



Insight Meditation in Myanmar and Thailand Based on Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw's Teaching

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Abstract

Thailand was greatly influenced by the new meditation technique from Myanmar, through Thailand alone has its long history of meditation tradition. Myanmar has produced a few great historical figures in Theravada Buddhist tradition who played a very important role in meeting the fundamental meditational needs of monks and lay followers. Among all those great figures, Mahasi Sayadaw is one of those who had reintroduced the Vipassanā technique in Myanmar and immediately obtained high recognition and acceptance by the Buddhist practitioners and scholastic world.

This article describes the historical background of meditation, mainly Samatha and Vipassanā, as practiced by the Buddha himself, its development in different time periods and contemporary popular meditative traditions in Theravada Buddhist countries.

Keywords: Insight Meditation, Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw, Myanmar, Thailand

Introduction

The meditation techniques taught by the Buddha can be generally classified as *Samatha* and *Vipassanā*, which has been translated as concentration meditation and insight meditation. One, *samatha*, is the development of mental concentration, or one-pointedness of mind (*cittakaggatā*). This kind of meditation is simply concentrating the awareness.¹ The term “*Vipassanā*” originally came from *Pāli* language. The “vi” is an intensifier and the word “*passanā*” means “to see”. Therefore, it is seeing with greater intensity or depth. Here, it means seeing the world and its nature in its depth. According to Buddhism, this world or *loka* has three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self. *Vipassanā* meditation is primarily concerned with giving rise to the realization of these three realities of world, as *Vipassanā* is the primary tool to gain wisdom and attain enlightenment.²

This new development in the practice of *Vipassanā* meditation and the whole movement started and gained strength in 19th and 20th centuries. It was introduced by U Nārādha and popularized by Mahasi Sayadaw. Mahasi Sayadaw’s method is known as new Burmese method as opposed to the method taught by teachers preceding him, such as Ledi Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw, and We Bu Sayadaw.³ In recent years the practical method of Ledi Sayadaw and Webu Sayadaw popularized the practice of *Vipassanā* in modern time, especially among the western audience, and shaped the worldwide mindfulness movement.⁴ These masters used the teaching found in *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and developed it further in order to gain insight in to the true nature of reality. *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* speaks of the awareness of the body and its movements, feelings (pleasant, unpleasant and neutral), mind and mental qualities, and ultimately awareness of *Dhamma*.⁵ In the *Sati Sutta*⁶ of *Anguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha taught that by practicing mindfulness one comprehends the dhamma clearly and

¹Piyananda Bhikkhu, **Gems of Buddhist Wisdom**, (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1993), p. 371.

²Bodhi, Bhikkhu. **The Noble Eightfold Path**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), p. 14.

³Joseph Goldstein & Jack Kornfield. **Seeking the Heart of Wisdom**, (Boston: Shambhala Publication, 2001), p. vii.

⁴Joseph Goldstein & Jack Kornfield, **Seeking the Heart of Wisdom**, (Boston: Shambhala Publication, 2001), p. vii.

⁵Majjhima Nikaya. Vol- I, p. 55.

⁶Bodhi, Bhikkhu (trs), **Numerical Discourses of the Buddha**, (*Anguttara Nikāya*), (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2012), p. 1229.

develops the sense of moral shame and moral dread. One restraints the sense faculties and eventually develops virtuous behavior, which leads the practitioner to right concentration to gain knowledge and vision of things as they really are.

The aim of this research is to study Mahasi Sayadaw's teaching on *Vipassanā* meditation and its significance in Myanmar and Thailand. Mahasi Sayadaw made a significant influence on the teaching of *Vipassanā* in the Western countries as well as in many of the Southeast Asian countries. His teaching on *Vipassanā* is known as the new Burmese *Vipassanā* method. An important feature of Mahasi Sayadaw's approach is its dispensing with the traditional preliminary practice of fixed concentration or tranquilization. Instead, the meditator practices *Vipassanā* exclusively during intensive periods of silent retreat that can last several months.⁷ Two key elements in Mahasi Sayadaw's method for developing mindfulness are the careful labeling of one's immediate experience together with the cultivation of a high level of sustained concentration known as "momentary concentration."⁸

Mahasi Sayadaw heavily emphasized on the practice of four basic meditation techniques from *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. 1) Newcomers have to concentrate on the abdomen, noting the movements of rising and falling. 2) If meditator imagines or thinks of something, he or she must make a mental note on it. 3) If meditator intends to move his hand or leg, there should be a mental note on intending.

This research will examine the existing *Vipassanā* method according to the teaching of Mahasi Sayadaw and its practices in contemporary Thailand and Myanmar based on the material available in English and Burmese as well as the translation of *Pāli* canonical texts. The author used the works of Mahasi Sayadaw, his immediate disciples as well as western scholars written on *Vipassanā* as the primary source of information.

⁷Phra Thepyanmongkol, **A Study Guide for Samathā Vipassanā Meditation Based on the Five Meditation Techniques**, (Bangkok: The National Coordination Center of Provincial Meditation Institute of Thailand, 2012), pp. 3-6.

⁸Mahāsi Sayadaw, **Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), p. 22.

Vipassana Meditation Taught by Mahasi Sayadaw

The uniqueness of this *Vipassanā* practice mainly consists in the observation of the abdomen as an object of concentration, mental noting technique, mindfulness and slowdown of activities. Mental noting is an important technique that is used for the development of *Vipassanā* in Mahasi Sayadaw meditation technique.

Traditionally, the prescribed object of meditation for calming the mind has primarily remained the breath or rather observation of the sensation of breath. Observation of the breath naturally brings calmness to the mind and the breath as an object of meditation is very natural and easily available. There are number of places in which people feel the sensation of the breath more acutely, such as the nostrils or the upper lip; rising and falling movements of the chest or the abdomen are also valid objects of meditation. However, Mahasi Sayadaw prefers the observation of abdomen.

Furthermore, the observation of the abdomen is similar to that of slow walking; as we can observe the foot rising and falling, it is possible to also experience abdomen rising and falling. Mahasi Sayadaw did not recommend to pay attention to the breath while walking as it leads to the tendency of losing contact with the body. Therefore, observation of the breath in the area of nostrils is a popular and effective way of achieving higher state of absorption or *jhāna*. If the mind is focused on a single object, the concentration effectively suppresses everything else, including the emotions. But when you emerge from the concentration you know that during the absorption the mind was very clear and it was all the time one with the object of concentration, the circle of light.⁹

However, it is also true that without a certain level of concentration one will not be able to engage in the sustained contemplation of the insight meditation. Therefore, such concentration is useful. Although Mahasi Sayadaw did give preference to the observation of abdomen, he did not discourage anyone from taking up the breath and sensation of the breath at the nostrils as means of achieving concentration.

The framework of Mahasi Sayadaw's teaching on *Vipassanā* meditation is largely based on *satipatṭhāna* and the seven stages of purification or *satta-visuddhi* from the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification) written by Acariya Buddhaghosa. Working on

⁹Venerable Sujiva, Essentials of Insight Meditation Practice, (Malaysia: Buddhist Wisdom Centre, 2000), p. 165.

these stages of purification gradually gives rise to insight knowledge or *vipassanā-ñāṇa* and ultimately leads to liberation. Mahasi Sayadaw adopts the approach of ‘bare insight’ (*sukkha-vipassanā*) in which the practitioner directly observes one’s physical and mental processes. One learns to see with increasing clarity the three characteristic of conditioned existence, which are impermanence, non-self and suffering.

The practice begins with the contemplation of the body, which remains till the end of all stages. Through practice, as the strength of mindfulness increases, the insight knowledge gets deepened, ultimately culminating in liberation. This practice gives rise to the insight into three *lakhana* without the development of the full range of *jhanas* or absorptions, therefore, it is also known as bare insight. However, the higher level of concentration is mandatory for the practice of *Vipassanā*.

Furthermore, as the teaching of Mahasi Sayadaw is based on *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna*, it focuses on the four foundations of mindfulness as means to alleviate the suffering of mind and overcome mental defilements. This is how the *sutta* describes it. If one wants to be born into the realms of men, devas, and brahmas, and ultimately to reach the Path and attain *nibbāna*, one must practice charity, morality, and mental development. One who aspires to the Path and its Fruition, and ultimately *nibbāna*, must practice insight meditation.¹⁰

“This is the sole way for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destroying of pain and grief, for reaching the right path, for the realization of *nibbāna*, namely, the four foundations of mindfulness. The four foundations of mindfulness are: (1) contemplation of the body; (2) contemplation of feelings; (3) contemplation of mind; and (4) contemplation of mind objects.”¹¹ Further, Mahasi Sayadaw also focuses on the need of a teacher for the development on the path.

The New Burmese Method of Vipassana

The “New Burmese Method” was originally introduced and developed by Venerable U Nārada and later on it was being popularized by his disciple Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw. Venerable Nyaṇaponika Thera also did much to popularize this new movement among the

¹⁰ U Htin Fatt (trs), *On the Nature of Nibbāna by The Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw of Burma* (First printed and published in the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, 1981), p. 28.

¹¹ M. Kāyagātāsati Sutta, p. 119.

English speaking audience. Many American teachers such as Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg studied with Mahasi Sayadaw and his disciple U Pandita.¹²

One of the key features of this new method is that it dispenses with traditional stage of *Samatha* focusing on the concentration and instead focuses exclusively on the practice of *Vipassanā*. One goes through the rigorous practice of meditation for months on end, with some meditation teachers designing schedules that demand most of the day starting from 3am to 11pm in silence and in meditation practice.

Mahasi Sayadaw focuses on the development of mindfulness with the careful labeling of one's experience together with high level of sustained concentration or *Khanika Samadhi*.¹³ Robert H. says that Buddhist practices are aimed at the attainment of "correct view, no just bare attention."¹⁴ Although Mahasi Sayadaw was a great *Pāli* scholar and was very familiar with the *Abhidhamma* teaching, the practice of *Vipassanā* that he popularized does not requires the knowledge of the philosophical teachings found in *Abhidhamma* or for that matter the strict observance of the *Vinaya* or monastic discipline.¹⁵ The method as introduced by Mahasi Sayadaw also promised a quick result. This was made possible due to the interpretation of the sati as the "bare awareness" or the unmediated, non-judgmental perception of things as they really are. The interpretation of sati slightly varies from the traditional Buddhist explanation of the term. The traditional Buddhist practices are geared toward cultivating the "right views".

Mahasi Sayadaw lived in a village of *Seikkhun* in upper Burma. At a very early age he received monastic education under U Adicca and got ordain as novice monk. He received his higher ordination in 1923.¹⁶ He was also a remarkable student and passed all the three *Pāli* scripture examinations. Later on in his life he became deeply interested in the study of *Mahasatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. It was due to his interest in the *Mahasatipaṭṭhāna sutta* and the *Vipassanā* practice that he decided to go to Thaton and practice *Vipassanā* under Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw. It was under him that Venerable *Sobhana*, as he was named

¹²Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, **The Faces of Buddhism in America**, (California: University of California Press,1998), p. 163.

¹³Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, Op. cit., p. 165.

¹⁴Robert Sherf, Op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁶Mahasi Sayadaw, **The Progress of Insight**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), p.

at the time, took his first serious practice of *Vipassanā*. He practice it very diligently for four months before he started teaching his first three disciples at his village in Seikkhun during 1938.¹⁷

Unfortunately, his teacher Taik Kyaung Sayadaw passed away and the responsibility to continue teaching and practicing meditation at Thaton was passed to him. In the meanwhile, he was also set for an examination of *Dhammacariya* or teacher of *Dhamma* and passed it with distinction during 1941¹⁸. Due to the Japanese invasion, Venerable Sobhana had to leave Thaton for his village at Seikkhun. He started teaching and practicing *Vipassanā* there to local community. Since then he became known as Mahasi and the monastery where he started teaching as Mahasi monastery at Seikkhun.¹⁹ It was also during this period that he started writing his first “Manual of *Vipassanā* Meditation”, which became an authoritative and comprehensive guide to the *Vipassanā* meditation, exploring both doctrinal aspect as well as practical side of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation.

Development of Meditation Movement by Mahasi Sayadaw and his Mission to Abroad

Mahasi Sayadaw has gained fame as a meditation teacher in the upper Burma which brought him the attention of a wealthy Buddhist named U Thwin who wished to make the Buddha Dhamma and the practice of meditation available to more people. After attending one of the discourses by Mahasi Sayadaw he made up his mind that Mahasi Sayadaw was the right kind of teacher for teaching meditation. He set up the Buddhasasana Nuggaha Association at Rangoon and donated five acres of land to the association for establishing the meditation center.²⁰ By the end of 1978, the meditation center had acquired 19.6-acre land with vast complex of buildings to support the needs of meditators. It was not until 1949 after the independence of Burma that Prime minister of Burma requested Mahasi Sayadaw to take on the teaching of *Vipassanā* at *Sasana Yeiktha* at Rangoon.²¹

¹⁷ Jack Kornfield, **Modern Buddhist Masters: Living Buddhist Masters**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication society, 1977), p. 53.

¹⁸ U Nyi Nyi, **Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw: A Biographical Sketch**, (Yangon: Myanmar Buddhasasana Nuggaha, 1978), p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰ Jack Kornfield., Op. cit., p. 54.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 55-56.

There are numerous other meditation centers were opened in many parts of Burma under the guidance of Mahasi Sayadaw by his trained disciples. Due to the popularity of Mahasi Sayadaw, large number of people turned to meditation and it became too difficult for Mahasi Sayadaw to personally give initiations talks to all the meditators, therefore, the meditation center started playing a recorded tape of Mahasi Sayadaw's talk for all the meditators in year 1951.²²

Mahasi Sayadaw also started training the Sangha members as teachers to teach in Burma. The meditation movement started by Mahasi Sayadaw became so popular that neighboring Theravada countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka and Cambodia started similar meditation centers under the guidance of Mahasi Sayadaw and his senior disciples. According to some estimate in 1972, about 700 thousand people were trained under Mahasi Sayadaw's guidance in Burma and abroad. Mahasi Sayadaw was honored by the Prime Minister of Burma for his service and received the title of “*Aggamahapandita*” or the Exalted Wise One. He also played an important role in the Sixth Buddhist Council or *Sangayana* as an editor and questioner.²³

At the request of the Government of Sri Lanka a special mission was formed during 1955 to teach *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation in Sri Lanka under the guidance of Mahasi Sayadaw. The mission opened up 12 permanent and 17 temporary meditation centers in Sri Lanka. Mahasi also ordained an Indonesian man called Mr. Bung as Venerable *Jinakakkhitta* and initiated him into progress of insight. Mahasi Sayadaw also sent a mission to Indonesia at his request to start a meditation center there. Together with 13 other monks, Mahasi Sayadaw ordained many disciples as monks and novices, gave a number of Dhamma discourses and taught *Vipassanā* meditation.²⁴

At the request of Thai Minister for *Sangha* Affairs, Mahasi Sayadaw sent a mission to Thailand consisting of his senior disciple U Asabha and U Indavamsa to teach meditation and promote the practice of *Vipassanā* in 1952.²⁵ It was due to their effort that *Vipassanā* meditation has become widely known and popular among Thai people. Numerous meditation centers were opened and many teachers benefited more than 100,000 people in Thailand

²² U Nyi Nyi, Op. cit., p. 6.

²³ Jack Kornfield., Op. cit., p. 59.

²⁴ U Nyi Nyi, Op. cit., p. 7.

²⁵ U Nyi Nyi, Op. cit., pp. 7-8.

through the practice of Mahasi Sayadaw's method during the first 10 years of this mission. Despite his ill health, Mahasi Sayadaw undertook five more missionary visits to Britain, Europe, America, India and Nepal.

At the request of Masoeyein Sayadaw who then presided over as *Sanghanayaka* of the executive Board at Sixth Buddhist Council, Mahasi Sayadaw taught two commentaries on Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga Atthakatha* and Venerable Dhammapala's *Visuddhimagga Mahatika* which are mostly concerned with Buddhist meditation theory and practice. Mahasi Sayadaw also translated *Visuddhimaga Mahatika*; altogether he produced some 67 volumes of Burmese Buddhist literature most of which is on *Vipassanā* meditation and related topics as well as *sutta* studies.²⁶

Mahasi Sayadaw attracted many visitors interested in meditation and seeking enlightenment. One of the first disciples who came to practice under Mahasi Sayadaw was British Rear-Admiral E.H. Shattock who came to Sasana Yeikta in 1952. He also published a book called "An Experiment in Mindfulness" after his return to England. Mr. Robert Duva, a French born American man, came to practice meditation at his center and later also ordained as monk. He also published a book in French about his experience in *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā* method.²⁷

A well-known teacher from India called Anagarika Shri Munindra came from Bodhi Gaya to learn and practice meditation under Mahasi Sayadaw and became a very close disciple and spent several years learning and practicing *Vipassanā*. Joseph Goldstein, another American, also came to practice and later wrote a book on insight meditation called "The Experience of Insight: A Natural Unfolding". Following these early works many more people came to practice and later on wrote about *Vipassanā* meditation.²⁸

Criticism of Mahasi Sayadaw's Method of Vipassana Meditation

Mahasi Sayadaw, despite his popularity also received criticism from certain quarters for his unorthodox method of noting the rising and falling of the abdomen in *Vipassanā* meditation. It is more often assumed that such a practice was an innovation of the Sayadaw

²⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁷ Jack Kornfield., Op. cit., p. 61.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

himself and had no canonical ground for it, but the truth is it has been adopted before Mahasi Sayadaw by Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw and is not contrary to the Buddha's teaching on the subject of meditation.²⁹

Mahasi Sayadaw adopted this method because the beginners find it easier to note the manifestation of the element of motions or *Vayudhatu* or air element. However, Mahasi Sayadaw did not impose this method to people who come to practice meditation at his centers if they preferred, for example, the practice of *Anapanasati* and observing breathing instead of the rise and fall of abdomen. Mahasi Sayadaw did not engage in such criticism. Later on two of his disciples gave some explanation of this method for critics to examine and see the merit if they wished so.³⁰

Controversies of this nature arose among the members of Sri Lankan Sangha; critical articles against the Mahasi Sayadaw's method were published in English newspapers and journals. Since such articles were written in English the audience was far larger and the necessity to address such misunderstanding became acute. Therefore, Sayadaw U Nanuttara of World Peace Pagoda responded to the criticism in Sri Lankan Buddhist periodical called 'World Buddhism'.

The System of Insight Meditation in Thailand

There are many schools of *Vipassanā* meditation, however, there are also great deal of concentration oriented meditation. There are systems of meditation in Thailand which emphasize the development and the practice of *Vipassanā* meditation. There are various traditions, some paying more attention on the preliminary concentration practice at the beginning while others directly emphasize on the practice of *Vipassanā* from the start.

There are meditation systems that vary in their emphasis on the *Vipassanā* meditation in Thailand. The Samatha tradition of Northeast Thailand is famous for its approach to meditation that focuses on the practice of *samadhi* or concentration. This approach is also referred to as Forest tradition; *Thammayuta Nikaya* does pay greater emphasis on this system of meditation.³¹ This system involves the development of some stage of *samadhi* but also

²⁹ U Nyi Nyi, Op. cit., pp. 8-9.

³⁰ U Nyi Nyi, Op. cit., p. 11.

³¹ Cousins L.S., **The Origin of Insight Meditation**, The Buddhist Forum, Vol. IV, 1994-96, (London: University of London), p. 9.

brings the element of insight meditation at early stage of its meditation system. This method also employs the practice of Buddha Mantra with mindfulness of breathing together with the meditation on the 32 parts of the body.³²

This approach can be considered a more conservative and reformist at the same time; it can also equate to that of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's tendency toward ultimatums. Wat Paknam's approach to meditation is more traditional and involves concentration on various centers of the body, in particular one slightly above the navel, and the recitation of the mantra *samma araham*. *Dhammakaya* is an offshoot of this kind of meditation with similar kind of meditation practice with strong tendency toward modernization, however, it is rather in presentation and not so much in its essential principles and ideas.

There are several kinds of meditation systems that are present in Thailand. They are as follows 1) The Triple Gem Meditation, 2) Mindfulness of Breathing, 3) Observing Rising and Falling, 4) Observing Mind-Body, and 5) *Dhammakaya* Meditation. These types of meditation systems present in Thailand cover both *Samatha* and *Vipassanā* forms of meditation or present the combination of both. Let us briefly examine them in turn.³³

The Development of Thai Forest Meditation Tradition

The practice of *Vipassanā* in Thailand comes from Mahasi Sayadaw's system of meditation in most part apart from few other sources within Burma. Therefore, it would not make sense to go over the same material as gone before while explaining the Mahasi Sayadaw's practice of meditation. However, I would recount the few essential points followed within Thai tradition of *Vipassanā* meditation. The four foundations of mindfulness, or *satipaṭṭhāna*, are an integral part of the practice. The practice of concentration or Samadhi is also encouraged within this meditation system. Beside the practice of sitting meditation, walking meditation is also given due its importance.³⁴

Thai Forest Tradition is largely a monastic meditation movement, that being said,

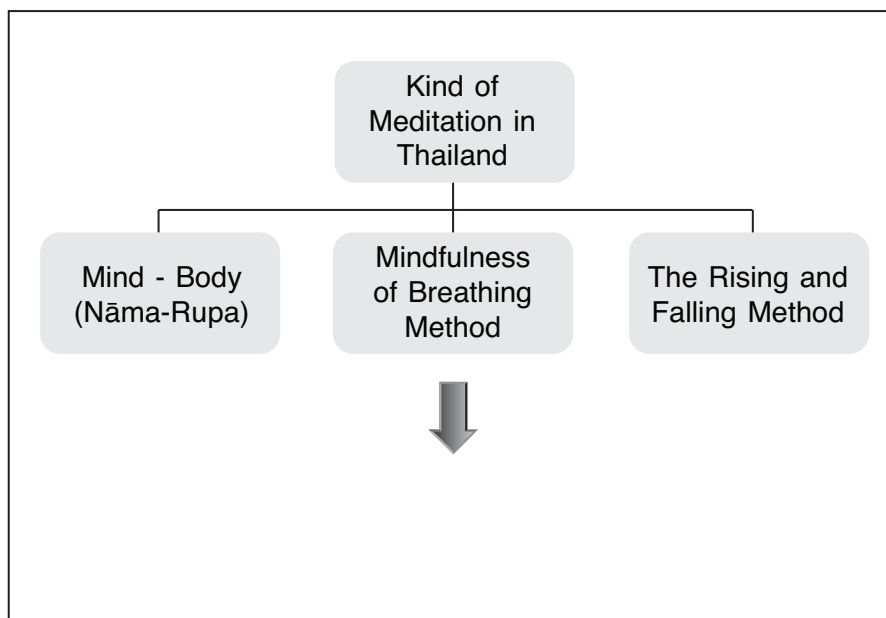
³²Cousins L.S., **The Origin of Insight Meditation**, The Buddhist Forum, Vol. IV, 1994-96, (London: University of London), p. 11.

³³Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakaram, **A Study Guide for Samatha Vipassanā Meditation Based On the Five Meditation Techniques**, (Rajchaburi: The National Coordination Center of Provincial Meditation Institute of Thailand, 2012), pp. 6-11.

³⁴Mahasi Sayadaw, **Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages**, (Kandy : Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), p. 16.

it also has impacted lay meditation movement immensely, the development of Thai forest monastic community was in response to the growing perception that Buddhism was in a state of decline. The practitioners in this tradition live in remote areas, which are mostly forest dwellings or remote wilderness and training grounds for the practice of meditation and monastic life in general. This monastic community is widely known of its austerity and strictness in practicing *Vinaya* or monastic discipline.³⁵

Ajahn Chah is perhaps the most well-known figure in Thai Forest Tradition. Today *Vipassanā* meditation has taken roots in the western counties, especially in the United States. Jack Kornfield, who is one of the foremost meditation teacher, was trained under Thai forest tradition with Ajahn Chah. Another famous figure is Ajahn Sumedho, who is the senior Western representative of Thai forest tradition, was the abbot of the Amaravati Buddhist Monastery. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the abbot of *Metta* Forest Monastery in San Diego County, also was trained in Thai Forest Tradition. Western followers of the tradition teach meditation in the monasteries as well as lay meditation centers.³⁶



³⁵ Ajahn Chah, **Being Dharma: The Essence of the Buddha's Teachings**, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), pp. 2-5.

³⁶ Jack Kornfield, Op. cit., p. 35.

Similarities and Differences between Insight Meditation in Myanmar and Thailand

Vipassanā meditation as we know it today was in most part derived from one or another tradition in Southeast Asia and especially from Burma in majority of the cases. That being said, within Southeast Asia there are many Buddhist countries with their own distinctive features when it comes to meditation method and its practice. Among all the countries in Southeast Asia, Myanmar is perhaps the most important center for the development of the *Vipassanā* meditation. Alike Myanmar, Thailand too has a long history of Buddhism but it was not until the modern period that meditation began to be popular. Myanmar has influenced Thailand when it comes to *Vipassanā* meditation and it is particularly true of the Mahasi Sayadaw system of meditation, which is generally well recognized and widely practiced among the *moni sayadawastic* community as well as the lay community.

Besides Mahasi, there are many more famous meditation teachers and meditation techniques both in Thailand and in Myanmar. Not all of those meditation methods emphasize on the *Vipassanā* like Mahasi Sayadaw; some of them focus on the practice of *Samatha* or tranquility meditation, which is calming the mind. In some cases, teachers focus on the *Samatha* and *Vipassanā* practices together and again other teachers focus on the practices that exclusively does not focus on the *Vipassanā* and are less known, such as the meditation on the Three Jewels or the meditation on six elements. However, more often the meditation teacher focuses on the practice of mindfulness of breathing, which again forms a foundation for *Vipassanā* practice in many traditions.

Vipassanā meditation practice takes its origin in the 19th century during the end of colonial period as movement against the colonial powers and as revival of the Buddhist root practices. The practice of meditation till this period was hardly unheard among the Buddhist communities of Thailand of Myanmar. However, starting from the 19th century interest in meditation practice grew on a much larger scale. The practices that evolved were largely based on the *Pāli* Canon and additional canonical texts such as *Visudhimagga*. This is especially true for the *Mahasatipatṭhāna sutta* and *Anapanasati sutta*, which have become the foundation for most of the *Vipassanā* meditation practices in general.³⁷

³⁷ Mahasi Sayadaw, Op. cit., p. 11.

However, in this context, there will be an comparative examination of the *Mahasi Sayadaw*'s method of *Vipassanā* or New Burmese Method and that of the famous *Vipassanā* mediation systems found in Thailand, to be more precise, the one that derives from the Mahasi Sayadaw and his disciples in particular.

Both Mahasi Sayadaw and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu take the *Mahasatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as an ultimate manual for training the mind for the full and complete liberation or *nibbanā* within this lifetime. The Buddha in the *Mahasatipaṭṭhāna sutta* says, "Now, if anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for seven years, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here & now, or if there be any remnant of clinging-sustenance. If anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for seven days, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here & now, or if there be any remnant of clinging-sustenance non-return. This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow & lamentation, for the disappearance of pain & distress, for the attainment of the right method, & for the realization of Unbinding."³⁸

This *sutta* forms the philosophical foundation for the practice of meditation as well as acts as the practical meditation manual. According to this passage the attainment of enlightenment is sure for those who practice the four foundations of mindfulness diligently spanning from the period of seven years to seven days. This statement of the Buddha gives this *sutta* a central importance in the Buddha's teaching. Later on, the *sutta* also goes into the details of systematic training and many forms of reflection on the *dhamma* or reality.

It is beyond any doubt that the four foundations of mindfulness forms the central teaching of the Mahasi Sayadaw and many other teachers within Thai or Burmese meditation tradition. The work of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa stresses on the 16 steps of *Anapanasati* which are nothing but the elaboration or the different stages of the four foundations of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind and dhamma. The same goes for the teaching of the Mahasi Sayadaw on the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness. As far as practical instruction are concerned, *Mahasatipaṭṭhāna sutta* acts as the manual for most of the teachers in Burma or in Thailand.

Most meditation teachers in Thailand and Myanmar equally emphasize on the importance of the practices and conditions that are conducive to meditation. Most meditation teachers recognize the importance of suitable place, which should enable one to concentrate

³⁸D. II., 290.

on the practice and avoid worldly distractions. Therefore, most of the teachers also ask the meditators to leave behind all the worries and connections with outside world for the time being. The meditation centers are located in more remote and peaceful places in the midst of nature and away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. The practice of observing silence is equally stressed by most meditation teachers as idle talk leads to dissipating of the mental energy.³⁹

One must recognize the Noble Eightfold Path leading to *nibbāna* as the *dhamma* that is to be sought after, cultivated, and revered. Such an attitude is a prerequisite for strenuous effort in meditation. One must fully appreciate the value of insight meditation and know how to practice it.⁴⁰

One may also recall the practice of mindfulness in everyday activity as an integral part of the meditation practice and indispensable preparatory stage in the practice of *Vipassanā*. The practice of general mindfulness is emphasized by the majority of teachers either in Myanmar or Thailand. Such an emphasis arises based on the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna sutta*. This is what the Buddha says about awareness of the body:

Furthermore, when walking, the monk discerns, ‘I am walking.’ When standing, he discerns, ‘I am standing.’ When sitting, he discerns, ‘I am sitting.’ When lying down, he discerns, ‘I am lying down.’ Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it. “In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or focused externally... unstained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.”⁴¹

This passage very well illustrates the importance of the general mindfulness with regard to the body and the advice is taken seriously by major Buddhist teachers of meditation as mandatory preparation for the further development of *Vipassanā* or *Samatha* for that matter.

³⁹ Mahasi Sayadaw, Op. cit., p. 23.

⁴⁰ U Aye Maung (trs.) **A Discourse on Dependent Origination** By Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw, (Bangkok: The Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1999), p. 9.

⁴¹ M., I., 55.

Conclusion

Although insight meditation arose in Southeast Asia, to be more precise in Burma in most part, but also in Thailand and Laos to some extent, today it is worldwide phenomena. Among all the major schools of traditions of insight meditation it would not be far fetch to say that “New Burmese Method” has gained prominence among all. It began with U Narada who introduced the practice and developed later on when Mahasi Sayadaw popularized and widely propagated it. Apart from Mahasi Sayadaw, there are also other well-known teachers of *Vipassanā* such as Ledi Sayadaw. One of the prominent figures in Ledi lineage of *Vipassanā*, S.N. Goenka is the most well-known teacher of this tradition. Then there is Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw whose teaching is based on the *Vissudhimagga*. He emphasizes the development of the four *jhanas* before going on to practice the four element meditation, that is to say, the earth, water, fire and air elements that make up the body. Another well-known teacher, Mogok Sayadaw, focuses on the practice of insight meditation with special emphasis on conditionality as well as the awareness of the feeling and mental states.

Insight meditation in Thailand and Myanmar has more similarities than differences, although one cannot ignore many unique features of the insight meditation that were developed in Thailand. There are five well known practices found in Thailand. The most well-known is that of Mahasi Sayadaw’s “New Burmese Method”. On the other hand, there is the Forest meditation tradition which is largely based on *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* and other texts from the *Pāli* Canon. Here one can also include the *Anapanasati* practice as taught by *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu*. There are also other meditation systems which are less known outside Thailand, such as Buddha mantra recitation of “Buddho”. There is also a meditation system that focuses on the mind-body observation and that of reflection on the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.