

Vipassanā as taught by the Mahāsī Sayādaw of Burma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 11 min read

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The Mahasi Sayadaw

Its been over two and half thousand years now since the Buddha first expounded the teachings. As time passes, the teaching becomes dulled. But there are always reformation movements throughout the history of Buddhism, some large and some small which revitalise the teachings, the Dhamma. And the Mahasi Sayadaw must be accredited as one of the key teachers in revitalising the practice of vipassana in Theravada Buddhist countries. ♦

U. Sobhana Mahathera was born in 1904 in Upper Burma. So, this year marks the centenary of his birth. He joined the order as a mature boy and went on to complete the traditional studies with distinction. He finally returned to his home town, Seikhum, where he became the abbot of the Monastery, known the Mahasi, The Big Drum. In Burma/Myanmar, monks are often referred to by the place name where they were born or dwell in, hence he became known as the Mahasi Sayadaw.

It was after the Second World War that some high-ranking people, including the then prime minister, U Nu, went looking for a teacher to start a meditation centre in Rangoon/Yangon. The centre was not to be just a monastery, but a place where lay people would be able to practise vipassana. This, it seems, was a little revolution since up until then it was generally presumed that only monastics could gain anything from meditation. This has indeed become special quality of a Mahasi centre in that there are lay teachers and lay practitioners and many of the centres are within the city or town boundaries easily accessible to lay people.

It was at this centre, in 1947 situated just on the boundary of Yangon that the Mahasi Sayadaw, U Sobhana Thera, began to teach a technique which he had developed through his own renowned teacher, U Narada, known as the Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw in Upper Myanmar. It has three main characteristics observing the breath at the abdomen, noting and going very slow.

Observing the Breath at the Abdomen

We observe the breath, or rather the sensations caused by breathing, in order to bring a moment to moment concentration. It calms the heart-mind because it is a neutral object. There are various places where people feel these sensations more acutely. Some feel them at the nostrils or upper lip, others the rising and falling of the chest and still others in the

abdomen. All these places are valid in terms of vipassana mediation. The Mahasi, however, favoured the abdomen.

The first reason is that it is related to slow walking. Just as we observe and experience the foot rising and falling, so we experience the abdomen rising and falling. This means that for the better part of the day, a meditator is aware of the characteristic of transience in a very obvious way. Transience or impermanence (anicca) is one of the ways in which the Buddha asks us to investigate ourselves. Is there anything we experience which is not impermanent? The other two avenues of investigation are unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) and not-self (anatta). It is the insights into these Three Characteristics of Existence that lead to liberation from all suffering.

The second reason for favouring the abdomen is that when the attention is placed on the breath at the nostrils, there is a tendency by way of concentration to lose contact with the body. That is why observing the breath at the nostrils is a popular and effective way of achieving those higher states of concentration known as the absorptions, jhana. Here, there is a danger. For when concentration becomes locked into one pointedness on a single object, the effect is to suppress everything else and this stops the process of purifying the heart, our emotional life. This is not to say that concentration practice cannot go hand in hand with vipassana. Indeed, that is well supported in the discourses. Rather, the Mahasi espoused the direct path of vipassana only (ekayano maggo) as it is taught in the Discourse on How to Establish Mindfulness (satipatthanasutta MN 10). Nor does this mean that observing the breath at the nostrils is not a valid technique in vipassana meditation. Indeed, although the Mahasi preferred the abdomen as a place of primary observation, he did not ban anyone from observing sensations at the nostrils.

However, when we do centre on the abdomen or the chest (when the breath is shallow), we remain very much in contact with body. This allows any turbulence in the body caused by our states of mind to manifest and burn off. This is the psychotherapeutic effect of vipassana. For our emotions, moods and mental states express themselves through the body often as blocks, aches and pains and so on and sometimes as raw emotion. All this mental turbulence has to be allowed to express itself within consciousness and it all has to be born patiently.

Noting

The second technique, which is specific to the Mahasi Method, is noting. Paradoxically this is a technique to take a meditator beyond thinking. Its not an end in itself. The Mahasi was a highly respected scholar. As a young man he had passed Dhammacariya (Teacher of the Dhamma) examination with distinction. At the Sixth Buddhist Council in 1945, when all the texts were reviewed and for the first time all the commentarial literature was edited, the Mahasi Sayadaw was given the task of Pucchaka (Questioner) and Osana (Final Editor) of

the texts. Although a scholar, he was not one to confuse intellectual understanding with true experiential insight. Indeed he put that intellect to the service of the Dhamma. He wrote many books on Dhamma and the best introduction to his system still remains his opening talk to beginners satipatthana vipassana: Discourse on the Basic Practice of the Application of Mindfulness. A more detailed description will be found in his book: Practical Insight Meditation.

According to the Buddhas teaching, there are two stages of concentrated thought before full concentration is established. ♦ The first is a simple noting or naming of the object. This simple labeling, naming, noting whereby the attention is pointed at the object is known as vitakka and is likened to a bee flying towards a flower. It is a word which encapsulates the whole experience. In a child this is very obvious and simplistic. When a two year old is beginning to speak theyll rejoice at being able to name an object. Car! Car! For that mind at its level of language the word car simply points at the object. Theres not much thought around it since language itself, which allows us to think about an object, is not developed enough for this to happen. For us, the word car conjures up a host of memories and desires. This is thinking about an object. This mentation is known as, proliferation (papanca), and the purpose of thinking and daydream is to keep us off the presenting object and distract the mind. ♦ The Buddha likened this to a monkey, jumping from branch to branch. This is exactly what we have to bring to a stop. Shrinking thought down to a single word is the preliminary effort. But at this stage the meditator is forever having to pull the attention out of wandering and into observing. Indeed this is what the training through a technique is all about - reconditioning consciousness to be present, to be attentive to whats happening now.

To be effective, this noting has to be done with precise effort. It has to be an acknowledgement of what the body, heart or mind are doing. For instance, when one wakes from a fantasy, there is the first note and then there is a second note and consequent noting, which is an acknowledgement of what is obsessing the mind. In the same way, if a sensation or feeling arises in the body, the first note is a recognition and the second note and all consequent notes are acknowledgements. This is what is really happening now. But although there is careful noting, the attention is always placed not on the word, but on the experience - the feeling of a sensation, the feeling of an emotion. (Knowing of a thought or image is always an , of course.). It is as though the intuitive intelligence sees through the word and experiences the presenting object directly. In this way the intellectual faculty is brought into the service of that intuitive intelligence, rather than the intuitive intelligence being fogged by conceptual thinking.

Now thought itself can be split into two categories conceptual and image making. ♦ At the breath, for instance, as we note, there will be a concept of rising and falling and also an

image of the abdomen in the mind. We do not try to destroy them or in any way obliterate them. We just keep pointing the attention at the feeling of movement, the sensations. This attention, as it grows in strength, will eventually take all the energy out of thinking to the point where there is just the noting word. This is now the second stage of development. The meditator is still noting, but the attention instead of wanting to wander off, becomes stuck as it were on the object. This is likened to a bee landing on and sucking on a flower. This is the second stage of developing right concentration and is called *vicāra*. If the meditator now continues to note, placing the attention more and more on the object, really feeling those sensations, really experiencing them as they arise and pass away, all the energy will be drawn out of the thinking mind. It will stop.

Thinking is always about something. It is an attempt to categorise. What we experience is seen in the light of past experience. What we have experienced in the past is filtered through the way we look at things, our dispositions (*sankhara*). That is why thought will not allow us to see things anew. If we really want to experience things as they really are, then all conceptual thinking about those things must come to an end. When thinking stops, we must therefore be right there with what is happening. And it is at that point that true *vipassana* consciousness, *samā sati*, right awareness, arises and our intuitive intelligence, *pañña*, free of the distortion of thought and image, can finally begin to understand and see the way things really are (*nanadassana-yatha-bhūtam*).

So we don't have to worry about when to stop the noting. It will just stop once we have arrived at a high enough level of awareness and concentration. Such moments of pure *vipassana* are usually of very short duration, but they have great potential for insight. These moments are known as *khanika samādhi*, momentary concentration which lengthen into a moment-to-moment concentrated awareness. This sort of concentration does not depend on a single object as does absorption concentration (*arāmbana samādhi*). It takes anything that arises within the mind as its object, but for the purpose of seeing the Three Characteristics of Existence (*lakkhana samādhi*). In other words, the concentration in *vipassana* is only there to support awareness (*sati*) and that intuitive intelligence (*pañña*). It is that steady gaze and exploration of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self that leads to liberation.

For some meditators noting comes with difficulties. For instance, the word is very loud and dominates the meditation. This is simply showing the meditator how blocked they are in conceptual thinking. By patiently pointing the attention at feelings, that intelligence will extricate itself from the conceptual mind. This is often quite a discovery for such meditators that there is another way of experiencing the world. Another is the difficulty of finding the right word. One starts to look for a word as a poet might. But the simplest word is enough and if one does not arise, a general word, such as , will do.

This noting, of course, is not just limited to the sitting posture. Indeed, it has to become

continuous from the moment we wake to the moment we fall asleep. The Mahasi was fond of saying, the continuity of awareness is the secret of success. Therefore, it becomes important to note the most actions of the day, such as opening a door. Indeed, we have to abandon all hierarchy, thinking that sitting is more important than walking which is more important than eating and so on.

However, it is not only sensations, emotions, wandering mind and actions that have to be noted, but also that category of thought that we experience as intentions. An intention is thought laced with desire and not all desires are unskilful. In fact, we are trying to empower those intentions that are skilful such as the desire to meditate. The reason we note intention

before we do anything is because all actions of body, speech and thought have as their instigator an intention. To note an intention gives us the time to acknowledge it as either wholesome or unwholesome. We can then let go of those intentions we discern will lead us to dissatisfaction and empower those that will lead us to contentment.

This is the understanding of kamma. And it is the will (cetana) that the Buddha calls kamma. Will is that power that takes something out of potential into the actual. We have to empower an intention to realise it. If we take a standing position and note our intention to walk, we can do so for a long time. Then suddenly the foot moves. The power that has translated that intention into an action is will and in so doing has committed an act of kamma. ♦ These actions when repeated create our habits and a compendium of habits is but our personality. It is this personality that is driving us to our destiny. So noting intentions becomes an essential part of the progress towards liberation.

Noting then is a technique, a contrivance, whereby we can begin to train the attention to remain still on the presenting object and more importantly trick the intellect into coming to a full-stop. For it is all that conceptual thinking that is distorting the way sees. It knows only by way of categories, memory and concepts. By halting that process of conceiving and keeping perception in its simplest form at the point of contact, this intuitive intelligence sees everything again as a child. But not with a child's understanding. Now that intelligence is primed to observe the Three Characteristics and that is why it liberates itself from the delusion of a mistaken ♦♦ identity and possession of the psychophysical organism. This body, this heart, this mind is not me, not mine and do not in themselves constitute a self.

Going Slow

Going slow, doing things slowly, refers to all those areas of activity the Buddha talks of in the Discourse on How to Establish Mindfulness in the section on doing things mindfully (sampajana-kari hoti), whether looking, dressing, toiletry, eating and so on. ♦ When we perform these actions very slowly and deliberately, it sharpens our attentiveness and makes easier to perceive. This is much the same as slowing a film down. The more you slow a film down the more you can see. The flick of a frog's tongue as it catches a fly. Usually we simply

do not see it. But with this film technique, we can discern the whole process. Indeed, you can see the process frame by frame. In the same way, the more we slow down movement, the more easily do we perceive how the body, heart and mind inter-react.

Progress of Insight

Such is the power of this technique that it is possible to guide a meditator through the classic stages of the Insight Knowledges (*vipassana nana*). These are the insights that lead to a direct experience of *nibbana*, the first time known as Stream-entry (*sotapanna*). This whole process is repeated four times to attain the Path and Fruit of the Once-returner (*sakadagami*), the None-returner (*anagami*) and *Arahat*, the enlightened being. The Mahasi explains all this in clear detail in his book, *The Progress of Insight*.

The Mahasi went on to complete tours in Southeast Asia, USA and Europe. In Britain, he came to lead courses at the Oakenhalt centre near Oxford, owned by the Burmese Saw family. After him came his chief disciples, Sayadaw U Janaka and Sayadaw U Pandita. Unfortunately, the Saw family had to sell Oakenhalt on the sad passing of Mr. Saw and the impetus faded. However, now there are city in London and Manchester where Mahasi monks dwell and teach this system. It is hoped that the Satipanya Trust will raise enough interest to establish a Mahasi meditation centre and carry on the work of one of the most eminent *vipassana* teachers of the last century, the Mahasi Sayadaw.

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