on the foundation of mindfulness and non-attachment.

Right speech (*sammā vācā*), right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) and right action (*sammā kammanta*) are the ethical codes of the Noble Eightfold Path on the foundational base of which right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), right concentration (*sammā samādhi*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), right understanding (*sammā ditthi*) and right

thought (*sammā saṅkappa*) are to be developed. The Noble Eightfold Path[12] is a practical way that benefits everyone who treads the path. But it is a difficult way of life for people who are parasitically attached to worldly pleasures and are reluctant, indifferent or lethargic to fight back defilements that arise naturally and continually in the untrained human mind. There is no short cut to the Path, it has to be treaded upon by oneself. Others can teach us about it, help us memorize all the eight factors, but to gain benefit from the Path oneself and to demonstrate this benefit to others one has to tread the Path oneself. This is what the forest tradition monks have done by themselves; they have systematically practiced and lived the Path and so they have become enlightened renunciants whose expositions of the Dhamma have reached the hearts of many across cultures, countries and linguistic barriers.

Initially, these monks had always preferred to lead a wandering life, practicing meditation in outdoor settings – in tiger and cobra-infested forests, mountain caves and forsaken cremation grounds – before settling down and establishing monasteries, especially to make themselves available to the lay community which sought their abiding teachings. The ascetic way of life and rigorous outdoor meditation practice made them true renunciants by enabling them to detach from all physical comforts and surviving on mere minimal requirements. From the voluntary cultivation of severing ties with material possessions and all physical comforts, they developed the mental prowess to face every difficulty, be it physical or mental, in a detached, yet courageous manner. And most importantly, the rigorous outdoor meditation practice had provided the fertile ground for the realization and reflective internalization of the three characteristics of existence (*tilakkhana*) – impermanence (*anicca)*, suffering (*dukkha*) and non-substantiality (*anattā*) and the Law of Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*) that clearly depicts the cycle of birth and rebirth starting from ignorance (*avijjā*). When monasteries grew around them, these monks implemented strict discipline to continue their way of practice themselves and to inspire their disciples to cultivate morality, mindfulness and wisdom through the practice of insight

[12] For a very clear exposition of the Noble Eightfold Path see Walpole Rahula. **What the Buddha Taught**.(Bangkok: Haw Trai Foundation, 1990) and P.A. Payutto. **Buddhadhamma**. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

meditation in the same manner. Out of their dedicated effort a praxis of mental well-being took shape the framework of which can be broadly discussed under the following levels.

In the numerous dhamma talks of the renunciant monks of the forest tradition, it is clearly reflected that the trained mind of a meditator transcends its own ego and at a higher contemplative level proceeds to deconstruct all dualistic notions starting from the very concepts of me and mine, I and the other. As Ajahn Chah succinctly expresses, "Give up clinging to love and hate, just rest with things as they are. Do not try to become anything. Do not make yourself into anything. Do not be a meditator. Do not become enlightened. When you sit, let it be. When you walk, let it be. Grasp at nothing. Resist nothing."[13]

3.3 Manifestation of dhammic truths through similes and metaphors

The teachings of the Buddha and his disciples down the ages have been replete with various types of figures of speech. Very often while teaching the dhamma to his flourishing dispensation, the Buddha upheld the essential need of the metaphor as a discursive teaching tool to clarify difficult points and that resulted in a clear comprehension in the listeners leading to the metaphoric reference retain its appeal in

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[13] The dhamma talk "The Simple Path" from Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter ed., **A Still Forest Pool – The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah**. (Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1985), p. 5. Compare this with the famous story about Ma-tsu (709-788), one of the most important Chinese Ch'an (Zen) masters: Abbot Huai-jang visited the young Ma-tsu in his cell and asked: "In practicing sitting-meditation, what do you aspire to attain?" "To attain Buddhahood," was the answer. Huai-jang took up a piece of brick and began to grind it against a rock. After some moments Ma-tsu became curious and asked: "What are you grinding that for?" "I want to grind it into a mirror." Amused, Ma-tsu said, "How can you hope to grind a piece of brick into a mirror?" Huai-jang replied, "Since a piece of brick cannot be ground into a mirror, how can you sit yourself into a Buddha?" "What must I do then?" Ma-tsu asked. "Take the case of an ox-cart," said Huai-jang. "If the cart does not move, do you whip the cart or the ox?" Ma-tsu remained silent. "In learning sitting-meditation, do you aspire to learn the sitting-Ch'an, or do you aspire to imitate the seated Buddha? If the former, Ch'an does not consist in sitting or in lying down. If the latter, the Buddha has no fixed postures. The Buddha-way goes on forever, and never abides in anything. You must not therefore be attached to nor abandon any particular phase of it. To sit yourself into a Buddha is to kill the Buddha. To be attached to the sitting posture is to fail to comprehend the essential principle." When Ma-tsu heard these instructions, he felt as though he were drinking the most exquisite nectar... (from John C. H. Wu, **The Golden Age of Zen**, (Taipei: United Publishing Center, 1975, 92.)

the subsequent ages. The metaphorical teaching method was the instrument which created impressive expressions for the listeners, and later the readers, when the teachings began to be written down, for instance, metaphorical teaching method in the *Puggalapaññatti*, which is contextualized with numerous referents such as people, inanimate objects, animate objects, nature and natural phenomena, etc., which were all part of the environment. Thus the Buddha's metaphorical teaching method has been an important format in the dissemination of Buddhism, both in the past and the present, having people, things or phenomena used for comparative purposes that led to the dissemination of the Dhamma easy for the sermoner and its reflective understanding for the devotee-/practitioner-listener.

Ajahn Chah's dhamma talks resemble the Buddha's many discourses in the use of the metaphorical teaching method. All his figures of speech are interesting, stimulating, thought-provoking and enriching. Ajahn Chah is one of those masters who when he says something, it cuts straight to the heart and mind, and stay there forever. Figures of speech often provide emphasis, freshness of expression, and conceptual clarity. Many different types of figures of speech related to general meaning of words such as simile, metaphor, paradox, proverb, didactic interpolation, irony, symbol, and epigram are found in the dhamma talks. But here we shall discuss in brief only similes and metaphors.

Similes and Metaphors

While in a simile a comparison between two distinctly different things is indicated by the word "like" or "as", in a metaphor a word which in standard (or literal) usage denotes one kind of thing, quality, or action is applied to another, in the form of a statement of identity instead of comparison. Most metaphors in the dhamma talks are associated with the depiction of defilements and how the untrained mind continually keeps falling prey to its own defilements. The similes and metaphors come is diverse form as object simile, animal and bird simile, food and fruit simile, nature simile, relationship simile, etc. Reflecting upon the 'worthlessness' of life and for the purpose of developing a reflective understanding on the transcience of all conditioned states, Ajahn Chah offered many similes related to common fruits and everyday objects.

Through numerous object similes the cause and effect of wholesome awareness cultivation is emphasized. Ajahn Chah while comparing the five aggregates of body and mind to a red-hot iron ball draws attention to the process of helpless fluctuation that grips most people and compares this state of mind to a cowbell or a pendulum being knocked back and forth. Meditation too is compared to an object simile – a log of wood. He says, "Meditation is like a single log of wood. Insight and investigation is one end of the log; calm and concentration is the other end. If you lift up the whole log, both sides come up at once. Which is concentration and which is insight? Just this mind."[14] Through numerous object similes Ajahn Chah points out to the need for the actualization of the process of 'letting go' which is indispensable for the realization of the Dhamma in depth. But prior to 'letting go', one also needs to be aware of working with one's mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) acquired through many conventional means like the education system of which most people are so unnecessarily proud of to the extent of fetishizing it.

Through the simile of a cup of water Ajahn Chah deconstructs the egoistic prejudices and opinionated thoughts that arise sometimes in highly educated or career-wise successful people who tend to have strong clinging (*upādāna*) to their degrees, knowledge, qualifications, alma mater, placement, career, academic positions, etc. He wonderfully expresses the bombardment of the ego in educated people through the simple example of emptying a cup filled with stale dirty water so that the cup could be used for beneficial purposes later. The cup as a receptacle is the mind, the stale water is the egoistic thoughts and clinging to those thoughts, and emptying the cup is the process of *un*-learning. *Un*-learning is not a negative process but a positive reinforcement of objective distancing from what one has acquired and imbibed through institutional learning, training, or even acculturation so as not to cling to such learning. In the absence of *un*-learning, the tendency to erect 'meta-narratives' out of one's own learning and theoretical assumption becomes very strong. We can see such tendencies even in present-day Thailand when acquaintances with the philosophical writings of Western philosophers like Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida and others have left the lay reader-academic become strongly anti-foundational in his attitudinal

[14] **A Still Forest Pool**, "Study and Experiencing," p.15.

disposition to the extent in which he even decries his own Buddhist foundational background, upholding his specialization as more relevant or extraordinarily important. Such views are detrimental in the sense that they make us unreceptive to the positive role of Buddhism, make us falter in seeing the holistic connection between different branches of knowledge and Buddhist teachings, the interdependence of fields of enquiry and in the long run make us stagnant and stagnated in self-created boxes/pigeonholes of knowledge acquired for knowledge's sake.

Ajahn Chah, although he was not educated in any modern institution of higher learning, nevertheless, understood the problems inherent in the lives of so-called educated people of the present time. He says, "Many of those who come to see me have a high standing in the community. Among them are merchants, college graduates, teachers, and government officials. Their minds are filled with opinions about things. They are too clever to listen to others. It is like a cup of water. If a cup is filled with stale, dirty water, it is useless. Only after the old water is thrown out can the cup become useful. You must empty your minds of opinions, then you will see. Our practice goes beyond cleverness and stupidity. If you think that you are clever, wealthy, important, or an expert in Buddhism, you cover up the truth of non-self. All you see is self – I and mine. But Buddhism is letting go of self. Those who are too clever will never learn. They must first get rid of their cleverness, first empty their "cup."[15]

While the above simile implies letting loose of what was closely held or clung to by the Ego, the simile of a "tightly woven net" draws attention to the cultivation of pure awareness so that no thought goes unattended. He says, "Know and watch your heart. It's pure but emotions come to color it. So let your mind be like a tightly woven net to catch emotions and feelings that come, and investigate them before you react."[16] Understanding different emotions implies understanding the five aggregates and therefore great emphasis is given by Ajahn Chah on probing deep into the five

[15] **A Tree in a Forest – A Collection of Ajahn Chah's Similes** compiled and edited by Dharma Garden Translation Group, (Taiwan: Dhamma Garden, 1994), p.13.

[16] Ibid. p.188.

aggregates in a very meticulous way. This is essential since only penetrative reflection on the aggregates can lead us to understand the workings of the aggregates and to free ourselves from their grip. In order to develop mindfulness the danger in the five aggregates is vividly expressed by Ajahn Chah through the simile of a red-hot iron ball. He says, "All the five aggregates of body and mind are like a red-hot iron ball. When it is red-hot all over, where can you find a cool spot to touch? – to grasp any part causes pain. Therefore, you should not get attached even to tranquility or concentration; you should not say that peace or tranquility is you or yours. To do so just creates the painful illusion, another red-hot iron ball."[17]

Closely related to the object similes are animal and bird similes. Ajahn Chah deconstructs the polarized power/pull of defilements of the strongly ingrained ones with the metaphor of a tiger and the subtle habitual defilements with a cat. His graphic description of defilements is aimed at bringing a solution to the impact of them. He says, "The defilements are like a tiger. We should imprison the tiger in a good strong cage made of mindfulness, energy, patience, and endurance. Then we can let it starve to death by not feeding its habitual desires. We do not have to take a knife and butcher." "Or defilements are like a cat. If you feed it, it will keep coming around. Stop feeding it, and eventually it will not bother to come around any more."[18] At times the dangers of the defilements are also compared to poisonous snakes like the cobra.

Through the simile of a vulture, Ajahn Chah questions the ego of an educated but ignorant person who loves to create barriers and baricades through narcissistic clinging to his worldly achievements and fail to build bridges of understanding and harmony by 'letting go'. He says, "Many people who have studied on a university level and attained graduate degrees and worldly success find that their lives are still lacking. Though they think high thoughts and are intellectually sophisticated, their hearts are still filled with pettiness and doubt. The vulture flies high, but what does it feed on?"[19] In a powerful metaphor through which he warns the dangers of clinging he

[17] **A Still Forest Pool**, "Study and Experiencing" p.16.

[18] Ibid. "Starving Defilements", p.31.

[19] Ibid. "Ending Doubt", p.8.

cites the example of a fish and a frog, how being allured by the tiny bait of food hanging from the fishing rod, they end up with the pain of getting piered by the hook and eventually facing painful and breathless death.

Ajahn Chah warns his disciple not be lured by the ebb and flow of worldly tides of pleaures and attractions no matter how alluring and fascinating they might appear at first sight. The animal simile about deep rooted defilements is named as Fish and Frog – "If you attach to the senses, you're the same as a fish caught on a hook. When the fisherman comes, struggle all you want, but you can't get loose. Actually you're not caught like a fish, but more like a frog. A frog gulps down the whole hook right to its guts. A fish just gets it caught in its mouth."[20] Such warnings against the currents of desire can be abated through an optimistic mindset and so Ajahn Chah does not really rules out the possibility of using the defilements as a source of learning. Through the simile of the fertilizer, he urges for the positive use of defilements. He says, "Our defilements are like fertilizer for our practice. It's the same as taking filthy stuff like chicken manure and buffalo dung to fertilize our fruit trees, so that the fruit will be sweet and abundant. In suffering, there is happiness; in confusion there is calm."[21]

Knowing the perils of attachment to worldly pleasures that leads to a spiritually ossified or stifling situation, he urges the practitioner to sincerely follow the path of dhamma. But clinging can arise even to wholesome states of mind which leads to the danger of impeding the arising of equanimity in the process of such states and efforts, and so through the metaphor of a duck he urges the practitioner to practice in a unique way as if one is raising a duck, "your duty is to feed it and give it water. If it grows fast or slow is the duck's business, not yours. Let it go and just do your own work. Your business is to practice. If it's fast or slow, just know it. Don't try to force it. This kind of practice has a good foundation."[22]

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[20] **A Tree in a Forest**, p.54.

[21] Ibid. p.29.

[22] Ibid. p.20.

In order to develop right concentration to forego clinging and craving for even wholesome elements, he enumerates many metaphors pertaining to nature (fruits, flowers, trees, etc) which are to be thoroughly understood in their dependent origination. Through the simple example of a mango he demonstrates how the different stages in the growth of a mango from its raw verdure state to ripe yellow tinge can help us reflect the element of impermanence inherent in every instance of cause and effect, being and becoming, life and death. The inseparable existence of one state and the other makes each state dependently related and when one probes deep into this dependent co-arising, one can see through the non-self or non-substantiality in what we blindly tend to consider as independent attributes, states, modes, etc.

Mango is a tropical fruit and in Thailand it is available all throughout the year. Taking this simple example of a fruit, Ajahn Chah deconstructs the tendency in practitioners to separate and segregate concentration, tranquility, and insight, a tendency that makes them fail to see the underlying dependent co-arising that connects all the three aspects. He beautifully exposes the truth of the interdependence of concentration, inner tranquility and insight with a mango that is green and sour, then yellow and sweet, but not two different fruits. He says "You cannot really separate concentration, inner tranquility, and insight. They are just like a mango that is first green and sour, then yellow and sweet, but not two different fruits. One grows into the other; without the first, we would never have the second. Such terms are only conventions for teaching. We should not be attached to the language."[23]

The same point is reteirated through the example of a wooden log – one cannot separate *samatha* and *vipassana*. "Samatha is tranquility, vipassana is contemplation. In order to contemplate, one must be tranquil, and in order to be tranquil, one must contemplate to know the mind. Wanting to separate them would be like picking up a log of wood in the middle and wanting only one end of the log to come up. Both of its ends must come at the same time. You can't separate them. In our practice, it isn't

[23] **A Still Forest Pool**, "Study and Experiencing", p.15.

necessary to talk of *samatha* or *vipassana*. Just call it the practice of Dhamma, that's enough."[24]

The Dependent Origination is a core teaching in Buddhism. The twelve links which are discussed in chapter 2 in some detail is wonderfully simplified by Ajahn Chah through a dynamic and non-static concept – the act of falling – each link in the chain of dependent origination likens to a fruit falling from a tree. From dependent co-arising he points our attention to the non-self in all conditioned phenomena. When we examine all that we call mind, we see only a conglomeration of mental elements, not a self. Then where can we stand? Feeling, memory, all the five aggregates of mind and body are compared to the shifting of leaves in the wind. That is why it is not at all advisable to cling to that which is non-substantial and increase suffering to ourselves and others. To development detachment to the self and all conditioned phenomena he urges us to see the world around us and everything in it as banana peel – "When you see things in the world like banana peels that have no great value for you, then you're free to walk in the world without being bothered, without being hurt in any way by all of the various kinds of things that come and pass away, whether pleasant or unpleasant. This is the path that leads to freedom."[25]

Mindfulness of desire would lead to busy ourselves with our own inner battle and struggle to win over ourselves. There is nothing to fight outside, the struggle is always one's own and with oneself. Some people had asked Ajahn Chah the simplistic question as to if we don't want desire why do we desire to practice, or the desire to practice is wrong. Ajahn Chah beautifully explains that both wanting and not-wanting are desires and defilements. "Wanting and not-wanting are both defilements, both are problems, delusions, lacking wisdom. Buddha had desire too. It's there all the time, only a condition of the mind. Those with wisdom, however, have desire but no attachment. Our desires are like catching a big fish in a net – we must wait until the fish loses strength and then we can catch it easily. But all the time we keep on watching it so that it doesn't escape." But as pointed out above the struggle is always

[24] **A Tree in a Forest**, p.197.

[25] Ibid. p. 4.

with oneself and not external factors. To find peace we have to search and let it arise within ourselves just like if we want to find water we have to dig up a well. "You'll have to work to find peacefulness in the world. It's like reaching water for a well – it's there but you have to dig for it. Or like an orchard that's already planted – the fruit are there, but you have to pick them. They won't just fall into your mouth."[26]

Ajahn Chah was a very strict monk when it came to abiding by the precepts and the monastic disciplinary codes (vinaya). Although he deconstructed every aspect of life in its multi-dimensionality, he never questioned the Vinaya nor relegated it to a negligent domain. Therein lay the ethical dimension of his practice where morality and vinaya became the ground for all tests and trials of monastic life. At no point he displayed double standards in his ethical principles and never deviated from the Path of Discipline laid down by the Buddha. He expressed his steadfastness towards the Vinaya through the organicity of many relationship metaphors/similes, for instance, while upholding the virtuous life he says, "Virtue and morality are the mother and father of the Dhamma growing within us, providing it with the proper nourishment and direction."[27] The vinaya is not just a set of codes to be followed mechanically in monastic life, but rather the unifying link between the monks to the Dhamma Vinaya, monastics to monastics, and monastics to the laity, upon the foundation of which spiritual solidarity and unifying bond rest. But he was also very tolerant and did not impose himself ruthlessly on his disciples. He says, "It is necessary to teach the basics first – basic morality, seeing the transitoriness of life, the facts of aging and death. Here is where we must begin. Before you drive a car or ride a bicycle, you must learn to walk. Later, you may ride in an airplane or travel around the world in the blink of an eye."[28]

With strict adherence to the Vinaya, he expressed the universality in the Dhamma beautifully through the metaphor of family that depicts vividly dhamma sharing – its universality and bonding ties. He says "If you want to find Dhamma, it

[26] **A Tree in a Forest**. p.196.

[27] **A Still Forest Pool**, "Virtue", p.54.

[28] Op. cit. p.8.

has nothing to do with the forests or the mountains or the caves. It's only in the heart. It has its own language of experience. There is a great difference between concepts and direct experience. With a glass of hot water, whoever puts his or her finger into it will have the same experience – hot – which can be called by many words in different languages. Similarly, whoever looks deeply into the heart will have the same experience, no matter what his nationality, culture, or language may be. If in your heart you come to that taste of truth, of Dhamma, then you become like one big family – like mother and father, sisters and brothers – because you have tasted that essence of the heart which is the same for all."[29]

Metaphors that deconstruct the Self and the Ego

In almost all his dhamma talks Ajahn Chah uses common similes and metaphors, but his use of these is firmly embedded in the contemporary world and the adoption of an ethical stance within that world. He wants people to address, for example, an image of a buffalo 'in all its fullness,' to consider humankind's relationship to itself in regards to the defilement of delusion, to make a choice and take up an ethical position in life. He says, "We must train our mind like a buffalo: the buffalo is our thinking, the owner is the meditator, raising and training the buffalo is the practice. With a trained mind we can see the truth, we can know the cause of our self and its end, the end of all sorrow."[30]

Once when a lay devotee tried to procrastinate the practice of meditation giving the excuse that she was very old and feeble and had no time since she was burdened with household responsibilities, Ajahn Chah admonished her saying, "Hey, listen. There's no one here, just this. No owner, no one to be old, to be young, to be good or bad, weak or strong…No one born and no one to die…When we carry a burden, it's heavy. When there's no one to carry it, there's not a problem in the world. That is the True Way."

[29] **A Tree in a Forest**. p.22.

[30] **A Still Forest Pool**, "Starving Defilements", p.32.

Through animal simile he not only desubstantialized the human Ego and its sense of superiority in the animal kingdom but also ignorance and indulgence with worldly happiness that triggers the mind to deviate from attentive awareness to the Dhamma. He says, "People are like buffalo – unless they are tied down firmly by all legs, they will not allow themselves to be given any medicine…In the same way, most of us must be totally bound up in suffering before we will let go and give up our delusions. If we can still writhe away, we will not yet give in. A few people can understand the Dhamma when they hear it taught and explained by a teacher. But life must teach most of us all the way to the end."[31]

In the Thai-Isan socio-cultural milieu, human folly is often associated with the dumbness of the water buffalo. 'Ngo muan khuwai' is the typical cliche or stereotypical expression which means 'as foolish as a buffalo'. In fact, it is a taboo to compare anyone to a buffalo. But Ajahn Chah's metaphoric reference is heartily welcomed by his disciples, for it made them recognize the defilements of worldly clinging in their own mind and challenges them to frustrate the clinging to get rid of it totally.

3.4 Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993)

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, the well-known ascetic scholar-monk of Thailand was born on 27 May 1906 in Ban Phumriang, Chaiya District, in Surathani province of Southern Thailand. He took higher ordination in 1926, at the age of twenty. All his life he regarded himself as the servant of Buddha and inscribed his personal dedication in his own words–

I offer this life and body to the Lord Buddha.
I am the slave of the Buddha, the Buddha is my master.
For this reason, I am called "Buddhadāsa."[32]

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[31] **A Still Forest Pool**. pp.ix-x.

[32] The quotation is from Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, **Tam Roi Phra Arahant (In the Footsteps of the Arahant)**, (Bangkok: Sukhapap Jai, 1986).

Having founded the monastery called *Suan Mokkh*, "The Garden of Liberation," in 1932, he undertook the most wide-ranging and influential study of the Pāli scriptures of Theravada Buddhism. These studies were the underpinning for his innovative and bold re-interpretation of many core Buddhist concepts like the doctrine of dependant origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and non-self (*anattā*). Moreover, he used his expertise in scriptural studies and exegeses to give renewed meaning to contemporary ideologies and thoughts as for instance, socialism came to be gleaned through the lens of Buddhism and the new concept of dhammic socialism emerged. Thus, out of his deep reflection on life and nature developed a commanding body of work that has inspired many to take a fresh look at Buddhism and inter-faith religion. As Santikaro Bhikkhu in his article "Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness" says, "He has been a pioneer in the application of Buddha-Dhamma to the realities of the modern world during the recent decades of rampant modernization and economic growth and has forthrightly criticized the immorality and selfishness of many modern social structures. Further, he has been Thailand's most vocal proponent of open-mindedness toward other religions."[33]

3.5 Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's innovative interpretation of core Buddhist concepts

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's innovative thinking and re-interpretation of many core Buddhist concepts began with his reflective understanding of the word dhamma itself,

[33] Christopher S Queen and Sallie B. King , eds., **Engaged Buddhism – Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia**, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p.147.

which according to him, has four meanings: i) Nature itself, ii) The law of nature, iii) The duty that must be performed according to that law of nature, and iv) The fruits or benefits that arise from the performance of that duty. He says, "We have not grasped the secret of Dhamma, so we are unable to practice in a way that gets the fullest benefit from life."[34] Only when the four inter-dependent nuances of dhamma are realized, the concept of developing life comes to bear true meaning. Therefore, after having clarified the four meanings of dhamma, Buddhadāsa went on to urge all his monastic and lay followers to keep in mind and consider deeply the concept of 'developing life'. Developing life means "causing life to progress to the highest level beyond all problems and *dukkha*, beyond all meaning and gradations of these two words."[35]

He lays out four aspects of developing life. The first is to prevent things that are pernicious and unwholesome to life from arising. The second is to completely get rid of and destroy any such things that already have arisen in life. The third is to give rise to wholesome things which are useful and beneficial for life. The fourth is to maintain and preserve those things so that they flourish continually. These four aspects of developing life: preventing new dangers, getting rid of old dangers, creating desirable things, and maintaining and increasing the beneficial things are what comprises *sammāvāyāma* or right effort that is a factor of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*). To Buddhadāsa developing life is the duty and spiritual obligation of one and all.

In order to fulfill this duty the cultivation of four very important dhammas or four dhamma tools is indispensable. These four tools of Dhamma are *sati* (reflective awareness or mindfulness), *sampajaññā* (wisdom-in-action or ready comprehension), *paññā* (wisdom) and *samādhi* (concentration). Having these four tools in possession paves the way for development of life at every time and situation.

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[34] Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. **Mindfulness With Breathing**. (Bangkok: The Dhamma Study & Practice Group, 1988), p. 5.

[35] Ibid.

Buddhadāsa laid great emphasis on the practice of *vipassanā* meditation for cultivating and training the mind so that these four Dhamma tools are enriched enough to develop our lives. What Buddhadāsa aimed through his personal example, supervised retreats, numerous dhamma talks and reflective writings was the cultivation of an interest in his followers, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, in the mental development of these four necessary dhammas. Closely related to Buddhadāsa's concept of developing life is the true understanding of the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*).

The doctrine of dependent origination is being interpreted in many different ways and Buddhadāsa's unique interpretation came up in opposition to Buddhaghosa's explanation of the process of dependent arising encompassing three lifetimes.[36] Quite contradictory to the process of three lifetimes, the doctrine of dependent origination according to Buddhadāsa conforms to the "principle of direct and immediate efficacy" (*sanditthika*) that is, it primarily concerns with the world and present life. In an attempt at offering an overhaul re-interpretation of Buddhaghosa's position, Buddhadāsa comes up with a very highly psycho-philosophical exegesis while simultaneously digging deep roots in practical application. Thus, his approach is a combination of conceptual and experiential understanding of the doctrine.

At the philosophical level Buddhadāsa draws our attention to the concept of Middle Path in the doctrine of dependent origination, that is, there is neither the substantiation of the ego (concept of a continuing existence) nor the negation of the ego (nihilism). Its law follows the principle of "this exists therefore that exists, this ceases to be therefore that ceases to be." Hence, teaching the doctrine of dependent origination using the concept of a continuing existence is undermining the law of dependent arising. Buddhadāsa claims that all the states of dependent origination must conform to the "principle of direct and immediate efficacy" to be recognized as the Buddha's teaching.

[36] Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. **Paṭiccasamuppāda**. (Bangkok: Thammasapa, 1992).

Dependent arising is a phenomenon that lasts an instant; it is impermanent. Keeping this premise in view, Buddhadāsa argues that physical birth is not what is implied in the doctrine of dependent origination; rather both birth and death should be understood in terms of psychological phenomena within the process of dependent arising in day to day life. Likewise, heaven and hell are mental states more than physical and tangible realms that one may ascend or descend. When the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion arise, right mindfulness gets obfuscated and the ego emerges. This is birth and this happens continuously in the absence of mindfulness. If the volitional action has already generated Feeling or Birth, and the *citta* is afflicted by extreme vexation and anxiety, then a pandemoniac situation is created in that very instant. The doctrine of dependent origination is therefore a kind of cultivation that can truncate the manifestation of suffering by instilling and maintaining awareness in the Six Roots i.e. the six sense organs – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind – when they come in contact with surroundings. Buddhadāsa, who aimed at a practical understanding of the dependent origination emphasized that applying this principle to protect the Six Roots and stop influxes (*asava*) or "flowing" of the *citta* that perpetrates *samsara* is the real end to the process of dependent arising. And this manner of ending the process of dependent arising is what he stressed as the Right Path (*sammapatipada*) because ultimately no ego can be found operating when the phenomena that last an instant according to the law of dependent arising are correctly perceived.

Like Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu did not insist on textual studies. In one of his talks on Emptiness, Śūnyatā he said, “The most essential meaning of the word 'study' is of the unceasing, dedicated observation and investigation of whatever arises in the mind, be it pleasant or unpleasant. Only one familiar with the observation of mind can really understand Dhamma. One who merely reads books cannot understand and what's more may even go astray. But one who tries to observe the things going on in the mind and always takes that which is true in his or her own mind as a standard has no way to get, muddled. Such a person will be able to comprehend Dukkha and the cessation of Dukkha and ultimately will understand Dhamma. Then if books are read they will be understood well.”

3.6 Meditation method of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Of all the different systems and techniques of mental development or *vipassanā*, Buddhadāsa finds *ānāpānasati-bhāvanā*, the cultivation of mindfulness with breathing in and out, the best. According to him, "The correct and complete meaning of *ānāpānasati-bhāvanā* is to take one truth or reality of nature and then observe, investigate, and scrutinize it within the mind with every inhalation and every exhalation. Thus, mindfulness with breathing allows us to contemplate any important natural truth while breathing in and breathing out."[37]

In the course of all his lectures on *ānāpānasati* Buddhadāsa makes it clear that the system of *ānāpānasati* is universal and non-sectarian and hence no one can exercise monopoly over it: "This system is not the Burmese or Chinese or Sri Lankan style that some people are clinging to these days. Likewise, it is not the system of 'achan this,' 'master that,' 'guru this,' or 'teacher that' as others are so caught up in nowadays. Nor is it the style of Suan Mokhh or any other wat. Instead, this system is simply the correct way as recommended by the Buddha."[38]

Regarding *ānāpānasati* as the heart of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the heart of all four foundations of mindfulness[39] Buddhadāsa expounds in detail in four tetrads all the sixteen stages of the Ānāpānasati Sutta and asserts that if the technique is to be complete, it must have all the 16 steps. Within the framework of the four tetrads there are the four suitable things or objects of contemplation – *kāya* (body), *vedanā* (feeling), *citta* (mind) and dhamma for gradual progression along the spiritual path. The 16 Steps are divided into four tetrads which correspond to these four fundamental objects of study.

The first tetrad known as *kāya* tetrad or *kāyānupassanā* is contemplation of the body. In it, the first thing one must study and understand is the breath – the different

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[37] Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, **Mindfulness With Breathing**, p. 7.

[38] Ibid., p.114.

[39] Ibid, p.115.

kinds of breath, their various qualities and characteristics, and the influence they assert. The first two steps of the first tetrad include contemplating the long breath and then the short breath and paying close attention to how they feel and all the different aspects of these two kinds of breath. At step three the meditator goes deeper and investigates the breath more profoundly than before in order to observe and understand clearly the presence of the two different kinds of bodies – the flesh-body and the breath-body – within the normal physical body. Step four of this first tetrad is calming the breath – this makes the body as well as mind calm. When the breath-body is adjusted well, it gives rise to a good, healthy, and calm flesh-body. Since the mastery of flesh body is not within one's direct control, Buddhadāsa advocates its indirect control through the breath. The breath is the life force (*pāna*) and understanding it in detail is significant to proceed to the fourth stage of this first tetrad i.e. calming the breath so that tranquility arises and *citta* gets ready to perform its further duties.

The second tetrad comprises of the contemplation of feeling (*vedanānupassanā*). As is so common for the untrained mind to slavishly cling to different feelings, especially happy feelings or *sukha-vedanā*, it is essential to contemplate on the fleeting nature of such feelings in order to still one's mind and avoid being foolishly entrapped by such emotional states time and again. Just as understanding the breath is essential to calm the flesh body and the mind, understanding of *vedanā* is indispensable to keep them under control since they are "conditioners of the mind (*citta-sankhāra*)". Buddhadāsa argues that "once we regulate the feelings, we will be able to keep our life on the correct path" and thus not be slaves to materialism. Therefore, it is rather a significant issue to master the feelings.

The third tetrad is *cittānupassanā* (contemplation of mind). The main objective of this is to know the mind and every kind of thought that arises in order to purify, concentrate and activate the *citta*. The preliminary steps of understanding and controlling the body/breath and feelings set the foundational base to investigate the mind and all arising thoughts in a clear and reflective manner. A clear, controlled and focused mind is needed to understand the ultimate truths of the dhamma which are not easily comprehended when the mind is untrained, disturbed and distracted. Therefore, Buddhadāsa says, "We make it the *citta* which is fit and ready to do the highest duties.

It must be prepared for its remaining duties, especially, the final conquest of *dukkha.*"[40]

The fourth tetrad is *dhammānupassanā* (contemplation of Dhamma). After getting to know the different states of mind, the final step is to contemplate the truth of dhamma – *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), *anattā* (non-self) and the law of causation. The truth of dhamma is the truth of nature and only upon understanding it one can 'let go' all attachment and attain the deep insight and perfect peacefulness that are unshakeable.

From the four distinct levels of mindfulness practice as taught by Buddhadāsa it is clear that each preceding level is a preparatory stage for the next and the cumulative effect of the final stage is of the greatest benefit to the practitioner in the sense that it widens his or hers mental horizon and leads to spiritual maturity with the conceptual and experiential understanding of the dhammic truths in their entirety.

Time and again Buddhadāsa emphasizes that the heart of the Buddha's teaching is "*sabbe dhammā nalaṁ abhinivesaya*" that is the realization that nothing whatsoever should be grasped at and clung to as "me" or "mine". This realization that gives rise to what he calls in Thai *cit waang* (mind free of self-idea or a freed mind, e.g., non-attachment) brings an end to all suffering. In other words, the whole essence of the Buddha's teaching he sums up as freedom from suffering through non-attachment. Hence non-grasping and non-clinging, the absence of any idea of self or of anything belonging to an abiding entity/self, which Buddhadāsa associates with the concept of *suññatā*, is according to him the most important teaching and is the core and essence of Buddhism. The Path and Fruit of Nibbāna consist in knowing this emptiness and in successively gaining the fruits of emptiness right up to the very culmination. And this can be attained through the persistent practice of seeing a thing as it is in itself without projecting subjective feelings on it and this 'true seeing' can be mastered through moment to moment mindfulness and insightful realization of *tilakkhaṇa* both at the conceptual and experiential level. He says, "When seeing, just to see; when hearing,

[40] **Mindfulness With Breathing**, p. 121.

just to hear. Achieving this, we become stable people. We have stability, unshakeability, and equilibrium. Although objects of every kind make contact with us in every way and by every sensory route, self does not arise."[41]

In his book *Buddhism in Brief*, Buddhadasa asserts the uniqueness of the anatta or non-self idea in opposition to views which affirm "the existence of abiding or lasting realities." The essay locates the heart of the human problem in attachment, and the solution to his problem in overcoming attachment:

The essential principle is this: through the studious search for the truth within one's body, through learning the true nature of things and persons, and through avoiding the attachment that produces suffering, one may extinguish suffering in mind and heart. Regard for the law of non-self produces a mind that is freed and at ease.[42]

To the question "What is Anapanasati?" Buddhadasa Bhikkhu replies in a talk delivered on 5 April 1987 that Satipaṭṭhāna is Anapanasati. He says, "Another common problem is that some people cling to and are stuck on the word *satipaṭṭhāna* (foundations of mindfulness) way too much. Some go as far as to think that Anapanasati has nothing to do with the four foundations of mindfulness. Some even reject Anapanasati out of hand. In some places they really hang onto the word "*satipaṭṭhāna*." They cling to the *satipaṭṭhāna* of the Dighanikāya (Long Discourses) which is not anything more than a long list of names, a lengthy catalogue of sets of dhammas. Although there are whole bunches of dhammas, no way of practice is given or explained there. This is what is generally taken to be *satipaṭṭhāna*. Then it is adjusted and rearranged into these and those practices, which become new systems that are called *satipaṭṭhāna* practices or meditation. Then, the followers of such technique deny, or even despise, the Anapanasati approach, asserting that it is not

[41] Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. **Buddha-Dhamma for Students**, trans. Roderick S. Bucknell, (Bangkok: Dhamma Study and Practice Group, 1988), p.9.

[42] As quoted in **Me and Mine Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa**. ed. Donald K. Swearer. (New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991), p.8.

satipaṭṭthāna. In truth, Anapanasati is the heart of *satipaṭṭthāna*, the heart of all four foundations of mindfulness."[43]

The 16 Steps which had been divided into the four tetrads as discussed above are reiterated by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu as the "straightforward and clear practice." And therefore, he urged his disciples, both monastic and lay, not to fall into the misunderstanding that Anapanasati is not *satipaṭṭthāna*.[44] Whether one calls it *satipaṭṭthāna* or Anapanasati there are only four matters of importance: *kāya*, *vedanā*, *citta* and Dhamma.

3.7 Somdet Āj Asabhamahathera (1903-1989)

The framework of Buddhist leadership ideally unites the individual spiritual quest and the ideological commitment of leading this quest to forge social benefits. Buddhist leadership is thus operative not on a unidimensional level alone, but rather manifests itself on multidimensional planes along the trajectory of a self-oriented 'gesture' of spiritual search and a socially-committed ideological stance. Within this individual-social nexus the realization of such truths as the *tilakkhaṇa* through the practice of Vipassanā meditation and the development of a mindset bestowed by the sublime qualities of *mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* function in tandem. Besides, strict conformity to Vinaya is the hallmark of Buddhist leadership that is clearly reflected in

[43] **Mindfulness With Breathing**, p. 115.

[44] Ibid.

the life and ideological standpoint of Venerable Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera, a well-known Thai monk who genuinely tried to strengthen the Thai Sangha's administrative role by creatively fusing the two monastic tasks namely, the task of learning or *gantha-dhura* and the task of meditation practice or *vipassanā-dhura*. Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera was also known as Phrapimolatham and Phra Buddhajarn. The title of Phrapimolatham was conferred upon him in 1949 (BE 2492) and much later in 1988 (BE 2531) he was promoted to the rank of Somdet Phra Buddhajarn. In 1957 the Burmese government bestowed upon him the title of Aggamahāpandita for his leadership of the contingent of the Thai Buddhist Sangha which participated in the Chatthasangāyanā Assembly in Rangoon.[45]

Venerable Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera was born on 8 November 1903 (BE 2446) in Ban Ton village in the northeastern province of Khonkaen. His father, Phim Duangmala and his mother, Jae Duangmala were subsistence farmers. From his humble beginnings as a village boy from the northeast who entered the monastic life as a novice at the age of fourteen, Somdet Āj rose to prominence quite early in his life upon initially holding the abbotship of many well-known temples in Ayutthaya province and later the abbotship of Wat Mahāthat, a temple under royal patronage in Bangkok. As a young novice at Wat Srijan in Banton sub-district he embarked on his first ecclesiastical studies from palm-leaf dhamma manuscripts. Although his early education was in Isan Dhamma Script and Thai Noi language, he mastered central Thai through a year-long training that soon secured him a job as a teacher at the age of sixteen. Three years later, however, he resigned from his teaching position and headed to Bangkok with the decision to further his ecclesiastical studies. In Bangkok, he was rather fortunate to reside at Wat Mahāthat under the tutelage of many senior and learned monks who were recognized both for their scholarship and steadiness in the Vinaya or disciplinary practice. It was at this time his childhood name Khamta was replaced by a senior monk with 'Āj' meaning boldness that well matched with his courageous and determined character. Bearing this new name he went forth for his

[45] For more biographical details including his numerous ecclesiastical ranks and positions see **Āsabhanusorn** [Commemoration Volume printed on the occasion of Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera's twenty-first death anniversary]. (Khonkaen: Pimolatham Institute, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus, 2010, BE 2553).

higher ordination on 18 June 1923 at the age of twenty. As he forged ahead and engrossed himself with his dhamma studies, he successfully completed the VIII grade of the Pāli ecclesiastical examination and all the three levels of the Dhamma examination and gradually began to display great skills in five major areas – ecclesiastical education, Abhidhamma study, ecclesiastical administration, dhamma propagation and dissemination of Vipassanā or Insight meditation.[46] Early in 1951 (BE 2494), he started his ambitious project of a nation-wide revival of Insight meditation which later spread to the neighbouring countries of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia as well as to distant countries in Europe and the US. Actively playing the role of Thailand's first monastic ambassador to the West, he made extensive contacts with political and religious leaders and was invited by the MRA to join religious tours around the world in 1958-1959 to spread the teachings of the Buddha.[47]

As his various projects met with success one after the other and he climbed the ecclesiastical ladder with sheer diligence and hard work by first serving as the deputy ecclesiastical governor of Ayutthaya province in 1933 (BE 2476) and then as the abbot of Wat Mahāthat and an ecclesiastical administrative minister in 1948 (BE 2491), he found himself in a difficult context for his reformist ideas in the 1960s as dictatorial rule came to grip Thailand's political scenario with Army General Sarit taking hold of premiership. Prime Minister Sarit's dictatorial regime was met with tough resistance from different quarters of the country and a rising communist insurgency in the impoverished and underdeveloped Northeast (also known as Isan) destabilized the government's policy of ruthless subjugation and the attempt at defining 'nationhood' against the backdrop of coercive social conformity, political docility and

[46] His greatest contribution to Abhidhamma study was his authoritative translation of the *Visuddhimagga* from the original Pāli into Thai. For his contributions to dhamma propagation in foreign countries see **Sasanakij Nai Tang Prathet [Ecclesiastical Duties Abroad]** (Bangkok: Wat Mahāthat Publication, 1983, BE 2526), and for dissemination of Vipassanā meditation see **Somdet Phra Buddhajarn Kab Vipassanā Thura (Commemoration Volume)** compiled by the National Board of Vipassanā. Bangkok, 1990 (BE 2533).

[47] The US based Moral Re-Armament (MRA) Group which was active in the 1950s and 60s in developing interfaith dialogues among religious leaders and general public upheld four guiding principles – absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love which Somdet Āj compared to the four virtues of truthfulness (*sacca*), self-control (*dama*), forbearance (*khanti*) and generosity (*cāga*).

superimposed cultural homogeneity – an attempt that was and is diametrically opposed to the much desired acceptance and celebration of 'differences' within a nation marked by ethnic and linguistic diversities. It was during this conflictual era that Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera became a direct victim of racial discrimination, suspicion, false allegation and groupism within the top brass of the hierarchical Sangha vying for power and positions.[48]

As the ecclesiastical administrative minister, one of the first demands from the government side that was directed towards him was the formulation of the Sangha Code prohibiting lay communists from entering the monastic life. To his rational way of thinking and precise judgment, this demand not only seemed absurd but also harmful for the propagation of Buddhism in the long run. Upon reflection he realized that unless and until the government itself identified communists among the general populace it would not be feasible for the Sangha to formulate the monastic stipulation, since no monastic had the tool and means to selectively identify communists among the lay followers so as to refuse higher ordination and given the political dimension of the matter, the act itself fell outside the domain of monastic spiritualism. He thus argued that the doors of Buddhism ought to remain open for higher ordination to any layman who had faith and the desire to enter the monastic life. In his view had the Sangha declared denial of higher ordination based on the allegation of allegiance to the communist ideology, that would had proved detrimental not only to the abiding faith of the laity on the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha but would also had negatively affected the healthy and reciprocal relationship between the monks and the lay community. Nevertheless, some senior most Sangha members who hesitated to take the matter directly into their own hands unanimously decided to place it squarely on Somdet Āj and demanded that it was his responsibility to formulate the monastic code in order to comply with the government's demand. The venerable Somdet's refusal to

[48] For more details see the interview of Phrapimolatham with Stephen Carr "An ambassador of Buddhism to the West" in **Sasanakij Nai Tang Prathet [Ecclesiastical Duties Abroad]**. (Bangkok: Wat Mahāthat Publication, 1983, BE 2526).

do so was later interpreted as his lack of respect for the elders and the discipline (Vinaya) as a whole and the rumour spread that he was himself a communist.[49]

Allegation after allegation heaped up and he was eventually defrocked and put behind the bars without any valid proof of alleged compliance with the communists. In this swift turn of events what was apparent was the unpleasant truth that most high ranking Sangha members stepped back from the scene and their deliberate silence and lack of willingness to stand united to give moral support to Somdet Āj displayed their indifference to his persistent effort at strengthening the role of the Sangha in reviving and revitalizing the trend of Vipassanā meditation practice. While the present writer is more interested in what followed within the confined and restricted shelter of the prison walls, the venerable Somdet's predicament remains a glaring example of victimization of innocent people on the ground of racial discrimination and ideological difference which when looked from the Levinasian perspective is symbolic of violence to the 'Other'. Levinas' reflection on ethics and the other are particularly relevant to us for a better understanding of the other. In Levinas' perspective the central violence to the other is the denial of/to the other his/her own autonomy. He calls this violence "totalization" and it occurs whenever one limits the other to a set of rational categories, be they racial, sexual, or otherwise. Indeed, it occurs whenever one already knows (however partially/pretentiously) what the other is about before the other has 'spoken', that is, it is the inscription of the other in the same.[50]

3.8 Imprisonment and the practice of Vipassanā meditation

Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera was imprisoned from 1962-1966 (BE 2505-2509) at the Santipal jail of the Central Bureau of Investigation in Pathumwan. In an attempt to humiliate him the police officer-in-charge snatched and tore off his robes and compelled him to disrobe. As a Buddhist country, Thailand's penal codes dictate that

[49] See chronological details of all the legal suits against Somdet Āj in Phromrin, Thong-in. **Kan Sueksa Santivithi Khong Phrapimolatham (Āj Āsabhamahāthera)** [**A study of the peaceful means of Phrapimolatham (Āj Āsabhamahāthera)**], unpublished master's dissertation in Thai, Bangkok: Mahachula Graduate School, 2008 (BE 2551).

[50] Levinas, Emmanuel. **Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority**. trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1969).

no prisoner-monk is permitted to wear the robes once he is incarcerated. The wearing of the yellow robe that symbolically stands for purity and spiritual leadership goes back to the Buddha himself. As a mendicant renunciant the Buddha's only apparel was the yellow robe and the same dress code that was made a part of the monastic disciplinary code (Vinaya) was uniformly adhered to by all his ordained disciples. The historicity of the fact bears great significance to all Buddhists and so in Thailand any monk when sentenced to imprisonment is disallowed to continue to wear the robe. A monastic behind the bars would be a disgrace to the nation and so the first attempt of the legal power holders was to delimit access to Somdet Āj to the 'sign' of monasticism – the 'Robes'. But Somdet Āj's forcible disrobing was only symbolic of physical humiliation to him and in the absence of any formal rite of leaving the Order, he claimed that no real disrobing ever took place. When his righteous claim to the yellow robe was violated through political and legal intervention, he had but little choice and so he wore an off white dress (a pair of pajamas and a shirt) similar to the ones worn by lay devotees during a meditation retreat.

At this crucial moment in his life, when interventionist politics through legal and retributive measures restricted and curtailed all his monastic duties the impact was stupendous externally, but not at the personal level. The dress had changed, but not the mind and he continued to abide by his previous monastic codes – having only one forenoon meal a day, observing the precepts, practicing Vipassanā meditation, paying homage to the Buddha and chanting regularly.[51] Practicing Vipassanā meditation daily became the central activity for him inside the prison walls. The trajectory of his earlier effort at a nation-wide revival of Vipassanā meditation had come to take yet another significant turn and finally reached even the smallest space available in the prison cell – the dark niche turning into an illumined meditation zone! What could be the biggest

[51] See the prison notes **Phajonman – Bantheuk Chiwit Haa Pii Nai Hong Khang [Struggling Against Evil – Record of Five Years in Jail]**. (Bangkok: The Central Office of Vipassanā Meditation, 1987, BE 2530).

irony to the legal forces' ignobility and disregard of a senior ecclesiastical leader who until then had been ordained for more than forty years?[52]

Almost half a century later, today the silent role that Somdet Āj played inside the prison cell comes alive to us once again as a very powerful gesture of commitment to the ideals of Buddhist ethico-spiritualism in general and spiritual leadership in particular. A critical reflection on his quiet resistance brings to light that aspect of moral integrity and *dhammic* determination by the sheer power of which he forged ahead in life despite many hurdles and difficult times. As a contemporary example of dedicated effort, Venerable Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera shines out as a source of inspiration and moral courage to many people.

Although we are not all political prisoners or ordained monastics struggling for a long deserved social space of their own, yet from the Buddhist perspective the five aggregates – corporeality (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) – that we time and again tend to recognize as our selves have already 'imprisoned' us all to varying degrees.[53] Realization of this truth is necessary to make our day to day living less stressful and constricted. Years later after his release, when Somdet Āj was once asked to comment on his life in the prison, he replied with a tinge of joy, "Marvellous! I had the time of my life." Behind his relaxed reply lay the poignant story of his endeavor to transform the physical confinement of the jail into a state of mental freedom through the practice of Vipassanā meditation. Imprisonment and freedom are two sides of the same reality i.e., our corporeal being and it is through rekindling the role of individual leadership

[52] As more and more inmates joined him in the practice of Vipassanā meditation and morning and evening chanting, Somdet Āj named (re-christened) the prison cell as Santipalaram. Santipal was the original name of the jail to which he added the word Aram meaning temple or monastery to signify the activities he was involved in. For a reflective analysis of the event see Sathiengpong Wonapong's article "Somdet Phra Buddhajarn: Āj Phuongāj" in **Somdet Phra Buddhajarn Āj Āsabhamahāthera Ramluek Nuengroi Pii** [Commemoration Volume marking the centennial celebration of his birthday anniversary]. (Khonkaen: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus, 2003, BE 2546), pp.15-24.

[53] See de Silva, Lily. **The Self-Made Private Prison**. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1990).

within each of us that the fettered self can be rescued. So what is this Buddhist leadership and what does it involve?

3.9 Conclusion

Buddhist spiritu leadership does not involve the role of 'leading' others through convincing and persuasive speech, canonical expertise, ideological standpoint, innovative meditation tool, political backing, accumulation of wealth, magical power of amulets, media attention, mask donning, etc but first and foremost in freeing oneself from the winding shackles of ignorance (*avijjā*) and defilements (*kilesa*). If this subjective and very personal element in Buddhist leadership gets severed, then the concept of leadership ceases to hold any true meaning; that is why, Buddhist leadership is different from all other forms of leadership. The foundation of Buddhist leadership is tied to mastering oneself first and then others; leading oneself first, one leads others and not the vice versa. And so no matter who we are, where we are, how well-known or least known we are, the onus of Buddhist leadership rests on each of us at the individual level prior to establishing this role in a wider context. And the pinnacle of this leadership is the realization of the state of egolessness with the constant aid of self-reflection alongside the practice of the three-fold training laid down in the Noble Eightfold Path, within the matrix of which the practice of Vipassanā meditation is so clearly embedded.

Looking at the inspiring examples of Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Somdet Āj we see the ideals of Buddhist leadership – truthfulness, moral uprightness, virtuousness, mindfulness, and self-integrity manifesting brilliantly even at troublesome hours when their life was beset with hardship from effects of various causes be it natural or man-made. Their moral standpoint enabled them to work for the benefit of the Buddhist community even when they were on the verge of losing everything, including their lives. For instance, Somdet Āj could have easily complied with the dictates of his superiors and the ones in power to successfully avoid all the vicissitudes in his monastic life – demotion, disrobing, imprisonment – but it was his unwavering faith in the Dhamma and the inspiration he had derived from Vipassanā meditation practice that perpetually guided him to act in a righteous manner devoid of

any self-interest. The price he paid for his *dhammic* determination was very heavy, but because he did not deter from the right path he could carve out a space for posterity to reflect upon and put into practice the ideals of true Buddhist leadership and its indomitable spirit. During his imprisonment he confronted the challenge to meet social injustice head-on with his motto –

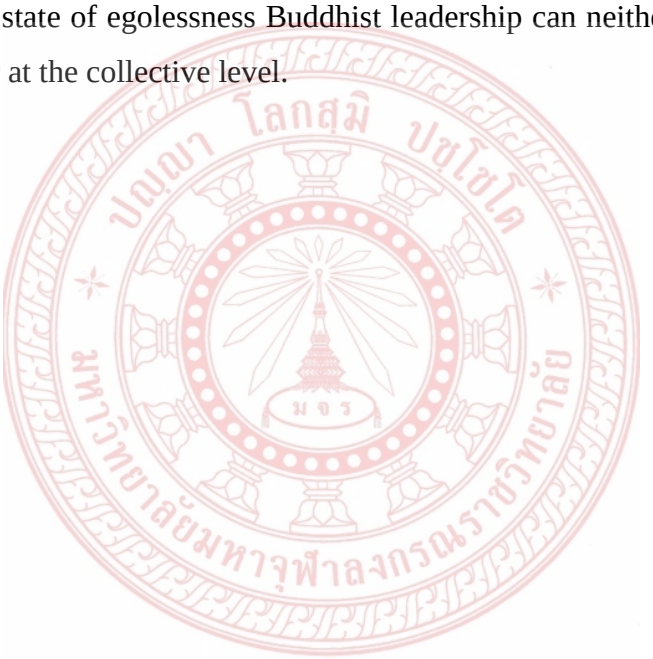
Evil and wickedness fill the world
They encircle the body and mind
The sole means of their destruction
Is goodness.

Commenting on the inspiration drawn from the life of Somdet Āj, the Most Venerable Phra Brahmapundit, the former rector of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University once said, "The three messages that we derive from Venerable Somdet Āj's life are – non-contentment in doing good action, non-retrogression from making an effort and developing a forgiving mind."[54] A true Buddhist leader is never tired or hesitant to engage in righteous action, but at the same time is forever alert to the cultivation of a mind that is non-egoistic and non-self-conceited. Since mindfulness begets not only loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy but above all equanimity, a true Buddhist leader is not slavishly victimized by misanthropy and revenge even at the most unforgiving moments and so his or her mind is full of forbearance, forgiveness and open-mindedness.

Somdet Āj's political imprisonment and our own existential entrapment within the folds of the five aggregates draw our attention to the relevance of Vipassanā meditation practice. With Vipassanā as the guiding practice the fight for justice and egalitarianism becomes a liberatory and meaningful endeavor without at the same time giving rise to schism, conflict and ignorance in the process. Rescuing the fettered self is the inevitable duty of all so as to bring a greater sense of joy and freedom to our lives. To do so begins with knowing one's own mind – how vacillating it is and how

[54] Phradhammakosājarn (formerly Phra Thepsophon). *Somdet Phra Buddhajarn and the development of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University*. A special talk delivered in Thai on the occasion of laying the foundation of the Somdet Āj Centennial Building at MCU Khonkaen Campus on 26 July 2004 (BE 2547).

relentlessly it is tied up by the workings of its own ego. Knowing the mind truly is emptying it of defilements, burning down all the embers of evils within. In other words, it implies decoding the mind of all habitual inclinations. The next step in to encode the empty mind with moral codes/precepts and mindfulness. What gets reinforced in this process of decoding and encoding is the issue of Buddhist leadership and individual commitment to the ideals it embodies. The Buddha's final words: "Transient are conditioned things, try to accomplish your aim with diligence" are a reminder to the fact that the onus of actualizing and living up to the ideals of Buddhist leadership rests on each of us. However, in the absence of virtue, morality and realization of the state of egolessness Buddhist leadership can neither be actualized at the individual nor at the collective level.



Chapter 4

BURMESE MEDITATION MASTERS: THEIR TEACHINGS AND MEDITATION METHODS

In this chapter we make an analytical study of the teachings and meditation techniques of a few Burmese meditation masters namely, Mingun Sayadaw, Taungpulu Sayadaw, and Mahashi Sayadaw keeping in view their unique teaching methods that differ in application but not in attainment of the final goal of liberation.

4.1 Mingun Sayadaw (1869-1954)[55]

U Nārada or Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw founded the first meditation centre with the help of supporters in 1911 in Myo-Hla. He was the first monk to have the idea of organising group meditation courses. According to some researchers, Venerable Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw was descended from Thee-Lon/Thi-Lon Sayadaw (1786-1860).[56] He was one of the many disciples of Aletawya Sayadawgyi. In 1896, Venerable Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw ordained with Venerable Aletawya Sayadaw as his preceptor. Around the age of forty, probably in the year 1908, Venerable Aletawya Sayadaw became a meditation master inspiring the young Mingun Sayadaw and others to take to insight meditation in a genuine way. Tracing back about the unique way in

[55] Sayadaw is a Burmese term of respect when addressing major Buddhist monks and means "great master".

[56] See Gustaaf 'Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma' (unpublished dissertation).

which Venerable Mingun Sayadaw taught meditation what comes to our noctice is that it was through learning canonical texts in Pali as well as the commentaries and Tika in a rather thorough manner that theoretical acquisition of such knowledge was encouraged to put into deep practice. It was therefore assumed by some researchers that Aletawya Sayadaw was the ordination lineage of Venerable Mingun Sayadaw. However, more to the textual studies the Sayadaw came to be credited for being one of the key figures in the revival of Vipassana meditation towards the end of Burma's colonial era.[57] Later, his prominent students, particularly Mahasi Sayadaw, helped popularize what is now known as the "New Burmese Method" or the "Mahasi method."[58]

Nyanaponika Thera, himself a student of Mahasi Sayadaw, describes the manner in which Mingun Sayadaw developed the New Burmese Method:

"It was at the beginning of this century that a Burmese monk, U Nārada by name, bent on actual realization of the teachings he had learnt, was eagerly searching for a system of meditation offering a direct access to the Highest Goal, without encumbrance by accessories. Wandering through the country, he met many who were given to strict meditative practice, but he could not obtain guidance satisfactory to him. In the course of his quest, coming to the famous meditation-caves in the hills of Sagaing in Upper Burma, he met a monk who was reputed to have entered upon those lofty Paths of Sanctitude (ariya-magga) where the final achievement of Liberation is assured. When the Venerable U Nārada put his question to him, he was asked in return: 'Why are you searching outside of the Master's word? Has not the Only Way, Satipaṭṭhāna, been proclaimed by Him?'"

U Nārada took up this indication. Studying again the text and its traditional exposition, reflecting deeply on it, and entering energetically upon its practice, he finally came to understand its salient features. The results achieved in his own practice

[57] Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience", *Numen* 42 (1995) p. 242.

[58] Ibid.

convinced him that he had found what he was searching for: a clear-cut and effective method of training the mind for highest realization. From his own experience he developed the principles and the details of the practice which formed the basis for those who followed him as his direct or indirect disciples. In order to give a name to the Venerable U Narada's method of training in which the principles of *Satipaṭṭhāna* are applied in such a definite and radical way, many scholars have proposed to call it the Burmese Satipaṭṭhāna Method; not in the sense that it was a Burmese invention but because it was in Burma that the practice of that ancient Way had been so ably and energetically revived.[59]

According to Mingun Sayadaw, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, the four foundations of mindfulness, is the only way for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of suffering and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbāna. Indeed the division into four *satipaṭṭhānas* – body, feelings, mind and dhamma – was a direct outcome of Buddha's Enlightenment. It is believed that previous Buddhas too followed the practice of *Satipaṭṭhāna* and it was rediscovered again by Gotama Buddha. The body concentration includes breathing, postures, activities, anatomical parts, the four elements and corpses in decay. The mindfulness on body is followed by concentration on feelings and mind and finally the concentration on the dhammas that include the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the sense-spheres, the awakening factors and the Four Noble Truths.

In the Sayadaw and his path of renunciation we see a similar figure like Ajahn Mun of the Thai Forest tradition with the only difference that Ajahn Mun and most other forest tradition monks did not focus on textual studies from quite early in their monastic careers. For them Nature was an open book that taught them to confront with all kinds of psychological fear, trepidations, doubts and foibles and to eventually overcome all mental formations (*saṃkhara*) through dedicated practice in remote and isolated forested mountains and carnal grounds far away from human habitation.

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[59] **The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: Satipaṭṭhāna: a handbook of mental training based on the Buddha's way of mindfulness, with an anthology of relevant texts** translated from the Pali and Sanskrit by Nyanaponika (Thera). (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1992), pp. 95–96.

4.2 Taungpulu Sayadaw (1898-1986)

Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw, a forest monk residing in Upper Burma, lived a solitary life for almost thirty-nine years practicing the age-old meditation methods that led to deep spiritual realization. Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw was born in Tezu, a large village in the Township of Wundwin, Mandalay Division in 1258 M.E. on the 3rd day after full moon of Tabang (March 1898). At the age of fourteen, he ordained as a novice and was given the name Shin Nandiya. After seven years in novicehood, he received higher ordination from his preceptor U Teja, and came to be known as U Nandiya. Although he was a forest monk and was famous for *paṭipatti,* he was equally famous for *pariyatti sāsana* as he initially studied canonical texts, commentaries, and sub-commentaries under the tutelage of many extraordinarily learned Sayadaws. He resided and taught at Yelai Monastery of Thazi for twenty years before deciding to go for solitary practice. He renounced the monastery at Thazi and went to Thaton where the then famous Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw had founded a meditation center. He learned the Mingun Sayadaw's method of meditation and stayed there for two years. He spent another two years at the village of Dhaywin six miles from Moulmein where at the request of his teacher he took charge of the meditation training. It was after this two-year period that he began the *dhutanga* life of a wandering ascetic who observed silence, had only three robes, begged for his one meal a day, and stayed outside or in a cave, and never placing his body on a reclining position.

According to Taungpulu Sayadaw: “What Makes A Meditation? When you know that you are having greed, you are no longer in ignorance but possess knowledge. If you know that you are angry, and have hatred, you are no longer in ignorance but possess knowledge. When you know that you are having ignorance, that knowing becomes knowledge, and it is a meditation. Even if you become aware of the feeling, “I don’t want to meditate,” that means you have the insight that you don’t want to meditate. Since you know that you do not want to meditate, that knowing becomes the meditation — the mindfulness and awareness that you know what you don’t want to do.” He further urged his followers to have great confidence in the Buddha.

He said: “Have Confidence in The Buddha, and you cannot make a mistake, they say. You will not be reborn in the miserable abodes for 100,000 world cycles, if you have love, respect and have confidence in him by way of your own devotion, you can reach the deva-loka as if you are being lifted up by your own hand. You are very sure to be reborn in the human or deva world. This is your firm destiny. Through your devotion, you will become a streamwinner.” From directing the mind of the devotee to faith he moves on to explicate the core teachings on *Tilakkhana*. He said: “That which you cannot conquer is *anicca*, impermanence. Because you cannot conquer it, there is suffering. If you know, it will break. If you do not know, you will go around and around. This is dependent origination.”

Although he had practiced as a lonely forest monk for a very long time, because of his accomplished teachings he was later requested by pious and lay devotees to spread the dhamma in public. His current leading disciples include Venerable Mahāmyain Sayadaw, U Jotika (1947-), Rina Sircar and many others who are very good at other religions, philosophy and psychology. In 1978, at the age of eighty, Taungpulu Sayadaw left his native Burma for the first time and traveled to the United States on the first of four visits. During these visits to the U.S., the Sayadaw gave discourses, performed ordinations, established a forest monastery – the Taungpulu Kaba-Aye Monastery in Boulder Creek, California – and oversaw the building of the Boulder Creek Shwe Thein Daw World Peace Pagoda, the first pagoda

in the Burmese style constructed in North America. In 1990, four years after the Sayadaw's passing, a relic from his body was enshrined in the Kaba-Thukha Aye Zedi Memorial Stupa, also built at the Boulder Creek monastery.

4.3 Taungpulu Sayadaw's Meditation Method

Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw used the methodical practice of mindfulness based on the thirty-two anatomical parts of the body. The benefits derived from this noble practice of mindfulness of the constituent parts of one's body are described in the *Gradual Sayings*. The thirty-two constituent parts composed of twenty solids and twelve liquids are divided into six groups. According to Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw's teaching method, each group is to be contemplated on for at least five consecutive days. The six groups are as follows:

1. Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, and skin.
2. Flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, and kidneys.
3. Heart, liver, membranes (diaphragm), spleen, and lungs.
4. Bowels, intestines, mesentery, feces, and brain.
5. Bile phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, and solid fat.
6. Tears, liquid fat, saliva, mucus, synovic fluid and urine.

To follow the 165-day course, meditators proceed with the constant recitation and visualization of each of the six groups above, first forward five days apiece and then backward five days apiece. After this first sixty days, they repeat both forward and backward five days apiece. Then the meditator adds together first one, then two, then three, up to the full six groups, for his or her recitations and mindful visualizations, each taking five days for the addition of a new group forward and five days for recitation backward. In the end, after approximately six months, the meditator will reach a point of mindfulness of the full thirty-two parts of the body.

In the dhamma talk "The Peace Beyond" Ajahn Chah reiterates the significance of investigating the body just as Taungpulu Sayadaw does. He says:

"Why should we investigate the body? What is this 'body in the body'? When we say to know the mind, what is this 'mind'? If we don't know the mind then we don't know the things within the mind. This is to be someone who doesn't know suffering, doesn't know the cause, doesn't know the end and doesn't know the way leading to the end of suffering. The things which should help to extinguish suffering don't help, because we get distracted by the things which aggravate it. It's just as if we have an itch on our head and we scratch our leg! If it's our head that's itchy then we're obviously not going to get much relief. In the same way, when suffering arises we don't know how to handle it, we don't know the practice leading to the end of suffering."

In *Blooming in the Desert: Favorite Teachings of the Wildflower Monk*, Taungpulu Sayadaw is quoted in regards to Nibbana, August 24, 1978 (translated by Rina Sircar): "So with the first stage of nibbana, one has to do everything, but one's speech, thought, and actions are beyond greed, hatred and delusion, and are carried out without attachment for anything (…)." "That is the first stage of nibbana, *tha u pa di the ta neban*, the nibbana remaining with the physical bases." "The second stage of nibbana is called *anu pa di the ta neban* – the nibbana remaining without the bases; that is, the enlightened mind and body are separated. But even then something remains. It is the Third Noble Truth – Nirodha – the Cessation of Dukkha. All the other Noble Truths are gone. (…). In this stage of nibbana, the 'person' – the Five Khandas – is no longer there, and there are no more pleasurable or painful states." "All of us are breathing, but none of us can see the breath of one another. So also in the same way, no one can see nibbana, but we can experience nibbana. As you can experience breath, so you can experience nibbana even though you cannot see it. Please try very hard to attain these stages."[60]

[60] Anne Teich ed. **Blooming in the Desert, Favorite Teachings of the Wildflower Monk Taungpulu Sayadaw**. (New Atlantic Books, 1996), pp. 39-40.

4.4 Didactic power in the metaphorical and aphoristic sayings of Taungpulu Sayadaw

While the dhammic messages manifested through similes, metaphors and personification is a powerful tool to inspire the practitioners, Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw's didactically-oriented epigrams and aphoristic sayings too have served the purpose of arising great interest, aspiration and inspiration in the devotees and the disciples. Most of these aphorisms serve as guiding maxims in life since they draw attention towards the prime importance of leading a virtuous life. He says, "Midnight is dark. The new moon is dark. The thickness of the forest is dark. But darkest of all is ignorance."[61] Ignorance here implies the lack of virtue or the Five Precepts.

Mindful abiding by the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*) points towards self-development of inner peace and virtuous living, both for the good of oneself as well as that of others. The self-training involved in the Five Precepts are not something imposed from the above but undertaken with one's own ready willingness, as the formulaic utterance – I undertake the precept to refrain from… (… *veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*), of each of the precepts demonstrate. The precepts, that are democratic in garb and not compulsive chains of binding, are considered as basic codes for maintaining peace and harmony within oneself and with others in one's immediate surroundings. Thus, it is clear that the observance of the precepts is a personal undertaking, however, when the positive effect of the act of observance upon oneself and the resultant well-being upon the society at large is taken into consideration, then it clearly indicates that the precepts actually help foster the issue of human rights,[62] an integral factor leading to communal peace and harmony.

Just as human rights issues safeguard and protect people's public and private welfare against any exploitative encroachment or intrusion, each of the precepts fosters due respect or concern for others' well-being by extending mindful awareness to certain inherent human values like love for life, property, dignity, truth, integrity,

[61] Ibid., "Virtue," p.54.

[62] Also animal rights/non-human rights when it comes to the first precept of abstaining from killing.

etc. Abstinence from killing (*panatipata*) is respect for life as a whole and other beings' right to their own lives. Abstinence from stealing (*adinnadana*) is having respect for other peoples' right to property and maintenance of it. Abstinence from sexual misconduct (*kamesu micchacara*) is respect for the sanctity of human life and its generative power and the right to safeguard it equally by everyone. Abstinence from lying (*musavada*) is respect for human speech and its purity in any interactive discourse. Abstinence from intoxicants (*suramerayamajja pamadatthana*) is respect for consciousness and its integrity, not letting consciousness swing like a monkey on a rope.[63] A society in which most people naturally abide by the precepts is peaceful with fewer cases or instances of theft, murder, rape, corruption, etc. Why is it so? Because each of the precepts triggers the arising of many healthy mental states, which in turn helps dissipate unwholesome mental conditions or thought-processes. Even in the most fundamental act of abiding by the precepts the dependent co-arising of wholesome or dependent non-arising of unwholesome mental states are closely inter-connected.

Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw therefore insisted greatly in developing virtues to make life simple and pure. With the metaphor of the peacock and the dog he beautifully illustrates the significance of the threefold training (*tisikkha*). He says,

"O yogis, you should be like the peacock and not like the dog. In nature, you have most likekly seen both baby peacocks and puppies. Which is more loveable? As the baby peacock is brown and without any feathers, you would probably say the puppy is more loveable. But once the peacock is full grown it has a beautiful blue body and a fan of many colors. However, as it ages the dog loses its furs and suffers from ticks and fleas. Similarly, you must practice *sila* (virtue), *samadhi* (concentration), and *panna* (wisdom) in order to avoid the forlorn fate of an old dog. The continual practice of these three results in spiritual

[63] In the *Abhisanda Sutta: Rewards* the Buddha refers to the Five Precepts as great gifts, "Now, there are these five gifts, five great gifts — original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning — that are not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and are unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives and brahmans. Which five?" Referring to the act of abiding by each of the precepts it is said, "…In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression." *AN* 8.39, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu,1997.

illumination that is like the beautiful royal blue plumage of the full grown peacock. If you fulfill *sila*, *samadhi*, and *panna*, everyone will love you, and you will love yourself as well."

The epigrammatic appeal of the dhamma talks is solidly embedded in the figurative richness and the ease with which it gets expressed so mellifluously. His dhamma talks indicate the necessity for a thoroughly self-conscious reading, one that subjects its own assumptions to close scrutiny. More practice and more reflection, the greater the practice the deeper is the awareness. He reiterates the benefit of focused awareness in "How to Achieve World Peace." He says,

"If I do everything with awareness, then the whole lot of 'I's will be aware, too. If I am mindful; then all around me will be mindful; the whole village will be mindful, then the whole world. If I am mindful, then you must be mindful if you are around me. If I am mindful, you cannot disturb me. If I am always mindful and you are around me, how long can you remain unmindful?"

4.5 Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982)

Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw is one of the greatest *vipassanā* meditation masters of the twentieth century. He was born in 1904 at Seikkhun, a large, idyllic and prosperous village in Upper Burma. He began his monastic education at the tender age of six at Pyinmana Monastery in his native village. He was initiated into the monastic Order as a novice at the age of twelve. A few years later, on 26 November 1923, he was ordained as a *bhikkhu* with the Most Venerable Sumedha Sayadaw Ashin Nimmala as his preceptor. Being extraordinarily bright and dedicated to ecclesiastical

studies, he successfully completed all the three levels of the government Pali scriptural examinations just within four years of his taking to higher ordination.

After this initial accomplishment, he began to teach at Taik-kyaung monastery in Moulmein. While teaching there, he continued with his own studies of the scriptures, being greatly interested in the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta*. His deepening interest in the *satipatthana* method led him to look for a genuine master to learn the practical side of it. He thus went to Thaton where the highly revered master, Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw was teaching it in group retreats. Under the tutelage of Mingun Sayadaw, the young Mahasi took up intensive practice and within a relatively short span of time mastered the technique in great depth that bore very positive results and very soon he could teach to his disciples at his native village. This initial experience of learning with a great master, teaching to others and simultaneously continuing the scriptural studies shaped the young Mahasi Sayadaw's a life and prepared him to emerged as one of the greatest meditation masters whose teachings continue to inspire and benefit many people even today, after more than three decades of his passing away. His lineage has continued to flourish and shape countless peoples' lives, both ordained and lay practitioners, across the globe.

4.6 The Meditation Method of Mahasi Sayadaw

Having trained under Venerable Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw in 1932, Mahasi Sayadaw successfully learned the technique of contemplating of the rising and falling of the abdomen. By paying attention to the four elements within the body namely, earth, fire, wind and water, one can gain insight into their characteristics. This movement (of the abdomen) is the element of motion (*vāyodhātu*), which comes from the section "On the Contemplation of Elements" (*dhātumanasikārapabba*) in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.* The starting point is rising and falling of the abdomen, then mindfulness in each posture of the body, and then gradually to know all kinds of feeling and thought that constantly arise in the mind. Mahasi Sayadaw has written many treatises on the practice that explain in great detail the methodical cultivation of mindfulness in each bodily posture while taking the movement of the abdomen as the core focus to concentrate the mind. His *Manual of Vipassana Meditation* remains an

authoritative and comprehensive work expounding both the doctrinal and practical aspects of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. In order to understand the procedure and to implement it at the practice-level, the steps can be outlined into three major exercises as follows.

Basic Exercise I While in a comfortable seated position, sitting erect with legs crossed, the mind (but not the eyes) is kept focused on the abdomen, the rising and falling movements, the expansion and contraction of the abdomen. If the movements are not clear to the meditator, then he or she is encouraged to place both hands on the abdomen to feel the rising and falling movements. After a short time the outward movement of inhalation and the inward movement of exhalation become clear. Then one is encouraged to make a mental note, *rising* for the outward movement, *falling* for the inward movement. The mental note of each movement must be made while it occurs. From this intial exercise meditators can learn the actual manner of the movements of the abdomen. However, one is not encouraged to concern with the form of the abdomen. Instead what one actually perceives is the bodily sensation of pressure caused by the heaving movement of the abdomen. This simple exercise helps the beginner to effectively develop the facilities of attention, concentration of mind and insight in contemplation. As practice increases, the manner of movement gets clearer.

Basic Exercise II While occupied with the exercise of observing each of the abdominal movements, other mental activities may occur between the noting of each rising and falling. Thoughts or other mental functions, such as intentions, ideas, imaginings, etc are likely to occur between each mental note of rising and falling. These are not to be ignored and simply disregarded but a mental note must be made of each as it occurs.

Basic Exercise III Since one must continue contemplating for a long time while in one position or posture, that of sitting or lying down, one is likely to experience an intense feeling of fatigue, stiffness in the body or in arms and legs. When any such sensation arises, the mind is encouraged to focus on that part of the body in which the sensation arises and continue contemplation, noting tiredness or stiffness. If there is movement, each detailed movement of the body must be contemplated in its respective order but not in any haphazard manner.

Through diligent practice mindfulness and concentration gradually improve in the meditator. Gradually, through concentrated attention, the meditator knows how to distinguish each bodily and mental process: “The rising movement is one process, the knowing of it is another.” While contemplating, one notices a material process as object and a mental process of knowing it, and it is to that pair alone that the terms of conventional usage – being, person, man or woman – refer. But apart from that dual process there is no separate person or being, I or another, man or woman.

Venerable Sayadaw’s disinterested and single-minded devotion to the cause of the Dhamma practice and propagation led to his meditation technique spread far and wide to many different countries. That he continued undertaking many missions for the propagation of the Dhamma and Vipassana meditation regardless of his advancing age and feeble health inspired generations of students who continued to preserve the lineage with great zeal and dedicated effort.

4.7 Conclusion

Vipassanā meditation is the main tool of the Buddhist practitioner in the absence of which Buddhism as a way of life, practice and thinking is hard to achieve. The Buddha bequeathed this tool to his followers so that each individual had the means to testify for himself or herself the truths he had taught. The Buddha did not base his teachings on hypothetical assumptions but rather on a pragmatic, goal-oriented and experiential understanding. Let me digress a little bit here so as to pinpoint the truth that without experiential knowledge mindfulness and insights can never become an integral part of the actual understanding of Buddhism no matter how well we argue, write and speak. Argumentative speaking and writing skills are techniques that can be developed but dhammic insights need to be cultivated through consistent and dedicated practice. There is no short-cut to the Path of Dhamma Practice, no formula or equation that one can simply memorise and reach to the highest truth, no capsule one can swallow and attain to higher states of realization. Looked at from the deeply practice oriented path of Buddhism we can clearly see how philosophers’ linear arguments often times form their own slippery grounds where arguments tend to follow their own chain of ignorant premises and syllogisms.

Derrida, for instance, in his text *The Gift of Death* states that: "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others."[64] That is why for Derrida it seems that the Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal. Derrida's skepticism about the conjugality of non-attachment and universal love and compassion in Buddhism arises because he looks at the matter from a purely theoretical perspective without the use of the practical method of Vipassanā. He thus missed the point and failed to realize the simple truth that because there is non-clinging to the dictates of the ego, the state of non-attachment arises and when there is non-attachment, universal love can arise spontaneously.

> Non-clinging to one's ego → non-attachment → universal compassion
> Realization of *tilakkhaṇa* → the true practice of *brahma vihāra*

Now how this process works is to be realized and practiced by oneself through the cultivation of moment to moment mindfulness in order to fight with one's defilements and the ego's endless craving that gives rise to all the three evils – greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). And mindfulness is sustained through Vipassanā meditation that gives rise to experiential understanding of the three characteristics of existence – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). This understanding is indispensable to free oneself from all defilements that arise from craving and attachment and when the mind is clean of selfish desire and clinging the four divine qualities – loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*) spontaneously blossom in the heart. Did the Buddha give up Vipassanā meditation after his enlightenment? Was he ever fully satiated with the practice of Vipassanā once his disciples became *arahants* and began to propagate the dhamma? So, true Buddhist spiritual leadership implies taking this core method as a sustained practice in life.

While Derridean deconstruction nurtures a critical approach by inculcating the habit of constantly undoing the dichotomous relation between all binaries,

[64] Derrida, Jacques. (1992). **The Gift of Death**. trans. David Wills. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

deconstruction itself is not necessarily rooted in any ethical values as such. In fact, through its questioning and re-questioning the concept of 'truth' and 'being' deconstruction as a mode of critical heuristic method seems to withdraw itself from a direct ethical standpoint. Quite contrary to this, is the approach of all the three Sayadaws whose subtle de-reifying approach to all conditioned states, never really displaces the great value on disciplinary training pertaining to the inter-connectedness in the practice of *sīla, samādhi* and *paññā*. Without morality, concentration cannot be developed and without concentration, wisdom cannot arise. While the Sayadaws urge on cultivating a deep level of understanding on non-substantiality and non-attachment to all conditioned states, whether physical or mental, yet they clarify and justify the inter-connection of the three and bear an uncompromising attitude towards the strict adherence to the monastic codes (*vinaya*).

In the absence of Vipassanā it is not easy to understand the habitual working of the mind that naturally tends to grasp at everything. It is even more difficult to accomplish the state of non-attachment and egolessness. To a mind yet not free from attachment and ego-formation, certain aspects of the Vinaya will always appear useless, outdated, partial, undemocratic and even misogynistic. For instance, many feminists tend to read the eight heavy rules (Garudhamma) for bhikkhunīs as unjust that place ordained women at a very subservient position. No matter how undemocratic these codes may appear from the modern day perspective, in essence they were meant to be adhered to for the harmonious co-existence of the bhikkhu and bhikkhunī sangha.

Will any negative energy be diffused suppose a much senior spiritually advanced bhikkunī pays her respects to a newly ordained monk? Will her spiritual maturity leave no trace on him? Will he be not humbled by her presence? Will not her perfection remind him of the hard work that awaits him? But the moment we assess the situation from a gender conscious outlook we fail to see the positive side and unnecessarily create tension between the conventions of age and sex and fail to view the two factors within the matrix of the three essential characteristics of existence *(tilakkhaṇa)* – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and selflessness (*anattā*).

Vinaya is the hallmark and not weakness of monasticism and through mindful adherence to it a monastic upholds the role of Buddhist leadership in all its chastity and sanctity. Emphasizing the significance of the monastic codes as supportive tools for the true realization of dhamma, the most venerable Ajahn Chah said, "All our actions – wearing the robes, collecting alms-food – should be done mindfully, according to the precepts. The Dhamma and discipline that the Buddha gave us are like a well-tended orchard. We do not have to worry about planting trees and caring for them; we do not have to be afraid that the fruit will be poisonous or unfit to eat. All of it is good for us. Once inner coolness is attained, you still should not throw away the forms of monastic life. Be an example for those who come after; this is how the enlightened monks of old behaved."[65]

In a lay Buddhist the observance of the precepts play an equally significant and meaningful role. For the monastics the Vinaya and for the lay community the five precepts act as a protective armor that strengthens each group leading to the formation of a strong base for not only socio-economic but mental development and awakening of wisdom. Mindful adherence to the five precepts – abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxicants – are essential in securing optimal happiness, harmony and safety in human relationship.

Negligence of the precepts has led to the escalation of many social evils like crimes, corruption, bribery, power abuse, prostitution, human trafficking, drugs and alcohol addiction to an alarming degree. Avenues of all sorts of sensual fulfillment are readily available in today's age of globalization, but safety zones are fast disappearing. Human life is dominated by endless craving and a sense of discontentment. Climate change and global warming are the phenomenal outcome of the quantum of *tanhā* underlying every heedless move of progress and change.

Since Buddhist leadership is based on developing mindfulness and insight, it is neither nourished nor sustained by self-centered views and interests. Going against the dictates of the 'I' and all its self-centered propositions Buddhist leadership deconstructs all the binaries that arise from clinging to the self at the linguistic,

[65] **A Still Forest Pool**. "Restraint," p.113.

ontological and conceptual/meditative levels. In other words, Buddhist leadership helps to strike a balance between living and working selflessly for the benefit of oneself and others without at the same time upholding the ego and its endless claims for self-aggrandizement.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Holistic well-being in the meditation masters' teaching methods

All the masters included in the research insisted time and again on following the Middle Way that emphasizes on not taking interest in either pleasure or pain and laying each of them down. If one is genuinely interested in Dhamma, one must learn to just give up, just let go and not get caught up in the attachments of the world and in relative judgments. The habitual nature of an untrained mind is to grasp at everything that is pleasant and reject with aversion all that is unpleasant without attempting to contemplate that impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness run through both pleasant and unpleasant conditioned states alike. Therefore, clinging to pleasant states brings suffering as much as aversion to unpleasant states does. Ajahn Chah puts it graphically, "When through desire, the heart grasps what is pleasant, it is just grasping the tail of the snake. It only takes a little while longer for the head of the snake to come around and bite you."

The Venerables had insisted on doing everything with a mind that lets go, that does not expect any praise or reward. This is because 'letting go' is a highly self-reflexive mental exercise that leads to peace, tranquility, and harmony with oneself and one's surrounding. No doubt it is the most difficult formula, but when put into practice it leads to true freedom. In the words of Ajahn Chah, "If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end. If you see states rising and falling in the mind and do not cling to the process, letting go of both happiness and suffering, mental rebirths become shorter and shorter. Letting go, you can even fall into hell states without too much disturbance, because you know the impermanence of them. Through right practice, you allow your old *kamma* to wear itself out. Knowing how things arise and pass away, you can just be aware and let them run their course."

All the six meditation masters'profound teachings uphold a paradigm of holistic well-being which benefits the mind at the spiritual, psycho-cognitive and

philosophico-contemplative level. At the ethico-spiritual level, the timeless teachings train the mind to free itself from defilements and all sorts of evil thoughts and unwholesome mental formations through the routine practice of cultivation of mindfulness focusing on the practice of *vipassanā* or insight meditation and ethical reflection. The rigorous training insists on recognizing the arising of defilements – greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*) – and discarding these defilements through the practice of mindfulness. As Ajahn Chah says, "The only way to reach an end in the practice of virtue is by making the mind pure."[66] With the constant mindful effort at recognizing defilements and then annihilating them, morality comes to be established on a firm attitudinal disposition that is marked by clarity of vision and understanding of the Law of Kamma i.e., resultant good or bad effects consequent on good or bad deeds. With unshakeable moral foundation the mind naturally matures to that level when it does not harbor negative emotions like feelings of jealousy, vindictiveness and revenge and so becomes calm, peaceful and non-confrontational. The non-confrontational disposition emerges because in its attempt to eradicate defilements the mind has already learnt to recognize and wage the internal war to vanquish such unwholesome states of mind like greed, hatred and delusion every time they arise.

At the psycho-cognitive level, the mind is enriched by the flow of positive emotions. The spiritual or moral maturity benefits the mind immensely at the psychological level as when in the absence of defilements the mind is enriched by various positive emotions such as contentment, love, fellow feeling, and self-reflexivity. The inner healthy state of mind is outwardly manifested in various positive behavioral patterns like happiness, gentleness in speech and bodily actions, non-aggressiveness, moral uprightness, concern for others, etc. With the influx of positive emotional states and mindful sustenance of them, the mind remains calm, peaceful and non-agitated and hence non reactive to negative and adverse forces and unfavorable situations. When the mind is continually calm and peaceful it is innocuous and hence receptive to positive flow of mental energy that ultimately leads to infusion of

[66] **A Still Forest Pool**."Rules Are Tools", p.114.

inspirational joy in oneself and others alike. As Ajahn Chah says, "The point of all practice is to lead to freedom, to become one who knows the light all the time."[67]

At the contemplative level, the teachings enable the mind to arrive at the state of equanimity (*upekkhā*). The mind free from defilements and desires and established on virtues gradually acquires the state of equanimity as it proceeds to see clearly all sense impressions having a common nature – impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of self. When equanimity is maintained, the mind gradually recognizes the pernicious workings of the ego and can distance itself from it. With growing mental strength imbibed from the practice of insight meditation and reflective apprehension of the fleeting nature of all things and the truth of *anattā* or non-substantiality i.e., all phenomena are non-self, and that there is no real essence, soul, or self, the ego can be transcended for good.

A balanced mind is one that is free from clinging to the ego. When the mind matures with the transcendence of the ego, the mental state moves to the state of egolessness and once this state is achieved the mind ceases to work within the dictates of binary oppositions. This is possible because the mind is trained to see through the process of thought construction and creation of illusions that arise from continuous clinging to various physical objects and mental formations, both wholesome and unwholesome. The mind that is habitually meditative and mindfully aware realizes that good or evil only arise in one's mind and so to be fully liberated one needs to step out of any such binaries. Transcending the binary oppositions the mind develops non-attachment to the ego, stimuli-driven pleasures or displeasures and all mental formations – spiritual, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, etc. The mind at this stage is tranquil and liberated with pure awareness and calmed of both elation and sorrow. This is when one realizes the Middle Path in one's practice. Ajahn Chah has pointed out, "The Buddha teaches us to keep laying down the extremes. This is the path of right practice, the path leading out of birth and becoming. On this path, there is neither

[67] **A Still Forest Pool**. "Rules Are Tools", p.114.

pleasure nor pain, neither good nor evil. Our Path is straight, the path of tranquility and pure awareness, calmed of both elation and sorrow."[68]

A mind not enslaved by clinging is free from selfish desires and motives and as it realizes the true state of things as being subjected to constant change, suffering and selflessness, it gets infused with certain sublime states of mind such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. The mind's realization of the true nature of everything, including the human self in all its conditioned physical and mental states, as subject to repeated alterations and non-substantiality or selflessness, empties itself of egoistic self-fulfilling desires and selfish motives, and such an empty mind is the *tabula rasa* into which imprints of the sublime states of mind can get easily encoded without any exertion.

All the Venerables are exemplary models of individuals who constantly strove for that innate wisdom the attainment of which led to the realization that not only the body but the mind too is not one's own self – not belonging to us, not I, not mine and so all of it i.e., clinging to one's body and mind must be dropped. According to Ajahn Chah, real meditation has to do with attitude and awareness in any activity, not just with seeking silence in a forest cottage. "In the end, we must learn to let go every desire, even the desire for enlightenment. Only then can we be free." Therefore, he urges his monastic and lay disciples to go beyond words and see and experience the process of deconstruction by oneself. He says, "If you are interested in Dhamma, just give up, just let go. Merely thinking about practice is like pouncing on the shadow and missing the substance. You need not study much. If you follow the basics and practice accordingly, you will see Dhamma for yourself. There must be more than merely hearing the words. Speak just with yourself, observe your own mind. If you cut off this verbal, thinking mind, you will have a true standard for judging. Otherwise, your understanding will not penetrate deeply. Practice in this way and the rest will follow."[69] Through the challenge to cut off the verbal/thinking mind the issue of metaphysics-of-presence in rendered at once redundant. However, to any person not

[68] **A Still Forest Pool**. "The Middle Way", p.7.

[69] Mahasi Sayadaw, **The Great Discourse on Not Self (Anattālakkhana Sutta),** (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1996). p.11.

conversant or familiar with meditation practice the challenge is not only burdensome but would simply appear unthinkable. On another informal occasion, he said, "To define Buddhism without a lot of words and phrases, we can simply say, 'Don't cling or hold on to anything. Harmonize with actuality, with things just as they are.'"[70]

5.2 Holistic well-being humanity can derive from the Thai and Burmese Meditation Masters' Teachings

The message of non-substantiality and non-clinging so poignantly expressed in the teachings of the Venerables from Thailand and Myanmar can serve as a panacea for the world steeped in the quagmire of growing discontentment. The Venerables have clearly demonstrated that when the mind does not grasp and is not caught up in the endless circles of desires and attachment, it leads to clarity of vision. The clear vision that can arise from non-attachment is badly lacking in our lives today. The different types of clinging that Buddhism identifies, such as: clinging to passions of the body, taste, smell, sound, sight, and other types of contact (*kāmupādāna*), clinging to views, such as opinions, doctrines and various theories (*ditthupādāna*), clinging to mere rules and rituals as the only true way (*sīlabbatupādāna*), and clinging to a self and mistakenly creating a self to cling to (*attavādupādāna*) have proliferated at a rapid scale, making people's lives centered upon extremely hedonistic and myopic concerns. As a result, no matter how high and sophisticated living standards have come to be, life still remains dull at the conceptual level.

Not only the message of non-clinging but the lesson of deconstruction of the self/ego is useful to end linguistic bickerings, racial prejudices and religious disputes that have bred uncanny hatred, jealousy, vain pride, suspicion, contempt, subjugation and misuse of power among different groups of people. To sustain the reality of hybridity and multiculturalism that are characteristic traits of today's world of globalization, the deconstruction of the individual ego is indispensable. The experiences of colonialism and the two world wars have shown that vain pride in one's racial and cultural origins gives rise to hatred and contemptuous disregard for other

[70] From the Dhamma Talk "Learning to Listen", given in September 2521 (1978) at Wat Nong Pah Pong and available at www.ajahnchah.org.

cultures and people outside one's own community leading to untold miseries and pain and disruption of unity and harmonious co-existence. When the principle of deconstruction of the ego is put into real practice, it helps to replace parochialism and jingoistic tendencies with loving-kindness and compassion towards others and fosters a more receptive world view which is based on tolerance, impartiality, fairness and egalitarianism. With a kind and compassionate mental disposition one can learn to accept and celebrate differences among groups of people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. While teaching his ordained disciples from various different countries and religious backgrounds Ajahn Chah emphasized, "For harmony with the group, we must give up pride and self-importance and attachment to fleeting pleasure. If you do not give up your likes and dislikes, you are not really making an effort."[71]

The type of mindfulness and deep understanding of non-substantiality that all the Venerables have urged us to develop is required for our fight with ourselves, to distill our hearts from 'bad faith' and sterilize our minds from unwholesome desires so that we are not slavishly caught up in the nexus of me and mine, I and the other. Both through the cultivation of mindfulness and reflective internalization of non-substantiality or *anattā* a holistic world view can be developed. At the mundane level, the emphasis on non-substantiality is indispensable to reduce hatred and deconstruct all conflictual categories and at the supra mundane level, reflective understanding of *anattā/sunyatta* in day to day life leads to blissful contemplation and makes life worth-living. As Ajahn Chah says, "Our lives are like the breath, like the growing and falling leaves. When we can really understand about falling leaves, we can sweep the paths every day and have great happiness in our lives on this changing earth."[72]

What we see in the theoretical side of Buddhist meditative practice in the writings of the Venerables and the practical side of it through the teachings methods and the exemplary lives that the masters have had led, we witness the emptiness of all phenomena including emptiness inherent in the very concept of *anatta* itself. All the masters and especially Ajahn Chah displayed great mastery in using the deconstructive

[71] **A Still Forest Pool**. "Harmony with Others", p.119.

[72] Ibid."The Leaves Will Always Fall", p.104.

mode of teaching through his emphasis on the practice of 'letting go' that led to non-reification of any absolute entity. While the text-bound exposition of emptiness of all phenomena and noumena in the writings of Buddhadasa and the Sayadaws from Myanmar led to a critical assessment of many heretical interpretations that appeared in the Buddhist tradition, the practice-oriented deconstructive teachings expressed through spontaneously delivered dhamma talks led to confronting and working directly with the devotee-practitioners's own problems of greed, judgment, hatred and ignorance. For instance, Ajahn Chah and Taungpulu Sayadaw's direct and simple teachings always turn their followers back to their own minds, the source and the root of all trouble.

The ethical message of all the Venerables emphasized that true understanding of the concept of non-substantiality leads to understanding everything in life and nature as-it-is-in-itself. This understanding is not inaction and passive acceptance as some people might hastily conclude. Enlightenment does not mean deaf and blind. On the other hand, enlightened understanding leads to empirical deconstruction of the 'self' and the 'self-in-action'. Time and again the masters through their dhamma talks and meditation sessions emphasized on seeing through the process of thought construction so as to recognize from one's own experiential reality the fact that when the mind is stirred from the normal state of tranquility, it leads away from right practice to one of the extremes of indulgence or aversion, thereby creating more illusion, more thought construction. A true understanding of the nature of the mind helps people to free it from conventional reality and so the mind is not enslaved by codes, customs, traditions, conventions, linguistics choices, personal predilections. Once this state can be achieved all binary oppositions get automatically collapsed leading to no more creation of dichotomy/polarity and slavish clinging to its hierarchical chasm.

The dhamma talks demonstrate down-to-earth profundity in practice that has arisen from moment-to-moment self-scrutiny and mindful practice of 'letting go'. In Ajahn Chah's form of empirical-deconstruction which involves conscientious and mindful teasing apart of all binary oppositions and releasing from their binding, there is no room for *aporia* or conflictual and conceptual hiatus. Although Ajahn Chah was

not a philosopher in the conventional sense of the term, nevertheless, his numerous dhamma talks bear testimony to the fact that he incessantly worked within the matrix of a mode of practice that can be categorized as a practical-form-of-deconstruction. Such a mode of practice does not valorize the 'written' text alone as academically-oriented philosophers are likely to do, but renders the practice a moment-to-moment phenomenal and empirical garb through the rigorous practice of both insight meditation and material simplicity in tandem. It can be concluded that the 'deconstructive' tool through which Ajahn Chah had sought to dispose of all self/ego arising positions helped lead to a state of knowledge or wisdom (*paññā*) the cutting edge of which provide axiomatic guidelines for a holistic living.

From our comfort-oriented lives today, the lifestyle of the Venerables may appear rather difficult, crude, irrelevant, utopian, ideal and non-appealing. Yet, in order to deal with the various problems that have arisen in the world due to the perilous mishandling of the ego and the rekindling and fueling of endless desires, we cannot afford to deny the inspirational, thought-provoking and abiding teachings of these great meditation master from the Theravada forest tradition of Thailand and Myanmar. Certain very useful messages from their thinking and practice can be emulated for the cultivation of a holistic approach to life and living.

The message of selfless renunciation of the Venerables is a reminder to us in scaling down excessive infatuation with material possessions and unbridled human greed – trends set in by the neo-capitalist market policies and consumerism. Today's consumerist culture is characterized by the trend of material indulgence more than the practice of moderation. And so although life has become comfortable, it has not resulted in an increase of true happiness and genuine satisfaction. Most people are discontent, prone to extravagance, obsessed with consumption and heedless to the benefits of cultivation of contentment. In this context, it is worth taking a look at the lifestyle of the Venerables and all their worthy disciples whose selfless renunciation has given rise to moderation in living and cultivation of contentment leading to lasting happiness. The cultivation of contentment is indispensable for the maintenance of optimum moral growth and ethical standards in any society. Cultivation of true contentment leads to a clean separation of the two contradictory tendencies namely,

desires for true quality of life and temptations to fulfil artificial desires, and prepares the ground for the establishment of the former. As the scholar-monk, P.A. Payutto puts it, "Contentment understood correctly means cutting off the artificial desire for sense-pleasure but actively encouraging and supporting the desire for quality of life. In Buddhism, contentment is always paired with effort. The purpose of contentment is seen to be to save the time and energy lost in ministering to selfish desires, and using it to create and nurture true well-being."[73]

The message of non-clinging of the Venerables is a panacea for the world steeped in the quagmire of growing discontentment. All the Venerables have clearly demonstrated that when the mind does not grasp and is not caught up in the endless circles of desires and attachment, it leads to clarity of vision. The clear vision that can arise from non-attachment is badly lacking in our lives today. The different types of clinging that Buddhism identifies, such as: clinging to passions of the body, taste, smell, sound, sight, and other types of contact (*kāmupādāna*), clinging to views, such as opinions, doctrines and various theories (*ditthupādāna*), clinging to mere rules and rituals as the only true way (*sīlabbatupādāna*), and clinging to a self and mistakenly creating a self to cling to (*attavādupādāna*) have proliferated at a rapid scale, making people's lives centered upon extremely hedonistic and myopic concerns. As a result, no matter how high and sophisticated living standards have come to be, life still remains dull at the conceptual level.

The Venerables's practice of compassion is an inspiring example. Attempts should be made to cultivate such a positive value for the happy and harmonious co-existence of all and for successful implementation of eco-friendly projects that can positively affect the flourishing of not the human race alone but also animals and plants. Such attempts can restore a balance in the eco-system which has long suffered from ravages of human greed and selfish motives. Unmindful plundering of nature has led to massive deforestation and extinction of wide range of animal species. When trees are fell and animals are poached, greedy minds look at nature as a domain that can be conquered and plundered endlessly. Churning short-term benefits from natural resources human beings fail to see themselves as an integral part of the eco-system.

[73] P.A. Payutto, **Buddhist Economics**, (Bangkok: The National Identity Board 1994), p. 33.

But with the cultivation of a compassionate outlook, one comes to recognize and value interdependence of lives on earth. Thus a tree along the road side is not seen as a log of wood that can be chopped off at one's will, but is considered a home to birds, insects, worms and a shady shelter for a weary traveler. Compassion to all living being leads to non-confrontation and harmony – harmony with oneself and with one's fellow beings and surrounding. Therefore, the cultivation of this great quality leads to eco-friendly consciousness and preservation of forests and nature as is witnessed in the case of each of the forest monasteries founded by the Venerables where resident monks live in harmony and contemplative quietude in the midst of nature.

The Venerables are role models for us in regards to their unwavering moral standpoint. If such a moral standpoint is not cultivated, it would be rather difficult to train our 'monkey' minds (equipped with ever more sophisticated technology) and to reduce crimes, corruptions, exploitations and misuse of power. The wheel of human progress can acquire a balanced momentum only when moral values are established on a firm footing. The defilements – greed, hatred and delusion – are at the root of all suffering and selfishness. The forest tradition monks have taught their numerous followers to learn to overcome, conquer and go beyond these defilements. Ajahn Chah says, "The defilements are like a tiger. We should imprison the tiger in a good strong cage made of mindfulness, energy, patience, and endurance. Then we can let it starve to death by not feeding its habitual desires."[74]

The type of mindfulness that all the Venerables have attained is required for our fight with ourselves, to distill our hearts from 'bad faith' and sterilize our minds from unwholesome desires so that we are not slavishly caught up in the nexus of me and mine, I and the other. Through the cultivation of mindfulness a holistic world view can be developed. As has been pointed out by Ajahn Chah, "When you pick mushrooms to eat, you do not do so blindly; you have to know which kind is which. So too with our practice – we must know the dangers, the snake's bite of defilements, in order to free ourselves from them. Everyone has defilements in his practice. We must work with them, struggling when they arise. This is not something to think about but to do. Much patience is necessary. Gradually we have to change our habitual ways

[74] **A Still Forest Pool**. "Starving Defilements", p.31.

of thinking and feeling. We must see how we suffer when we think in terms of *me* and *mine*. Then we can let go."[75]

It can be concluded that all the masters possessed great mastery in using the ascetic discipline to teach their ordained disciples and lay followers to confront and work directly with their own problems of greed, judgment, hatred and ignorance. Their direct and simple teachings always turn the followers back to their own minds, the source and the root of all trouble. Their profound teachings emphasized that understanding the *tilakkhaṇa* and putting this understanding into practice leads to understanding everything in life and nature as-it-is-in-itself. This understanding is not inaction and passive acceptance as some people might hastily conclude. Enlightenment does not mean deaf and blind. On the other hand, enlightened understanding leads to empirical deconstruction of the self and self at work. The forest tradition monks emphasized on seeing through the process of thought construction so as to recognize from one's own experiential reality the fact that when the mind is stirred from the normal state of tranquility, it leads away from right practice to one of the extremes of indulgence or aversion, thereby creating more illusion, more thought construction. A true understanding of the nature of the mind helps people to free it from conventional reality and so the mind is not enslaved by codes, customs, traditions, conventions, linguistics choices, personal likes and dislikes. Once this state can be achieved all binary opposition get automatically collapsed at the same time leading to no more creation of 'meta-narratives.'

The dhamma of the Venerables is down-to-earth, but yet difficult to realize and understand when the mind is ceaselessly caught up in the quagmire of defilements and heedlessness to defilements. It requires moment-to-moment self-scrutiny and mindful practice of 'letting go'. In this form of empirical-deconstruction which involves conscientious and mindful teasing apart of all binary oppositions and releasing from their bindings, there is no room for *aporia* or conflictual and conceptual hiatus. All the Venerables, even though not philosophers in the conventional sense of the term, nevertheless, incessantly worked within the matrix of a mode of practice that can be categorized as a practical-form-of-deconstruction. Such a mode of practice does not

[75] **A Still Forest Pool**. "Starving Defilements", p.31.

valorize the ‘written’ text alone as academically-oriented philosophers are likely to do, but renders the practice a moment-to-moment phenomenal and empirical garb through the rigorous practice of both insight meditation and asceticism in tandem. It can be concluded that the ‘deconstructive’ tool through which the Venerables and most essentially Ajahn Chah had sought to dispose of all self/ego arising positions helped lead to a state of knowledge or wisdom (*paññā*) the cutting edge of which provide axiomatic guidelines to solving numerous problems encompassing such diverse states and situations as psychological, environmental, and economic.

5.3 The teachings shape a mind-set and epitomize Buddhist ethico-spiritual leadership

Through the very good example of the Venerables we can understand the concept of Buddhist spiritual leadership. The Venerables refrained from using money in day to day life, they did not directly focused on investment of cash to propagate the dhamma, all their lives they stayed in rural set-up away from the media and never had any self-propagandist agenda, yet they very successfully disseminated the dhamma far and wide. Taking them as monastic role models we can reflect upon the essence of Buddhist leadership and its implications. Buddhist leadership does not involve the role of ‘leading’ others through convincing and persuasive speech, canonical expertise, ideological standpoint, innovative meditation tool, political backing, accumulation of wealth, magical power of amulets, media attention, mask donning, etc but first and foremost in freeing oneself from the winding shackles of ignorance (*avijjā*) and defilements (*kilesa*). If this subjective and very personal element in Buddhist leadership gets severed, then the concept of leadership ceases to hold any true meaning; that is why, Buddhist leadership is different from all other forms of leadership. The foundation of Buddhist leadership is tied to mastering oneself first and then others; leading oneself first, one leads others and not the vice versa. And so no matter who we are, where we are, how well-known or least known we are, the onus of Buddhist leadership rests on each of us at the individual level prior to establishing this role in a wider context. And the pinnacle of this leadership is the realization of the state of egolessness with the constant aid of self-reflection alongside the practice of

the three-fold training laid down in the Noble Eightfold Path, within the matrix of which the practice of Vipassanā meditation is so clearly embedded.

Since Buddhist spirituo-ethical leadership is based on developing mindfulness and insight, it is neither nourished nor sustained by self-centered views and interests. Going against the dictates of the 'I' and all its self-centered propositions Buddhist leadership deconstructs all the binaries that arise from clinging to the self at the linguistic, ontological and conceptual/meditative levels. In other words, Buddhist leadership helps to strike a balance between living and working selflessly for the benefit of oneself and others without at the same time upholding the ego and its endless claims for self-aggrandizement. Looking at the inspiring life of all the Venerables we see the ideals of Buddhist leadership –truthfulness, moral uprightness, virtuousness, mindfulness, and self-integrity manifesting brilliantly even at every situation. His moral standpoint enabled him to work for the benefit of the Buddhist community. It was his unwavering faith in *dhamma* and the inspiration that he derived from Vipassanā meditation practice that perpetually guided him to act in a righteous manner devoid of any self-interest. Because he did not deter from the right path he could carve out a space for posterity to reflect upon and put into practice the ideals of true Buddhist leadership and its indomitable spirit.

Commenting on the inspiration drawn from the life of Ajahn Chah, Paul Breiter (formerly, Ven. Varapanyo Bhikkhu) in the afterword to his remarkable book *Venerable Father* remarked, "Travelling through Thailand and England, visiting Ajahn Chah's monasteries as well as the homes of former monks, one thing comes through consistently, and that is the love, gratitude and high regard for Ajahn Chah of all those who spent a part of their lives under his guidance. From the simple remark, "Luang Por was good, wasn't he?" to the statement that "he was the most remarkable person I ever met …. And one of the greatest men Thailand has ever produced," it is quite obvious how he reached people and shaped their lives for the better."[76]

[76] Paul Breiter, **Venerable Father – A life with Ajahn Chah**, (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994), p.173.

From the great example of all the Venerables we can conclude that a true Buddhist leader is never tired or hesitant to engage in righteous action, but at the same time is forever alert to the cultivation of a mind that is non-egoistic and non self-conceited. Since mindfulness cultivation helps give rise to not only loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy but above all equanimity, a true Buddhist leader is not slavishly victimized by misanthropy and revenge even at the most unforgiving moments and so his or her mind is full of forbearance, forgiveness and open-mindedness.

5.4 Concluding remarks and suggestions for further research

With Vipassanā as the guiding practice the fight for socio-political justice and gender egalitarianism becomes a liberatory and meaningful endeavor without at the same time giving rise to schism, conflict and ignorance in the process. Rescuing the fettered self is the inevitable duty of all so as to bring a greater sense of joy and freedom in our lives. To do so begins with knowing one's own mind – how vacillating it is and how relentlessly it is tied up by the workings of its own ego. Knowing the mind truly is emptying it of defilements, burning down all the embers of evils within. In other words, it implies decoding the mind of all habitual inclinations. The next step in to encode the empty mind with moral codes/precepts and mindfulness. What gets reinforced in this process of decoding and encoding is the issue of Buddhist leadership and individual commitment to the ideals it embodies. The Buddha's final words: "Transient are conditioned things, try to accomplish your aim with diligence" are a reminder to the fact that the onus of actualizing and living up to the ideals of Buddhist leadership rests on each of us. However, in the absence of virtue, morality and realization of the state of egolessness Buddhist leadership can neither be actualized at the individual nor at the collective level.

In this research we have cited numerous examples from the dhamma talks and sayings of all the six Venerables to demonstrate their teachings. All their teachings are resplendent with profundity and clear exposition of the core Buddhist concepts. As direct and simple the dhamma expositions could be, they are simultaneously marked by spontaneity and deep reflection, hence they serve as great food for thought.

This research is an attempt at critically analyzing the ethico-philosophical dimension manifested in the dhamma expositions of six foremost meditation masters from Thailand and Myanmar, all of whom belonged to the Theravada Forest Tradition. The austerity in the practice of meditative mindfulness that accompanied the strict adherence to *vinaya* or monastic disciplinary codes had made all the Venerables accomplished meditation masters, whose profound teachings are today widely disseminated across the globe. Their collected teachings form a corpus of reflective guidelines for the cultivation of mental well-being that is not only conducive to individual moral growth but also for communal spiritual health and mental well-being along the path set forth by the Buddha more than two millennia ago. When we take a close look at the teachings of the Venerables and especially of Ajahn Chah, we can see a continuous flow of ideas similar to that of Derridean deconstruction being put into real life practice. The salient feature of the Venerables's teachings is that thought-provoking similes and metaphors intersperse almost all the dhamma talks that strategically lead to the cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*) through a mindful deconstruction of all dichotomous thought-processes.

While the deconstructionist's challenge to binary oppositions is centered upon logocentrism, what is deconstructed in the teachings of the Venerables is not just language, but the human Ego itself in all its *kammic* dimensions – linguistic, psychological, social, ethico-philosophical, and cultural orientations. In the numerous dhamma talks of these great renunciant monks, it is clearly reflected that the trained mind of a meditator transcends its own ego and at a higher contemplative level proceeds to deconstruct all dualistic notions starting from the very concepts of me and mine, I and the 'Other'. Given the antiquity and ubiquity of binary thought processes dominating every human discourse, it is interesting to see how in the dhamma talks binaries get ceaselessly dismantled time and again. By mindfully de-reifying all mental formations, conditioned states and conventional linguistic signs – be it the written word or the verbal utterance – the simple, direct and profound teachings bring to the fore the importance of cultivation of Right Understanding in daily life for the well-being and true liberation of oneself and others. That is why the teachings have great relevance today for productive and sustainable relationship both at the regional and global level. The relevance of the teachings arise from both their profundity and

practical applicability, since underneath the teachings lay accumulated knowledge of the meditation master, gathered over years of experiential quest to lead the mind to acquire that level of mindful understanding which is absolutely free from defilements and egoistic clinging. Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike can gain from the teachings because the underlying messages embodied in them are free from sectarianism. The universality in the praxis can be applied at any time and situation by any interested person, irrespective of religious and cultural background.

In conclusion it can be said that although this research is limited to the study of the mode of dhamma practice and mindfulness cultivation of Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Somdet Aj Asabhamahathera from Thailand and Mingun Sayadaw, Taungpulu Sayadaw and Mahasi Sayadaw from Myanmar, the critical approach of it can be applied to similar studies of ethico-philosophical approach of other great meditation masters of the Thai-Isan forest tradition – Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Thate, Ajahn Maha Bua, Ajahn Teean Chittasubho and others. The approach can also be applied to an analytical study of the continuation of the Venerables' way of philosophizing and mode of practice by their longstanding disciples from Thailand, Myanmar and other countries, especially from the West. There is also the need to undertake further research of a comparative nature. It is hoped that the methodology will be of much benefit and can be very well extended to a comparative study of the Venerables's approach with the *weltanschauung* of other well-known monks who are not directly from the forest tradition but whose practice and approach is based on rigorous insight meditation practice. It is hoped that the approach incorporated in the present research will open up new vistas of enquiry and add a new dimension to the analytical approach in the study of Buddhism in the near future.

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Appendix

Interview questions to monastics, academics and lay practitioners

The following unstructured questionnaire was designed to be used during interview sessions of a few selected respondents/informants that included both monastics (monks, white-clad nuns/maechiis, and bhikkunis) and lay experts.

1. How familiar are you with the teachings of Thai meditation masters like Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Somdet Āj Asabhamahathera and meditation masters from Myanmar like Mingun Sayadaw, Tuangpulu Sayadaw, and Mahashi Sayadaw? Have you had the chance to visit the monasteries of these Venerables like Wat Nong Pah Pong at Ubon Ratcathani province in Northeast Thailand, Suanmokkh in Surathani province in Southern Thailand, Mahasi Monastery, Yangon, Myanmar? If yes, what in your opinion is the uniqueness of the monasteries you have visited so far? How and in what ways is the ambience conducive towards the cultivation of mental development?

2. As monks who followed the monastic codes (*vinaya*) strictly, Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Somdet Aj Asabhamathera, Mingun Sayadaw, Tuangpulu Sayadaw and Mahashi Sayadaw abstained from using any cash money in daily life. What is your opinion about this? Is it a good example that should be emulated by other monastics, especially those who are fully dedicated to meditation practice? Or, is it an extreme form of practice that cannot be applied in the present-day context and situation of globalization?

3. This practice of non-using cash money in daily life can be interpreted as an epitome of true practice of contentment, cutting down of every desire pertaining to materiality and unnecessary aggrandizement of wants. Moreover, without a focus on cash-flow, Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Somdet Āj Asabhamahathera, Mingun Sayadaw, Taungpulu Sayadaw and Mahashi Sayadaw could spread the dhamma far and wide across the globe. How do you assess these Venerables vis-à-vis the Dhammakaya, the Santi Asoke, and modern-day Sayadaws's effort at propagating dhamma with a direct focus on the flow of cash money from devotees or privatized enterprises?

4. What do you think of the six Venerables use of language in teaching dhamma? Ajahn Chah for instance, never spoke any English, or for that matter any foreign language, except for his native tongue, Isan and the national language, Thai. Yet, he could teach dhamma very successfully to his disciples from diverse socio-religious, linguistic, and racial background. His disciples came from different countries like the US, UK, France, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Israel, Japan, Germany, Austria, etc. Why do you think language was never a barrier to him in dhamma communication?

5. The Venerables' dhamma talks abound in local images, similes, metaphors, puns, paradoxes, etc. Why and how in your opinion, could the Venerables' successfully use such indigenous images to put the dhamma across to a global community that was constantly seeking their guidance along the spiritual path?

6. Do you think the six Venerables had great psychological prowess to fully comprehend their disciples' demeanour – their psychological depths and spiritual needs? They could literally probe into their minds and give very timely ethical counseling that both baffled and nurtured the disciples. How in your opinion could the Venerables accomplish this without resorting to any form of magical or supernatural means that are common methods employed by some monastics in the Theravāda tradition?

7. What is your opinion about the teaching method of the Venerables (if, you are familiar with it)? What aspect of their teachings do you like most and why?

8. All the Venerables did not have any higher formal secular education or university degrees, yet their dhamma exposition is precise, clear, analytical, of penetrative depth, consistent (consistency is evident even in repetitive emphases), and can be paralleled to contemporary philosophical trends like Derridean deconstruction. What do you think is the main instrumental force behind this?

9. All the Venerables were very strict with monastic disciplinary codes (*vinaya*) and demanded that their disciples adhere to the same form of strictness too. They treated all their disciples, the natives as well as the ones from abroad

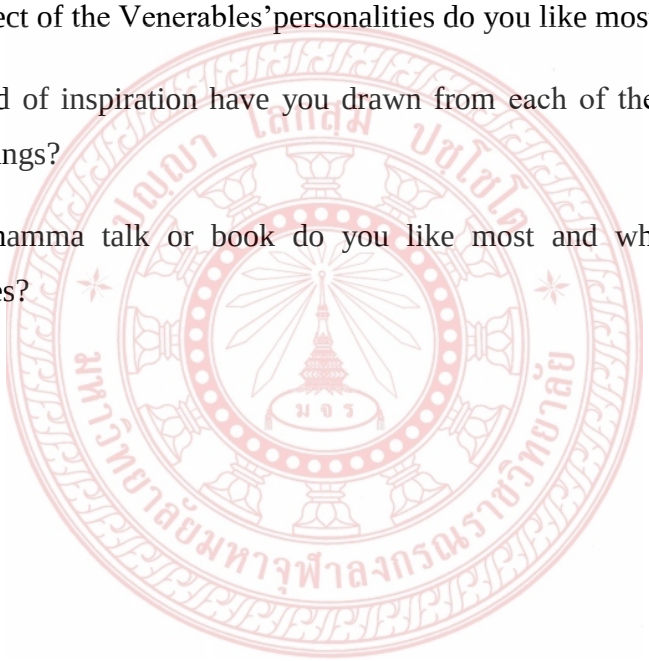
equally, without any form of partiality, leniency in practice or bias. Despite this strictness and non-manipulative approach, there was and still is a constant flow of disciples to their monasteries (even after the passing away of the Masters). How do you assess this success story of most of these monks who spent their entire lives in rural set-up away from any media attention and without having any self-propagandist agenda?

10. What in your opinion is the Venerables's greatest contribution to Buddhism in their capacities as monastic leaders and meditation masters?

11. What aspect of the Venerables'personalities do you like most?

12. What kind of inspiration have you drawn from each of the Venerables's life and teachings?

13. Which dhamma talk or book do you like most and why of each of the Venerables?



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International Conference on 'Introspection on Buddhist Traditions', Gautam Buddha University, India, 2012

The 2nd International Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Universities (IABU), Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2012

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