

Meditation in Myanmar

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In this lecture ...

- What is meditation?
- Pāli and Pāli–loan words regarding meditation
- Social, political and cultural contexts of Myanmar since the 19th century
- Prominent meditation teachers and their methods
- Case study: Theinngu Sayadaw's practice
- Conclusions
 - Growth pattern
 - Foundations of meditation in Myanmar
 - Meditation as a lived tradition

Meditation

- A range of practices to bring about self-transformation
- Self-transformation:
 - Our responses, thinking-patterns, habits and character traits
 - Our physical make-up
- The goal: to attain *nibbāna*
- Two broad aims of meditation: ‘calming’ (*samatha*) and ‘insight’ (*vipassanā*)
- The four stages of liberation
 - Stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*)
 - Once returner (*sakadāgāmi*)
 - Non-returner (*anāgāmi*)
 - Arhat



Terms concerning meditation

- *Bhāvanā*, ‘cultivation’
- *Kammaṭṭhāna*, ‘place/object of work’
 - *ka-ma-htan-yeik-tha*, ‘a pleasant shade for object of work’
- *Samatha*, ‘calming’
- *Vipassanā*, ‘seeing through’, ‘investigating’, ‘insight meditation’
- Versatile nature of *samatha* and *vipassanā*



Mental qualities associated with meditation

- *Samādhi*, ‘concentration’
- *Jhāna*, ‘meditative state’, ‘meditative absorption’
- *Sati*, ‘to remember’, ‘mindfulness’, ‘awareness’
- *Paññā*, ‘wisdom’
- *Ñāṇa*, ‘knowledge’ – *vipassanā-ñāṇa*, ‘insight knowledge’

- *A-thi* (အထိ)
‘knowing’ or ‘sense-consciousness’

- *Tha-ti* (ထာတိ), *sati*, ‘mindfulness’



A-thi and tha-ti Buddha image at Botahtaung Pagoda, Yangon

Distinctive features of Buddhism in Myanmar



At Vijjodaya Theinngu Meditation Centre,
Pyay, 2007

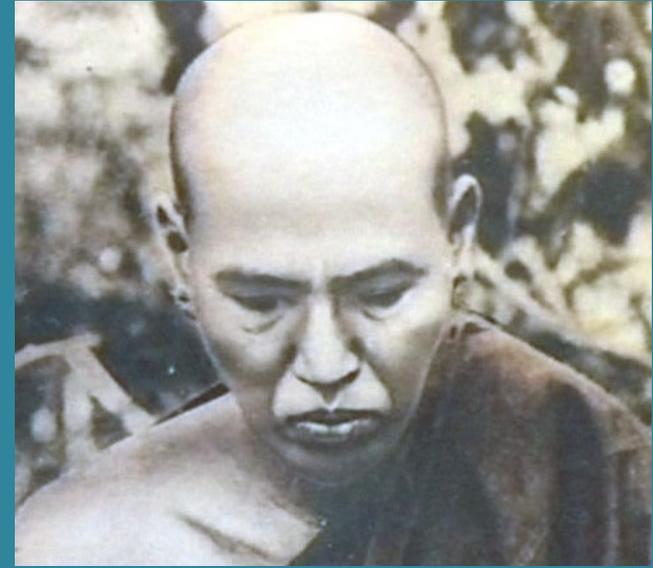
At the 45th Oral Examination of Abhidhamma
at Abhidhamma Propagation Association, Yangon,
2012



Founding fathers of the Vipassanā movement

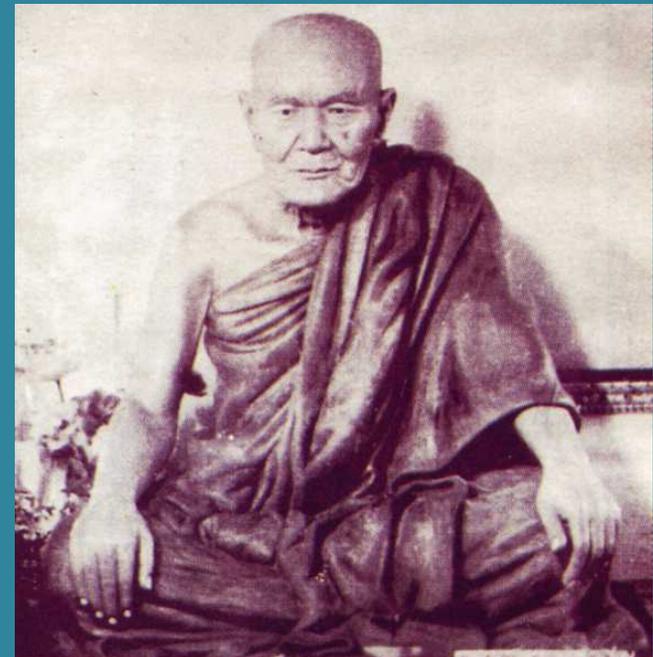
19th century Burmese response to fear of end of Buddha's teaching.

The Ledi Sayadaw U Ñāṇa (1846–1923)



The Mūla-mingun Jetavana Sayadaw U Nārada (1869–1955)

Vipassanā meditation and study of Abhidhamma, especially among lay people



Slow transmission of Abhidhamma Studies globally

Buddhist Beliefs

Abhidhamma as the embodiment of Buddha's omniscience (*sabbaññuta-ñāṇa*) and the great defence of the Buddha's *sāsana*

Meditation as a mind/mental culture

Socio-political factors

Strong literary traditions of Buddhist studies in Burmese history – e.g.

- The studies of Pāli language and the Pāli canon in Pagan period or earlier
- The increased studies of *Abhidhamma* at least from the 16th/17th century Burma

Threats – real or imagined

- External threats – e.g. the British in the early 19th century
- Internal threats – e.g. controversial teachings by various groups
- Natural threats – e.g. cyclones
- Supernatural threats – e.g. angry spirits or dark magic

Nationalism

- Differentiating Burmese *Theravāda* Buddhism
- Establishing Burmese Buddhist identity

Outcomes

Omnipresent *Abhidhamma*

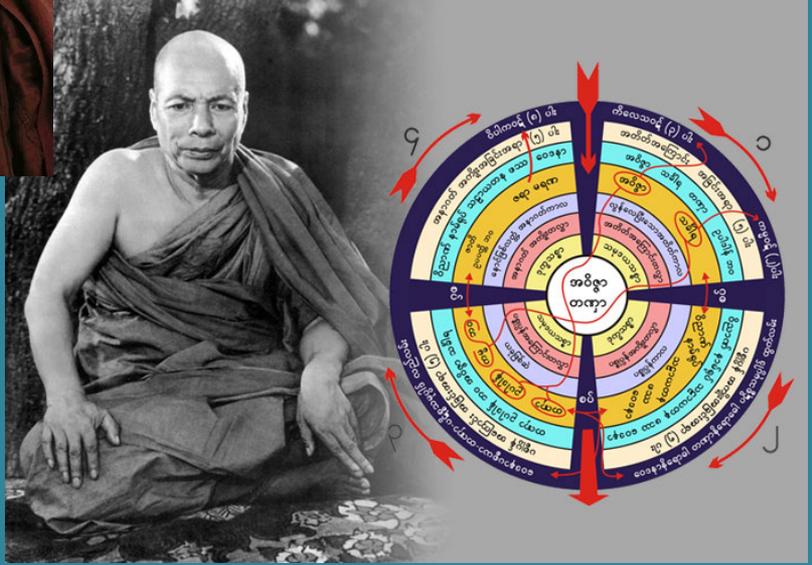
- Mass *Abhidhamma* studies
- Transformation of studies on Buddhist texts
- *Abhidhamma* meditation
- *Abhidhamma* medicine
- *Abhidhamma*-based apotropaic practice
- Daily objects – e.g. the 24 conditions as logo on fans, banners etc.

Reinforcing forces: sermons and *dhamma* talks given by monks and lay literati + memorisation and recitation of *Abhidhamma* + beliefs in gods (*devas*) being helpful

Some Prominent Burmese Vipassanā Teachers and their tradition since the late 19th century

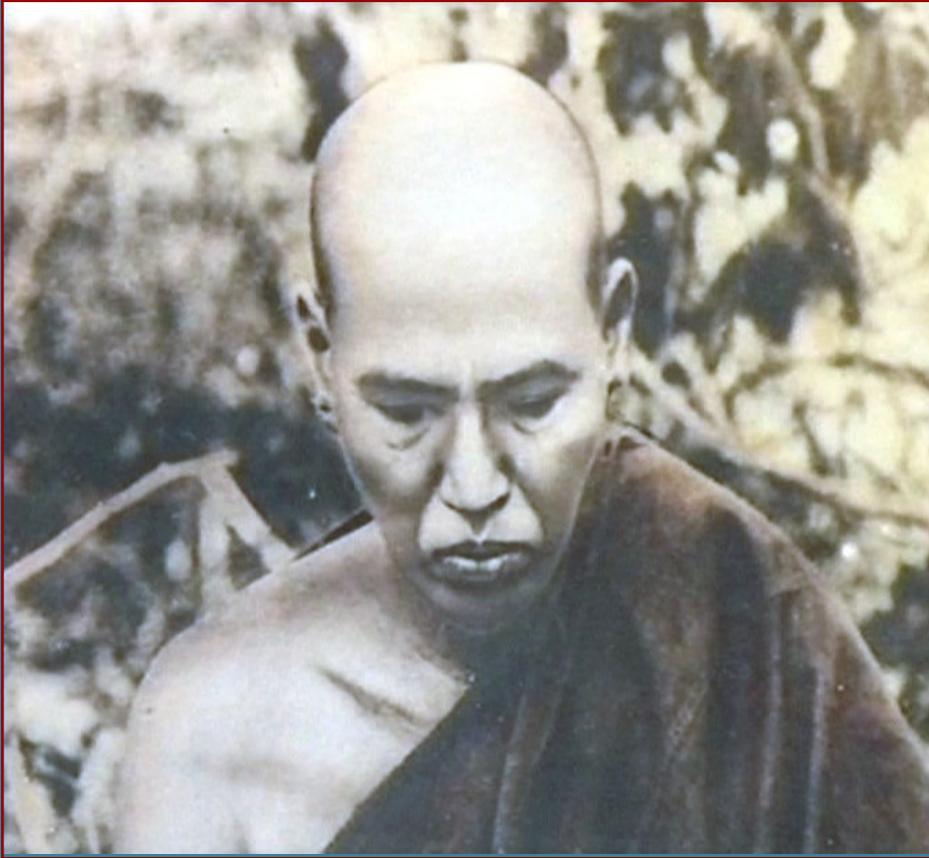
Ordination name	Popular name	Birth year	Death year	Age	Monastery/Tradition	Town	Textual basis
Ñāṇa	Ledi Sayadaw	1846	1923	77	Ledi kyaung taik	Monywar	Abhidhamma/canonical texts
Eindaka	Kyaung-ban Sayadaw	1860	1927	67	Kyaung-ban		
Narada	Mula-mingun Sayadaw	1869	1955	86	Zei-da-wan Mula Mingun	Mawlamyine	Mahasatipatthana-sutta
	Ana-gan Saya Thet-gyi	1873	1946	73	Saya Thet-gyi method		
Sumana	Mohnyin Sayadaw	1873	1964	91	Mohnyin Tham-bok-dei	Monywar	
Kavi	Sunlun Sayadaw	1878	1952	74	Sunlun		None
Konmara	Webu Sayadaw	1896	1977	81			
Nandiya	Taung-pu-lu Sayadaw	1897	1986	89			
	U Ba Khin	1899	1971	72	U Ba Khin (International Meditation Centre)	Yangon	
Vimala	Mogok Sayadaw	1899	1962	63	Mogok Vipassana Centre	Yangon	Paticcasamuppada
Ukkatṭha	The-inn-gu Sayadaw	1901	1973	72	The-inn-gu	Yangon	None
Rewata	Kathitwaing Sayadaw	1904	1965	61	Kathitwaing Forest Monastery	Pegu	4 elements
Sobhana	Mahasi Sayadaw	1904	1982	78	Mahasi	Yangon	Mahasatipatthana-sutta
Sobhita	Maung-htaung-myae-zin Sayadaw	1920	2006	86	Kanni		
Āciṇṇa	Pa-auk Sayadaw	1934			Pa-Auk	Mawlamyine	Visuddhimagga

See Houtman (1990: 283–322) for detailed analysis of meditation lineages in Myanmar.



Ledi Sayadaw

- Vipassanā movement
- Abhidhamma
- 105 books in Burmese and Pali



Ana-gan-Saya-Thet-Gyi
(a student of Ledi)

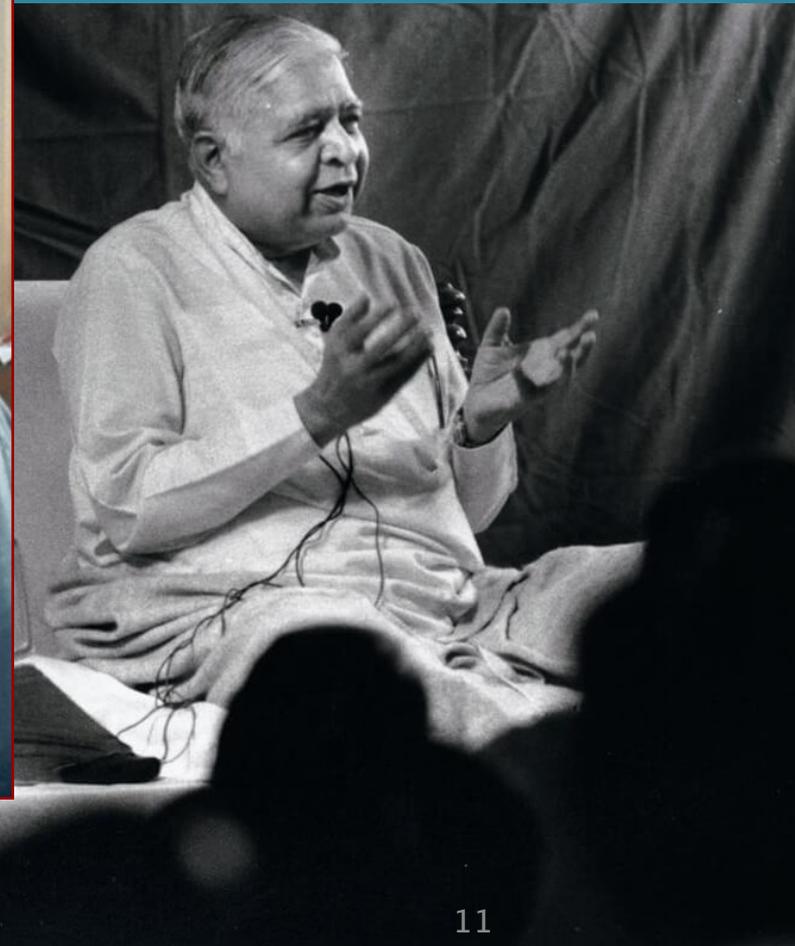


Webu Sayadaw and U Ba Khin



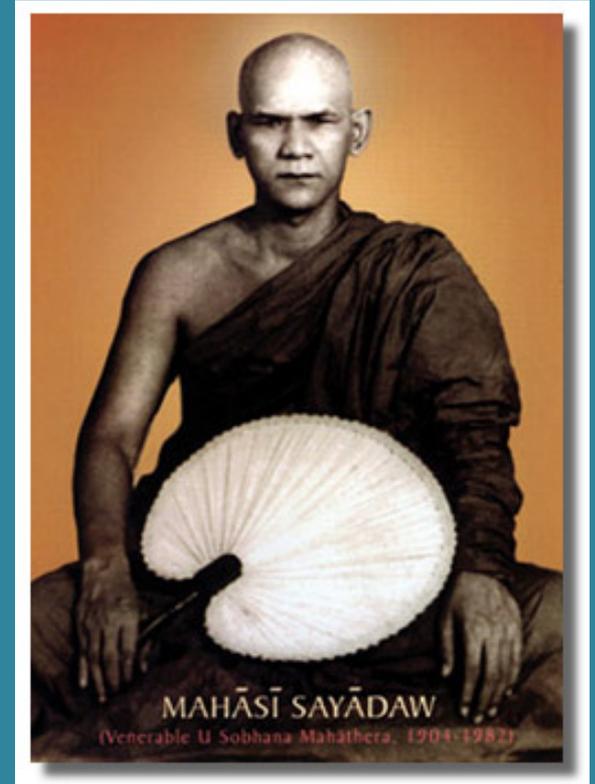
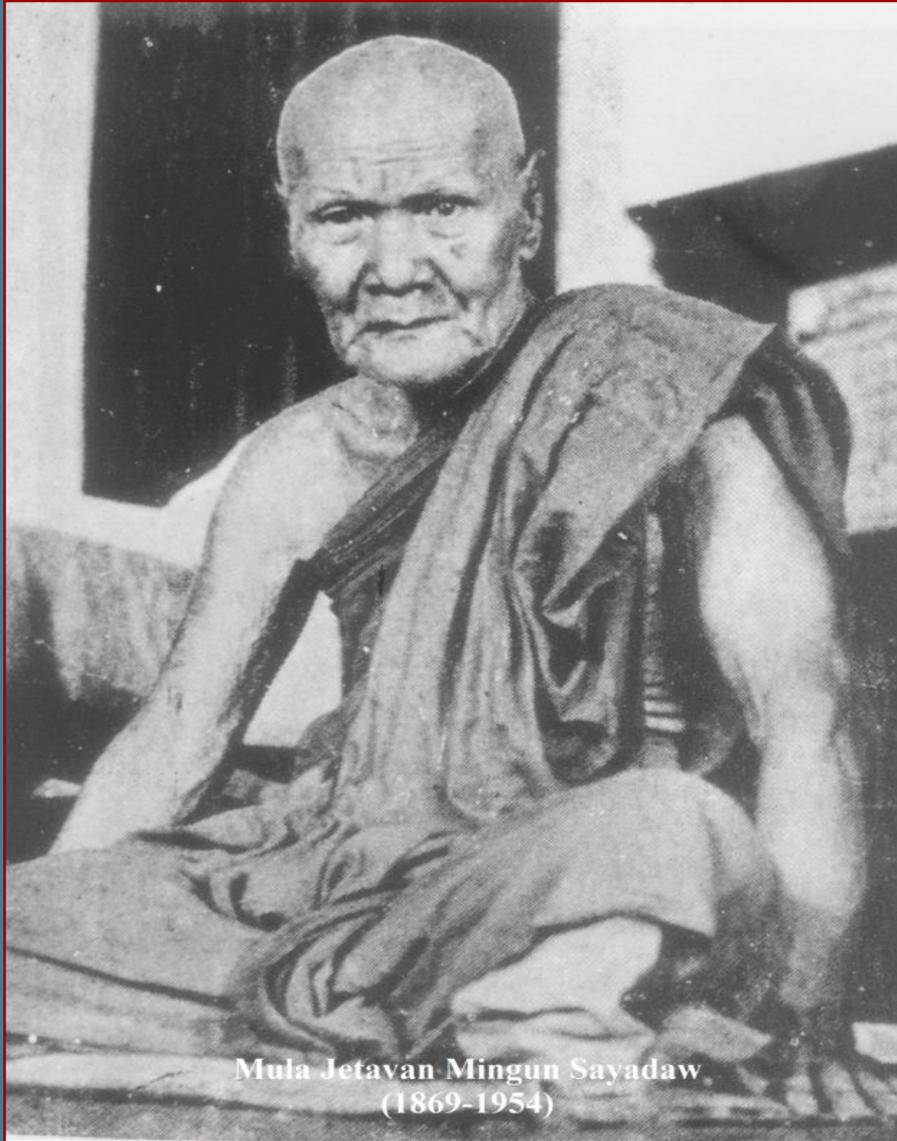
1941

Mindfulness on
breath



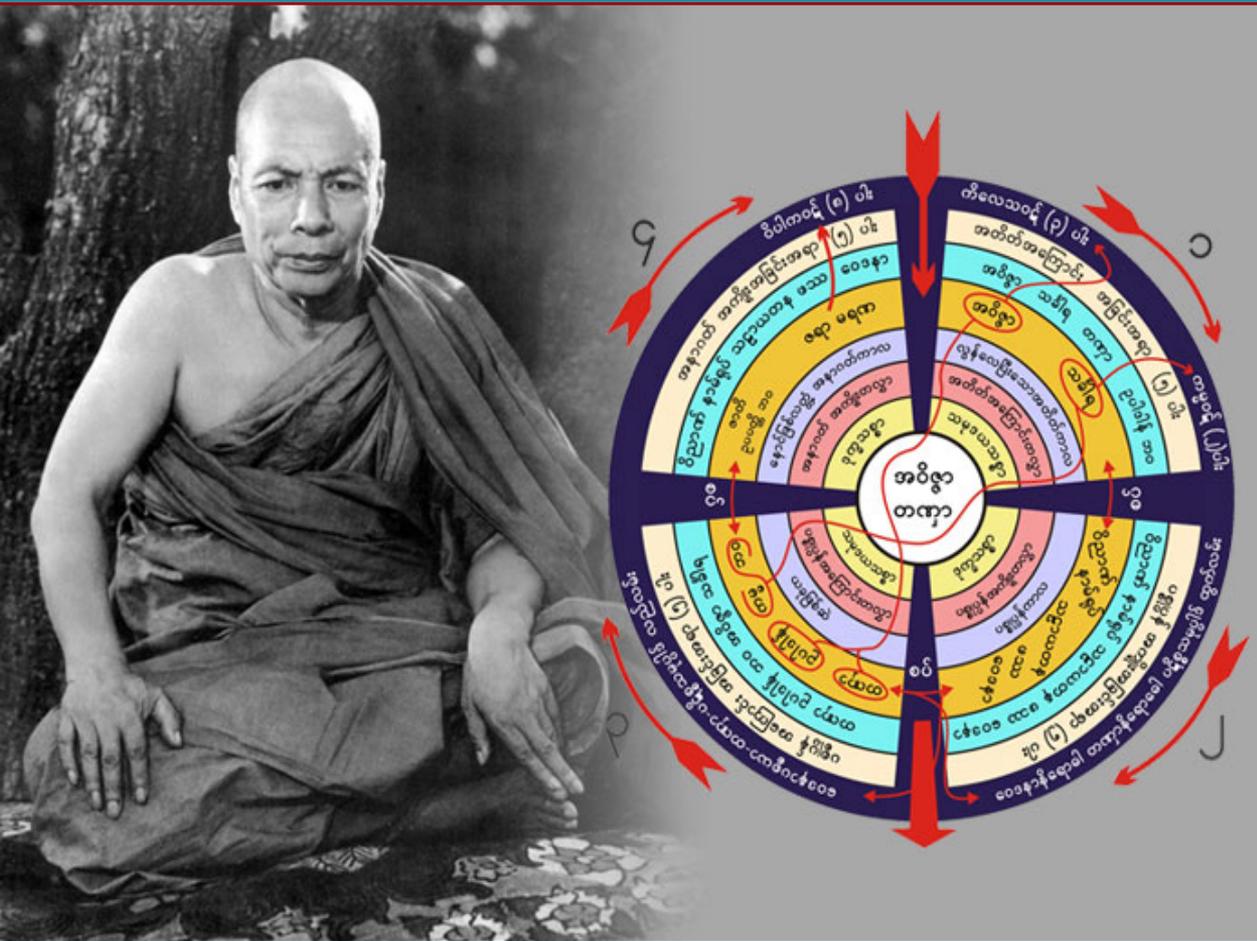
S. N. Goenka (1924–2013)

Mūla-mingun Jetavana Sayadaw



- Teacher of Mahāsi Sayadaw
- Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta

Mogok Sayadaw



- Dependent Origination
- Theoretical and practice combined
- Mindfulness on breath
- Mindfulness on *citta*

- Breath as 'home'
- Other thoughts as 'guests'

Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw

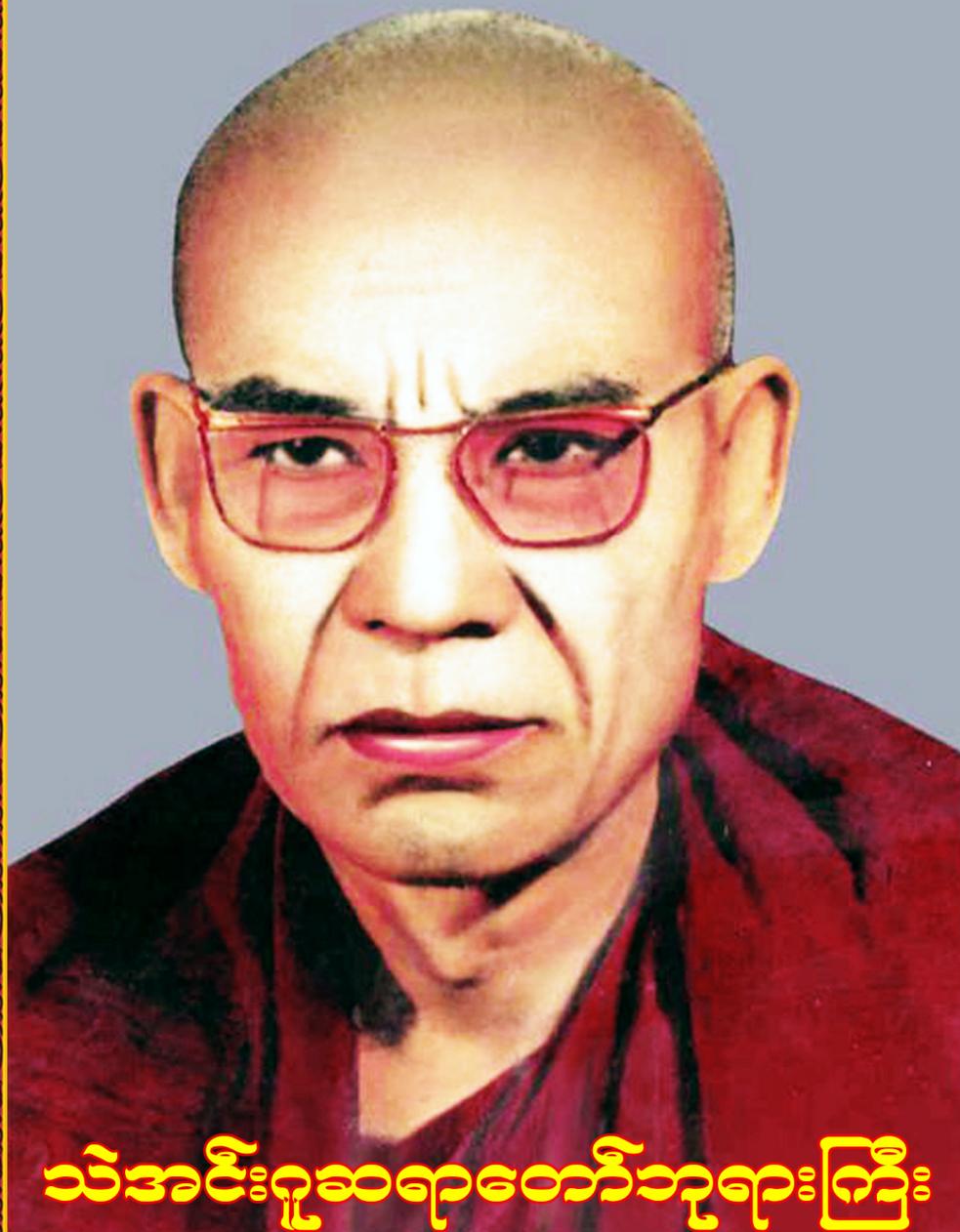


- *Visuddhimagga*
- *Jhānas*
- Mindfulness on breath
- Coloured disk
- Four elements
- Material states and mental states (*vipassana*)
- Causality and interrelations between things (*dhamma*)

Sunlun Sayadaw

- Born in upper Burma
- Sent to a monastery for education but learned very little
- A subsistence farmer
- A strong fear of death
- Asked whether a man ignorant of the texts could undertake the practice
- Mindfulness of breathing
- Q & A with educated monks

ကျေးဇူးရှင် စွန်းလွန်းဂူကျောင်း ဆရာတော်ကြီး ဦးကဝိ



Theinngu Sayadaw

- Born in lower Burma
- Sent to a monastery for education, but could barely read
- Married four times
- A robber
- A strong fear of death due to a near-death experience in a robbery
- Followed Sunlun's method
- Meditating 16 hours a day
- Q & A with educated monks

Theinngu Sayadaw's Practice



Ven. Ukkattha
(1912-1973)

Overcoming 'wrong view' (*diṭṭhī*) and 'craving' (*taṇhā*)

Overcoming 'wrong view'

- Heavy, rapid breathing
 - > intense bodily sensations
 - > arising and dissolution of sensations
 - > arising and dissolution of everything
 - > nature of suffering
- Overcame 'wrong view'
- What is 'wrong view'?
- Bodily sensations such as heat, pain, etc. as 'I am hot', 'I am in pain', etc.
- Personalizing our experiences
- Not seeing sensations as sensations

Overcoming 'craving'

- Stronger mindfulness and concentration
- The 'mental image' (*nimitta*) of 'impure aspects of the body decomposing' (*asubha*)
 - > body became foamy and bubbling
 - > stomach became bloated
 - > eyes began to bulge
 - > colonies of maggots began to occupy the body
 - > the body started to burn in fire and to turn into bones and ashes
- His own body and bodies of others
- Fear of *asubha* + the aversion to the *asubha* meditation and the desire escape from it
- Pleasant as unpleasant/suffering

Overcoming the *asubha* meditation

- Contemplation of the four great elements
 - Pus and blood as water element
 - Fire burning the body as fire element
 - Bloated body parts as wind element
 - Bones as earth element
- Contemplation of causes and effects
 - Seeing *asubha* → labeling it as *asubha* → arising of desire not to see it → arising of clinging
- Arising and dissolution of ‘atomic units of matter’ (*rūpa-kalāpa*)

Overcoming latent defilements (*kilesa*)

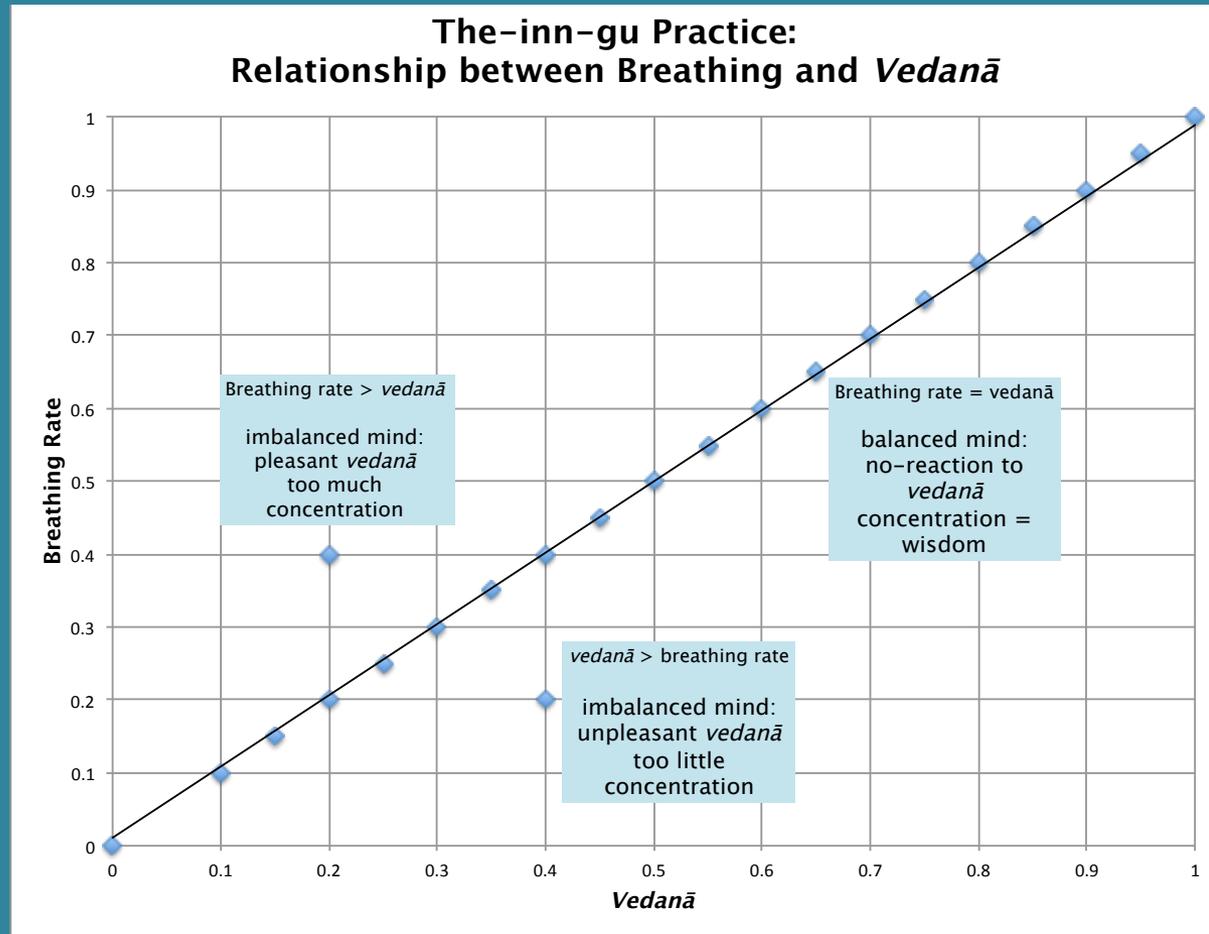
- Attachment to subtle units of matter and mental states
- Contemplate material states in terms of impermanence, suffering, without a self
- Investigate mental states – desires/wishes to see, to hear, to taste, etc.
- Realisation that ‘impermanence’, ‘suffering’ and ‘non-self’ as concepts
- Seeing as seeing, hearing as hearing, etc.
- *Yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana* – ‘see and understand the way things are’

Samādhi and Paññā

“Let *samādhi* lead. . . . How to achieve the balance between *samādhi* and *paññā*?”

“If the degree of physical sensation is 10, the awareness of in-breath and out-breath at the nostril is 10. If the sensation increase to 20, *samādhi* increases to 20. . . . Do not tense the body, or increase the desire to push it [the pain] away. The breathing naturally gets faster and stronger.”

(Paññājota 2003: 172)



Meditation Technique in Theinngu

For beginners: strong, forceful, rapid and rhythmic breathing

For advanced practitioners: breathing in and out with a focus on sensation

Posture:

- comfortable, straight posture – not too tight, not too loose
- checking posture from time to time
- cannot change posture

Two hours sessions:

- strong, rapid breathing for 2 hours
- using/adjusting breathing to observe sensation
- balancing *samādhi* and *sati*
- use of other meditation objects
 - e.g. meditation on 32 parts of the body, four great elements, *etc.*

Guided meditation:

- Initially, to understand and accept physical pain
- to recognise and understand reaction to physical pain – but less emphasis on emotions and emotional pain

Theorizing the Practice



Aunglan Sayadaw Ven. Candimā
(1952–)

- Growing congregations
- Running retreats in urban areas, overseas and online
- Expectations of the educated monastic and lay audiences
- Wrote 3 books, theorizing the practice
 - E.g. *The Path of Stream-enterer: meditation object, practice, meditative mind and entry to the path* (2009) draws on the *Abhidhamma*, esp. the *Visuddhimagga*

Conclusion 1:

Growth pattern of meditation traditions in Myanmar

- Ledi, Mahāsī, Mogok, Pa–Auk traditions
 - Textual authority with a focus on *Abhidhamma*
 - Centralised organisational structure
 - Role of prominent business people, government officials etc.
- Sunlun and Theinngu traditions
 - No textual authority, but tested repeatedly by experts in Buddhist texts, inc. *Abhidhamma*
 - Decentralised organisational structure
 - Role of social media and online

Conclusion 2:

Meditation as a lived tradition

- Meditation in Theravāda societies as a lived tradition
 - the very end of 15th century
 - In Myanmar, the 19th century
- Rooted in authoritative texts, Pāli canon, the commentarial literature and handbooks
- Adaptable
 - The Vipassanā movement > Mindfulness
 - Development of a wide range of methods
 - Theorizing the practice
- Wide-spread
 - In Myanmar
 - Diaspore communities around the world

Conclusion 3:

Role of *Abhidhamma* in Meditation

- Influence of *Abhidhamma* culture
 - Demand from the educated audiences
 - Meditation practice and meditative achievement measured against orthodox *Abhidhamma* texts, such as the *Visuddhimagga*
- *Abhidhamma* as a prescriptive guide to help along the practice
- *Abhidhamma* as a descriptive aid to help make sense of experience

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