

# 1b

## Samatha and Vipassana

A brief social history and psychology of meditation teachers and their teachings  
A brief study by Piya Tan ©2022

### 1 Introduction: Early Buddhism and Scholars' Buddhisms

#### 1.1 RELIGION AND BUDDHISM

##### 1.1.1 Academic study of religions

**1.1.1.1** Compared to the study of Judaism and Christianity—which have their own numerous specialized seminaries and institutions—Buddhist studies has been dominated by “outsiders” to Buddhist culture and tradition, and most of them are not even Buddhist. However, since 2000,<sup>1</sup> a few such scholar practitioners [3.2.1.2; 6.0] have spent years as Buddhist monastics (often under different teachers and traditions)<sup>2</sup> or living with them for purposes of first-hand observation/participation studies.<sup>3</sup> In recent decades, significant contributions have been made to Buddhist studies by Asian Buddhists themselves, especially in Japanese, Chinese and Korean universities, and from a growing number of Asian migrants to Western countries, and Western converts to Buddhism.

**1.1.1.2 The scholarly study of Buddhism** has advanced so much today that it is often indispensable in a historical study of early Buddhism, that is, a study of the historical Buddha and his teachings during the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. The scholarly methods have been well applied to the study of early Buddhism by way of its texts, literature, practices, philosophy, anthropology, culture, philology, ethnology, archaeology, arts, historiography,<sup>4</sup> history, psychology, law and comparative studies (intra-Buddhist and inter-religious), and other subjects related to Buddhism.

Then, there are the interesting and broad terms: Buddhist studies and Buddhology. The 2 terms are often regarded as being synonymous, in that they *both* involve an academic study of Buddhism. However, there are significant differences between them, especially for scholars. An “**academic study of Buddhism**” or simply “Buddhist studies” generally refers to the work of scholars who first specialize themselves in the mastery of the Buddhist languages (Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and so on) with which they study, edit and interpret Buddhist texts, teachings and developments, writing in various modern languages (especially English).

##### 1.1.2 Academic study of Buddhism

**1.1.2.1** The traditional field of **early Buddhist studies**, focuses, as a rule, on the study of Buddhist moral ethics, doctrines and philosophy, and meditation and psychology. In this connection, too, we have individuals and groups who edit the Pali texts, publish them, and translate them for both scholars and the general readers. Modern psychology is also experimenting with **Buddhist meditation theory and practice** for their own profession and advancement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Esp with the publication of *Buddhist Theology: Critical reflections by contemporary Buddhist scholars*, edd Roger Jackson & John Makransky, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of this are **Jack Kornfield** (1945- ), author of *Living Buddhist Masters* (1977); **Robert E Buswell, Jr** (1953- ), author of *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist practice in contemporary Korea* (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Eg, **Jeffrey Samuels** (not to be confused with Geoffrey Samuel, specialist in Tibetan Buddhism), author of *Attracting the Heart: Social relations and the aesthetics of emotion in Sri Lankan monastic culture* (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Historiography is the study of the writing of history and of written histories, incl the collecting, study and interpretation of ancient Buddhist inscriptions, manuscripts and texts.

**1.1.2.2** The term **Buddhology** was coined in the early 20th century by the Unitarian minister Joseph Estlin Carpenter (1844-1927), which he defined as the “study of Buddhahood, the nature of the Buddha, and doctrines of a Buddha.” However, the terms Buddhology and Buddhist studies are generally synonymous in the contemporary context.

Frank J Hoffman, in his entry on “Buddhology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, says that in some specific contexts, Buddhology may be viewed as a subset of Buddhist studies, with a focus on Buddhist hermeneutics, exegesis, ontology and the Buddha’s attributes.<sup>5</sup> In other words, this is a parallel to biblical theology, a term which sits uncomfortably with the study of early Buddhism, but goes well with Mahāyāna studies.

### 1.1.3 Meditation studies

**1.1.3.1** One of the regular Buddhist topics of scholarly contention is that of **meditation**. Since most scholars do not take up meditation as a personal Dharma practice, they only see darkly through their academic lenses at what is actually *the most personal and experiential aspects of Buddhist training*. Such a theoretical, “outsider” observation tends to be aware of only 2 forms of practice: samatha and vipassana.<sup>6</sup>

Why this simplistic dichotomy, especially when the Buddha himself actually speaks of 4 kinds of meditation practice? **The (Yuga,naddha) Paṭipadā Sutta** (A 4.170) speaks of these 4 modes of meditation practice and progress (paṭipadā), namely:<sup>7</sup>

(1) “insight preceded by calm”	<i>samatha,pubb’arigama vipassanā</i>
(2) “calm preceded by insight”	<i>vipassanā,pubb’arigama samatha</i>
(3) “calm coupled with insight”	<i>samatha,vipassanā,yuga.naddha</i> <sup>8</sup>
(4) “a mind seized by dharma-restlessness”	<i>dhamm’uddhacca,viggahita mānasa</i> <sup>9</sup>

- The 1<sup>st</sup> is through the cultivation of dhyana and stages of calm, which then leads to liberating insight.
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> is through a preliminary insight, which is then deepened into dhyana for liberation.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> is the both, calm and insight, “yoked together,” working in unison.
- The 4<sup>th</sup> is described as “*dhamma* restlessness,” an investigation into such a state of mind leading to insight, and then concentration.<sup>10</sup>

**1.1.3.2** Scholars generally tend to over-simplify (1) as “samatha” and (2) as “vipassana,” and dismiss (3) as simply a combination of the 2 categories, samatha and vipassana. In their theoretical studies, they seem to see the first 2 as simply 2 kinds of Buddhist meditation. They either ignore or do not seem to understand that (3) is actually a “path of practice and progress” (*paṭipadā*) of its own.

Most scholars seemingly fail to note the key modifiers in all the 4 descriptions of early Buddhist meditation modes: “preceded (by)” (*pubba*), “coupled (with)” (*yuga,naddha*) and “seized (by)” (*viggahita*). Actually, all the 4 descriptions include both samatha *and* vipassana! Moreover, almost no scholar even mentions (4), which is probably quite beyond most, if not all, non-practitioners. This is understandable since even Buddhist teachers rarely explain what it really is.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, edd W M Johnston & C Kleinhenz, 2015:225 f.

<sup>6</sup> Earlier scholarly studies tend to be aware of only 2 kinds of Buddhist meditations—samatha and vipassana—as shown in Johannes Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> A 4.170/2:157 (SD 41.5).

<sup>8</sup> **Yuga,naddha** (*yuga*, “yoke; pair” + *naddha* or *nandha*, “tied, bound, put on”), “putting a yoke, yoke together: Pm 2:92 f; KhpA 27; (adj) congruous, harmonious: UA 153, 398; (neut) congruity, association, common cause”: KhpA 27; Pm 2:98 = Vism 682.

<sup>9</sup> See SD 41.5 (5, esp 5.2); see also SD 60.1a (1.1.2).

<sup>10</sup> This is sometimes associated with modern insight schools.

### 1.1.4 Views on meditation: professional and practical

**1.1.4.1** Scholars studying meditation who are well aware of the early Buddhist texts and meditation traditions, generally see it in terms of **3 main approaches**: one group considers **insight** (*vipassanā*) to be essential and calmness (*samatha*) to be inessential in the pursuit of nirvana: the vipassana essentialists [1]; the 2<sup>nd</sup> group follows samatha as its main practice [2]: the samatha essentialists;<sup>12</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> group views **both** calm and insight to be essential [3]: the twin approach.

We will here briefly examine all 3 views for a better understanding of why there is such a divergence, and what the suttas and Buddhist meditation teachers actually affirm regarding them. For our purposes, we will use the anglicized<sup>13</sup> terms “samatha” and “vipassana” to refer to its modern usage, and “Samatha” and “Vipassana” (with the initial capitals) as scholarly or sectarian categories; in either case, without the diacritics. [2.2.1.2]

**1.1.4.2 Edward Conze**, for example, explicitly affirms that both samatha and vipassana are necessary in a quest for nirvana, but he also admits that there “is even some tension between the 2 modes of approach” (Conze 1956:17) [4.1.1]. While others like **Paul Griffiths** highlight this “tension” [1.2.1]; yet others, like **Damien Keown**, work to resolve it. Keown is one of the modern British Buddhists for whom Buddhism is embraced as both profession and practice.

**Mills**, in his 2004 paper, makes an interesting and important comparative study between Griffiths’ scholastic samatha-essentialist views and Damien Keown’s ideas on how a balanced samatha-vipassana practice cultivates moral concern (*sīla*). Since, in this Part 2 of the trilogy (SD 60.1b) we are focusing on how scholars view Buddhism from the outside or who have an “outside” view,<sup>14</sup> we shall examine some of Keown’s ideas and contributions as an “insider,” in Part 4 (SD 60.1d).<sup>15</sup>

**1.1.4.3** For a broad academic view, Mills’ paper should be read in full before continuing here, where I shall mostly discuss teachings related to Buddhist meditation practice, rather than discuss the differences in scholarly views. My task is not that of proving any scholar wrong (except when his error is clearly against early Buddhism) but of opening a window into seeing how scholars think and work with their subject or “specimen.” We shall then examine how the different Buddhist masters think and teach.

I will quote from relevant and interesting passages from the scholars, or summarize them for our benefit. What better way for us to learn how scholars treat Buddhism than to study the scholars themselves, especially the practitioners or sympathizers of Buddhism by showing how “outsiders” each project his own virtual reality into Buddhism, creating his own virtual Buddhism. This is a fascinating study since we can very well apply such observations to understand, even expose, how Buddhists themselves may have similar wrong views, making themselves “outsiders” to that with which they are supposed to be at home.

---

<sup>11</sup> A study of these 4 modes of meditation is vitally helpful for a better understanding of this study. Please see SD 60.1a (1.1.1); the 4<sup>th</sup> kind of meditation is explained in (1.1.2).

<sup>12</sup> See Mills 2004:22.

<sup>13</sup> By “anglicized” we mean not only the English spelling but that such terms are found in the larger modern English dictionaries, such as the Oxford dictionaries and the Merriam-Webster series.

<sup>14</sup> By “outside” I broadly refer to those who see themselves as scholar first, or behave so, ie, the non-practitioner or those Buddhists who tend towards the secular. However, we have included traditional groups committed to their own brand [eg 2.3] for a more comprehensive view of the samatha-vipassana “tension.”

<sup>15</sup> We shall examine Keown’s ideas and contributions in **SD 60.1d** (the 3<sup>rd</sup> part in this trilogy), under (3.2).

## 1.2 An outsider's view on Buddhist meditation

**1.2.1 Paul J Griffiths**, an English-born US theologian,<sup>16</sup> like many open-minded, learned, ecumenical Christians, started his academic career with a deep interest in Buddhism. **Ethan Mills**, in his delightfully sensitive and incisive paper on "Cultivation of moral concern in Theravāda Buddhism" (2004) shows how Griffiths works with his own theoretical reconstruction of early Buddhist meditation. Most of this section is based on Mills' paper.

Griffiths' academic views on Buddhist meditation can be found in his scholarly book, *On Being Mindless* (1986), where he discusses **the state of cessation** (*nirodha, samāpatti*)<sup>17</sup> specifically in relations between samatha and vipassana. Strictly speaking, "cessation" (*nirodha*) is not a meditative state as in one "to be attained" as some goal of meditation: it refers to an aspect of the awakened mind of the Buddha or an arhat, and sometimes that of a non-returner, when he takes nirvana as the object of meditation. Understandably, in such a state *neither perception nor feeling* occurs. Hence, the notions of samatha and vipassana do *not* arise at all in this connection!

**1.2.2** Here's a bit of **academic wry dark humour**: when a non-scholar writes, say, about the Buddha being a "Sun-God," no scholar is likely to pay any attention to it; but when a renowned French scholar like Emile Senart proposed that the Buddha was a "solar myth," the idea was eagerly picked up by Dutch scholar Heinrich Kern, and other lesser scholars discussed and argued over it, as if their livelihood mattered; and indeed, they did.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of Griffiths, he characterizes samatha as "enstatic" (ecstatic or rapturous in a spiritual sense) and vipassana as "analytic." He writes, in fascinating and fine scholarly form,

Such analytical meditations are designed, then, to remove standard cognitive and perceptual habit-patterns and to replace them with new ones. Furthermore, these techniques are designed to teach the practitioner something new about the way things are, to inculcate in his consciousness a whole series of knowledges that such-and-such is the case. In contrast, the enstatic meditations are designed to reduce the contents of consciousness, to focus awareness upon a single point and ultimately to bring all mental activity to a halt.

(Griffiths 1986:13; emphases added)

To those personally familiar with early Buddhist teaching and meditation, surely this passage sounds like a fine case of gobbledygook,<sup>19</sup> or, more darkly, a shibboleth:<sup>20</sup> it shows that the writer was

---

<sup>16</sup> **Paul J Griffiths** (1955- ), English-born US theologian, and Warren Professor of Catholic Thought at Duke Divinity School. His early works incl incisive interpretations of Yogācāra Buddhism, but later converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, and accepted the Schmitt Chair Catholic Studies at Univ of Illinois, Chicago. He resigned from Duke after being reprimanded by its administration for openly questioning the usefulness of diversity training [such as religious openness and tolerance] in his faculty: <https://web.archive.org/web/20191012023832/https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/duke-professor-resigns-after-facing-discipline-for-challenging-diversity-training/118283>. Biblio: *On Being Mindless: Buddhist meditation and the mind-body problem*, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Fully, "the cessation of perception and feeling" (*saññā, vedayita, nirodha*). It is only experienced by the Buddha, the arhat and, perhaps, a non-returner. Since it is actually an experience of the nirvanic state, it is outside of the usual meditation stages of the unawakened, esp in mundane meditation. SD 48.7 (3.2); SD 50.7 (1.2).

<sup>18</sup> See SD 59.6 (1.1.2.5).

<sup>19</sup> OED: 1944: *American Notes & Queries* Apr 9/1, "Gobbledygook talk: Maury Maverick's name for the long high-sounding words of Washington's red-tape language." Maverick was the Texas Congressman who coined the word to describe the frustrating jargon used by US policymakers. It reminded him of the sound of turkeys gobbling.

<sup>20</sup> A shibboleth is basically a word special or unique to a group but which wrongly pronounced or used by an outsider, thus revealing his true status. For its origin, see SD 20.1 (2.1.1.1).

an “outsider.” He knew the words, but not their meanings and usages. Griffiths goes on to write of 2 different ways, in his view, that Buddhists view “the basic human problem” and how they each work to solve it:

“Those who follow and advocate the analytic techniques tend to perceive the basic human problem as one of ignorance, an inaccurate understanding of the way things are” (Griffiths 1986:14). In other words, if the disease is ignorance, the cure must be knowledge.

“In drastic contrast, the practitioners of the enstatic techniques aimed at tranquility tend to perceive the basic human error as one of attitude rather than cognition; the key Buddhist term here is ‘thirst’ (*taṇhā*), a term that denotes all types of passionate desire and attachment” (Griffiths id). When our attitude causes suffering, then we must change that attitude to one that does not cause suffering.

**1.2.3** In scholarly analysis, we say that Griffiths has here created a “**tension**,” comprising 2 possible, opposing situations under the roof of the same system. He sees these as 2 completely separate goals each with their differing methods “all jostling about within the same tradition” (Mills 2004:24). This, according to Griffiths, has created numerous philosophical problems:

“Throughout Buddhist history, intellectuals have attempted to reconcile thought-systems which are on the face of it, irreconcilable” (Griffiths 1986:16).<sup>21</sup>

We must imagine that Griffiths, whether he was aware of it or not, was thinking with a Christian cap on. If this were Christian theology, it might be irreconcilable. However, amongst Buddhist teachers, views and disagreements prevail as the unawakened norm. This has never been an issue because, as unawakened beings, we have the licence to err (so long as we are ignorant of it).

No right-minded Buddhist teacher would declare that he is the only one who is right, nor that such and such a system is the only right one (although his pupils may proudly claim otherwise). My point is that, as Buddhists, we hold an opinion so long as we think it is right and true. We are often enough, likely to change our views as we mature in our understanding and wisdom.

## 2 Vipassana

### **2.1 VIPASSANA SCHOLARS**

#### **2.1.1 Scholars’ views on meditation**<sup>22</sup>

**2.1.1.1** Scholars who are neither practitioners nor meditators nor Buddhist, are likely to see early Buddhist meditation as merely the attaining of wisdom, which, after all, is what brings awakening to the Buddha. Hence, they regarded **insight meditation** to be the more important of the two. Even at the start, there is a fundamental problem: informed Buddhist practitioners do not see samatha, “calmness,” and vipassana, “insight meditation,” as exclusive Church-like confessions, but as practical starting-points in their commitment to Buddhist learning, practice, realization and propagation. Often, the terms calm or calmness (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) merely reflect what inspired them to take up Buddhism and meditation in the first place.

We shall here assume, provisionally, that there are **categories** called “calmness meditation” and “insight meditation,” as understood by advocates of such “systems,” and to have some insight into how scholars study them and how teachers teach them. Hence, on the surface, we are likely to perceive that amongst Western Buddhists at least, Vipassana as “insight meditation” predominates in the US [2.3.4], while Samatha as “calmness meditation” is popular in the UK [3.3.2]. It would be insightful for us, as practitioners, to see how such scholars are also practising Buddhists. There is always

---

<sup>21</sup> Griffiths’ book is an interesting philosophical diversion for those who depend on an academic career or who enjoy reading. Otherwise, we would miss nothing setting it aside for other related and urgent matters.

<sup>22</sup> This section and parts of the following are inspired by **Ethan Mills’** profoundly insightful paper on the “Cultivation of moral concern in Theravāda Buddhism” (2004).

something valuable to learn from these insights how others see Buddhism or how they are influenced by it. [2.2.1.2]

**2.1.1.2** In his 2004 paper, **Ethan Mills** identifies the following scholars and writers as those who “have considered insight meditation to be the more important of the two”: Rahula, King, Gunaratna, Bodhi, Solé-Leris and Griffiths. Bh Bodhi has written a number of papers on Buddhist meditation.<sup>23</sup> H Gunaratana is also a well known Buddhist scholar who has written a few popular books on meditation.<sup>24</sup> W L King, was a US Methodist minister with an interest in Buddhism.<sup>25</sup> W Rahula was a Sinhala secular priest and professional scholar.<sup>26</sup> Little is known of Amadeo Solé-Leris, except for his book, *Tranquility and Insight*.<sup>27</sup>

W Rahula dismisses samatha meditative attainments as “... mystic states ... mind-created, mind-produced, conditioned ... have nothing to do with Reality, Truth, Nirvana ... not purely Buddhist. [The Buddha] therefore discovered *vipassanā*” (Rahula, 1959:68). Bh Bodhi, in the Introduction to his translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, writes “the role of serenity is subordinated to that of insight because the latter is the crucial instrument needed to uproot the ignorance at the bottom of samsaric bondage (1995:38 etc). These non-meditating writers regard samatha either as “subordinate” to vipassana or inessential to Buddhist training, at least, in theory.

**2.1.2** We may well ask: **If samatha is inessential, why is it included in Buddhist meditation at all?** The answer, for most scholars of this group, is that samatha techniques can sometimes help develop qualities useful in vipassana meditation. Nonetheless, samatha techniques are not as inherently valuable as vipassana techniques. This does not necessarily mean that these scholars are all saying the same thing. Their views seem similar in at least seeing vipassana as the *superior* form of meditation, and that samatha, no matter how helpful it may be, is ultimately *unnecessary* for the task of reaching the path of nirvana.

## 2.2 SAMATH-VIPASSANA TERMINOLOGY

### 2.2.1 On the terms Samatha and Vipassana

**2.2.1.1** Terms like “Vipassana Meditation,” “Samatha Meditation,” “Vipassana school,” and so on don’t really exist as discrete Dharma entities but as social realities constructed by their founders, and

---

<sup>23</sup> **Bodhi** (Jeffrey Block) (1944- ), a renowned scholar and successful translator, by his own admission, said that he is unable to meditate due to years of suffering from an inexplicable “karmic” headache. Among his learned papers are “Two styles of insight meditation,” [https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay\\_45.html](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_45.html). His own foundation, Buddhist Global Relief, funds projects to fight hunger and empower women across the world.

<sup>24</sup> **Henepola Gunaratana** (1924- ) earned his PhD in philosophy (diss: *A Critical Analysis of the Jhanas in Theravāda Buddhist Meditation*) from American Univ, Washington DC, and worked as a salaried lecturer in various univs. He published books on the dhyanas (*jhāna*) based on Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhi, magga, such as *The Path of Serenity and Insight* (1985). Like many of the Sinhala monks, he is better known as a scholar than a meditator. He famously wrote that *thinking occurs during dhyana!* (“Should we come out of jhāna to practice vipassana,” 2007. See **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, SD 33.1b (6).

<sup>25</sup> **Winston Lee King** (1907-2000), US Methodist minister of New England churches, US Army captain and chaplain, interested in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Wrote on Burmese Buddhism: *Theravāda Meditation: The transformation of Buddhist yoga*, 1980.

<sup>26</sup> **Walpola Rahula** (1907-1997), Sinhala Buddhist priest, Prof of History and Religions, Northwestern Univ (1964), 1<sup>st</sup> Buddhist priest to hold a professional chair in the West. His best-seller is *What the Buddha Taught*, 1959. His *Bhikshuvakage Urumaya* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1948), tr as *Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (1974), was a shrill voice in Sinhala racism and Buddhist nationalism, and significantly accelerated the secularization and decline of Sinhala monastic Buddhism in our time.

<sup>27</sup> **Amadeo Solé-Leris**, *Tranquility and Insight: An introduction to the oldest form of Buddhist meditation*, 1986.

popularized by teachers and followers. Thus, these “brand names” usually refer to a teacher-centred system of teachings or methods (usually both).

Hence, even amongst the various Vipassana schools, there are clear variations in how we should meditate and what to look out for. However, once we are familiar with them, we will notice that, despite their curious or unique views, they invariably revert to sutta teachings for verification in matters beyond their ken.

**2.2.1.2** The usages of the terms “samatha” and “vipassana,” and “Samatha” and “Vipassana” have already been mentioned [1.1.4.1]. They are often used by academic scholars and Buddhist sects like jerseys worn by opposing players in a friendly game, or uniform in army units committed to protecting the nation. As their teachings deepen and sittings progress, and as curious members of either group, they (most of them surely) will see that they are actually progressing towards the same thing: to enjoy the game, for the love of the country, for the sake of peace and enlightenment.

## **2.2.2 What is vipassana?**

**2.2.2.1** Hence, we have “**Vipassana schools**,” those that stress the element of insight (*vipassanā*), a word which literally means “seeing (*passanā*) in many ways (*vi*).” Technically, the “many ways” refers to the *rise and fall*,<sup>28</sup> and the unending rapid *changes*, that characterize all experiences and phenomena.<sup>29</sup> The former refers mostly to “sense-experiences,” that is, the conscious body, while the latter mostly to “mental phenomena” (the mind’s own experiences of itself, such as emotions, memories, visions and so on); but to the adept these descriptions are interchangeable.

**2.2.2.2** Echoing the suttas, Vipassana teachers and their followers interpret *vipassanā* as “seeing things as they are,” that is, as arising from various conditions, and ending when those conditions are not present. Whether we like it, dislike it, or ignore it, these are all the workings of our own mind; those external events are merely correlated to our minding but not its causes. By understanding why we *like, dislike or ignore* these events, we grow in our own self-understanding. This, they understand to be “right view” (*sammā,diṭṭhi*), the first and foremost limb of wisdom training (*paññā sikkhā*) of the 3 trainings, that is, the noble eightfold path.

The common purpose of the Vipassana meditator is to understand how the mind “sees” things (*rūpa*) and “names” (*nāma*)<sup>30</sup> them, thus creating “names-and-forms” (*nāma,rūpa*), views and imaginings that cloud up our mind as “(mental) proliferation” (*papañca*), a wild jungle of mental objects and thoughts.<sup>31</sup> Our task—the highest of renunciations—is to renounce them.<sup>32</sup>

**2.2.2.3 The Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15), for example, distinguishes between how through “minding,” there is conceptual contact (*adhivacana,sanphassa*, labelling or naming) of our mental states, conjuring them into virtual reality. Through “sensing” (experiencing on the physical sense-level), there is sense-contact (*paṭigha,samphassa*), recognizing sense-experiences by *naming* them into virtual reality. Behind both levels of experiences, is, of course, the mind itself; for, without the mind, there will be no sense-experiences whatsoever.<sup>33</sup>

The Vipassana meditator’s task is to have insight (seeing into and through) these twin processes; hence, freeing himself from their machinations and virtual realities, as if freeing himself from the

<sup>28</sup> For a sutta def, see **Dīgha,jānu S** (A 8.54,15), SD 5.10.

<sup>29</sup> See eg **Phēṇa,piṇḍa S** (S 22.95), SD 17.12.

<sup>30</sup> The verb is *namati*, “to bend (by naming),” but this is rarely used in normal instructions. Caus, *nameti* and *vinameti*; from which we get *vipariṇāmeti*, “to change (all around, in diverse ways).”

<sup>31</sup> See **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18), SD 6.14 (2); SD 57.1 (2.4.2.3).

<sup>32</sup> See **Atammayatā** (SD 19.13).

<sup>33</sup> D 15,20/2:62 (SD 5.17).

game-world that is samsara. This is known as “directly experiencing true reality,” which is the hallmark of the awakening experience.

**2.2.2.4** Vipassana teachers and their followers—like scholars of Vipassana [2.1.1]—tend to read or interpret suttas in terms of insight, with an important difference: the former are committed to its practice internally; the latter study them as external categories. Nevertheless, they are likely to rely on the same textual sources.

**The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22; M 10) is an old favourite with Vipassana practitioners since it does not seem to address dhyanas (*jhānas*)—the signature *samatha* experience—like in other texts. However, although dhyana is not mentioned in this Sutta, it is well known that it is implied and it clearly prescribes many *samatha* practices.<sup>34</sup> [2.2.2.6].

**2.2.2.5** Another Vipassana favourite is the late canonical **Ratha, vīnita Sutta** (M 24), which lays out the 7 stages of purification (*satta, visuddhi*) through insight.<sup>35</sup> The 7 stages and their respective teachings may be listed as follows:

(1) The purification of virtue (*sīla, visuddhi*)

Fully keeping to the moral precepts and training-rules (explained in the Visuddhi, magga in terms of the monastic “4 purifications of moral virtue” (*catu parisuddhi, sīla*)<sup>36</sup>

(2) The purification of the mind (*citta, visuddhi*)

Overcoming of the 5 hindrances<sup>37</sup> through attaining access concentration and full concentration (ie dhyana)<sup>38</sup>

(3) The purification of views (*diṭṭhi, visuddhi*)

Understanding the 3 characteristics,<sup>39</sup> etc, of mental and physical phenomena, especially how the 5 aggregates<sup>40</sup> constitute a living being

(4) The purification by overcoming doubt (*kaṅkhā, vitaraṇī, visuddhi*)

Discernment of conditions for mental and physical phenomena<sup>41</sup>

(5) The purification by knowledge and vision of the path and the not-path (*maggāmagga, ñāṇa.dassana, visuddhi*)

The correct discrimination between the false path of worldly ecstasy and euphoria, and the true insight into impermanence, suffering and non-self

(6) The purification by knowledge and vision of the path (*paṭipadā, ñāṇa.dassana, visuddhi*)

This is a series of insight-knowledges up to the supramundane paths

(7) The purification by knowledge and vision (*ñāṇa.dassana, visuddhi*)

Knowledge of the 4 supramundane paths (the 4 levels of sainthood), short of arhathood

**2.2.2.6** Buddhaghosa structures his magnum opus, **the Visuddhi, magga** (the path of purification) upon these 7 stages of purification, which are, in turn, summarized as the 3 trainings, that is, moral training (1<sup>st</sup> purification); concentration training (2<sup>nd</sup> purification); and wisdom training (3<sup>rd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> purifications). Its **chapters** are arranged as follows [with the purifications listed within square brackets]:<sup>42</sup>

<sup>34</sup> M 10/1:55-63 (SD 13,3). On dhyana and satipaṭṭhana: SD 13.1 (4.3).

<sup>35</sup> M 24/1:145-151 (SD 28.3).

<sup>36</sup> See Vism 1.42-125/15-44.

<sup>37</sup> *Pañca nīvarana*, ie (1) sense-desire (*kāma-c, chanda*), (2) ill will (*vyāpāda*), (3) sloth and torpor (*ithīna, middha*), (4) restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca, kukkuccha*), and (5) doubt (*vicikicchā*) : see **Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55/-5:121-126), SD 46.55.

<sup>38</sup> See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4.

<sup>39</sup> The 3 characteristics are impermanence (*aniccatā*), suffering (*sukkhata*) and non-self (*anattatā*): see **Atam, mayatā**, SD 19.13 (1).

<sup>40</sup> “The 5 aggregates” (*pañca-k, khandha*), see SD 17, esp (**Dve**) **Khandhā S** (S 22.48/3:47 f), SD 17.1a.

<sup>41</sup> Cf (**Kaṅkhā**) **Revata S** (U 5.7/60), SD 25.15.

- (1-2) Descriptions of moral virtue and ascetic practices [1. the purification of moral virtue]  
 (3-17) Descriptions of meditation, dhyanas, and dhyanic powers [2. The purification of the mind]  
 (18) [3. The purification of view]  
 (19) [4. The purification by overcoming doubt]  
 (20) [5. The knowledge of the purification by knowledge and vision of the path and the not-path]  
 (21) [6. The purification by knowledge and vision of the way]  
 (22-23) [7. Purification by knowledge and vision]

Despite the 7-purification formula being traditionally taken to epitomize vipassana, Buddhaghosa includes detailed analyses of meditation and **the dhyanas** in chapters 3-11 of his tome. In other words, he includes both *samatha* and *vipassana* in the Visuddhi,magga. [2.1.1.1, 2.2.1.2]

**2.2.2.7** In short, a Vipassana teacher, in contrast to a Samatha teacher, may instruct his students to ignore or “let go” of all mental images by simply observing their rise and fall, and sometimes focusing attention on *a particular area of the body*, such as nose-tip or the abdomen. By allowing attention to settle there, it is possible to observe and analyze *the rise and fall* of physical, mental and emotional phenomena. For most Vipassana practices, it is important not to allow the attention to dwell on a feeling, but rather to mindfully “watch” in an analytical manner a sense-impression, an idea or an emotion as they arise, thus attending to a wide range of mental objects.

## 2.3 BURMESE VIPASSANA

### 2.3.1 Burmese Buddhism and early Vipassana

**2.3.1.1** Burmese Buddhist meditation must have started with the arrival of Buddhism in the country.<sup>43</sup> But little is known about Burmese Buddhism, especially meditation, before the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when, apparently, meditation had started to decline and was hardly practised, partly because of social circumstances, fueled by the belief that the Dharma-ending age had arrived. This meant that, for most people, meditation would be difficult and ineffective until the advent of the next Buddha, Metteyya—millennial beliefs fueled by troubled and uncertain times.<sup>44</sup>

One of the earliest challenges against this notion came from **Medawi**, a monk who was said to have taught Vipassana in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century [2.3.1.3 f]. From such records, we can only be certain of the overlapping theories, but we cannot be sure of whether the Vipassana of that early period was identical, or even similar, to the kinds of Vipassana we see today. Often such practices seem to have been introduced by “wizards or shamans” (*weikza*).<sup>45</sup> They probably taught and practised a mixture

---

<sup>42</sup> The 7 stages of purification are also the bases for the following modern Buddhist works: Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 1998:187-194; Nānarāma, *The seven contemplations of insight*, 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Pali chronicles record that Indian emperor Asoka sent 2 Indian monks, Soṇa and Uttara, to Suvaṇṇa,bhūmi, “the land of gold,” in 228 BCE. This may be either Thaton in lower Burma or Nakhorn Pathom (56 km west of Bangkok) in Thailand (Sujato, *Sects and Sectarianism*, 2012:34). See also H G Q Wales 1969:10 f; G H Luce, “The advent of Buddhism to Burma,” 1974:119-138; Smith & Watson 1979:10 f; f r Allchin 1989:1-16, 1990:163-173; Cousins 1997c:186 f; J Stargardt 1990 (rev K R Norman, JRAS 1992).

<sup>44</sup> On Metteyya and his coming, see **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda S** (D 26/3:58-79) + SD 36.10 (4). From mid-16<sup>th</sup> cent to 1635, much of Burma was unified as the **Pagan** kingdom by the ruling Toungoo (or Taungoo) dynasty, and it included the Shan states (including the Chinese Shan states), Manipur, northern Siam and Lan Xang. This was followed by the Restored Toungoo Dynasty (1635-1752). This was followed by the “3<sup>rd</sup> Burmese Empire,” under the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885).

<sup>45</sup> *Weikza*, Burmese for (P) *vijjā*, “knowledge,” but here with the special sense of “supernatural knowledge, magic.”

of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna magic.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, it is wise to define ‘Vipassana’ broadly for our historical survey and analysis. [2.2.1.2]

**2.3.1.2** One of the earliest accounts we have of **Vipassana** being taught and practised in Burma centred around the figure of the monk—perhaps a shaman (*weikza*), **Waya-zawta**, who lived in the Sagaing Hills in Upper Burma during the reign of king Maha-dhamma-yaza-dipati [IMahā,dhamma,rājā-dhipati] (1714-1754; r 1733-1752), the last king of the declining Nyaung-yan (Restored Toungoo) dynasty. Waya-zawta’s monastery was located just across the Irrawaddy from the royal capital, and there he started a Vipassana movement in the 1720s-30s.

Waya-zawta claimed to have attained once-returning (*sakadāgāmi*),<sup>47</sup> promised that through his meditation method, practitioners could attain streamwinning, once-returning, even non-returning. When he died, however, his movement was suppressed by the king. The scholar-monk **Monywe Sayadaw** (1767-1835) records this a century later:

An elder monk named Waya-zawta, who lived in the village of Watchek, used to preach to followers of his doctrine that they had become *ariya sotāpannas*. Many monks and laymen became his disciples and soon they could be found in every town and village of Upper and Lower Burma declaring, “I have become a *sotāpanna*, I have become a *sakadāgāmi*!” After Waya-zawta died, an investigation was held of monks dwelling at his place who continued to preach his doctrines. When these monks admitted to their teachings, the king had them defrocked and ordered them to shovel elephant and horse manure [in the royal stables].<sup>48</sup>

The reasons for the king’s suppression could not have been religious, since he only made his move after the monk’s death. Moreover, the king did not harass any other monks, such as Medawi, a zealous champion of Vipassana [2.3.1.3]. Clearly, his suppression of Waya-zawta was out of political concerns. The movement had grown large, with numerous people claiming to have attained those high stages. Such people might have considered themselves above the king, and they could have easily attracted supporters to foment an insurrection. Even though the king had claimed Bodhisattva status (a common claim amongst kings), in Theravada, he was still a “worldling” (*puthujjana*), and hence below the saints, who were “nobles” (*ariya*) on a spiritual level. Such notions of superiority above the king were taken to be *lèse-majesté*, especially at a time when the king was threatened from all sides.<sup>49</sup>

**2.3.1.3** After the king’s suppression of Waya-zawta’s Vipassana movement, there was a civil war that ended the Nyaung-yan dynasty. It was at this time, that a young scholar-monk named **Medawi** (layname, U Sine, 1728-1816, also Shin Mei-da-wi)<sup>50</sup> began writing Vipassana manuals, based on the Abhidhamma, in vernacular Burmese. These were probably the earliest known practical Vipassana manuals in Burma. He completed his first manual in 1754, when he was only 26, which was the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the new Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885).

He was a learned and prolific writer. In his *Nāma-rūpa-nibbidā Shu-bwe*<sup>51</sup> [the manual on insight into repulsion towards name-and-form] (1756), Medawi criticizes the defeatist attitude of the general populace of his times regarding the inefficacy of meditation and possibility of awakening in one’s life-

<sup>46</sup> Initially, Burma was dominated by an eclectic Buddhism called Ari Buddhism, which incl Mahayana and Vajrayana elements as well animist practices like nat (tutelary spirits) worship and influences from Brahmanism. G Coedès, *The making of South East Asia*, Univ of California Press, 1956:113; Niharranjan Ray, *Theravada Buddhism in Burma*, 1946:148-150

<sup>47</sup> On *once-returning* (*sakadāgāmi*), see SD 10.16 (12).

<sup>48</sup> Monywe Sayadaw, *Mahā-yazawingyaw*, c1830:177 f.

<sup>49</sup> Lieberman 1984:194 f; Pranke 2010:455-457; De La Perrière et al (eds), *Champions of Buddhism*, 2014:\*\*\*.

<sup>50</sup> See Houtman 1990:291 f.

<sup>51</sup> In Pali, this is *Nāma.rūpa,nibbidā Vipassanā Gantha*.

time. He teaches that the Dharma-ending occurs only on a personal basis, that is, those who do not practise.

#### 2.3.1.4 In his **Satu-giri Shu-bwe Kyam**, he writes:

Should anyone ever believe, “I am unable to practice even so much as is necessary to attain the path and fruit of stream-entry!” ... and being content with the moral purity so attained, not engage in any further practice, then for that person it can be said that the religion of practice has gone extinct. (Medawi 1968:59)

Medawi wrote over 30 manuals related to meditation, centering his teachings on the 3 universal characteristics (impermanence, suffering, nonself)<sup>52</sup> in relation to the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness).<sup>53</sup> King Bodawpaya (r 1782–1819), the 6<sup>th</sup> Konbaung king and one of the dynasty’s most religiously active and innovative monarchs, conferred on him a royal title and a monastic endowment for his work on Vipassana.<sup>54</sup>

Medawi’s teachings on *the possibility and urgency of meditation and awakening in this life* have a positive influence on many in Burmese Buddhism even to this day. On account of his remarkable works and teachings, he may be regarded as the true founder of the Burmese Vipassana tradition. [2.3.5.2]

### 2.3.2 Pre-modern Vipassana in Burma

**2.3.2.1** Before Medawi’s time, meditation was hardly taught, even less practised. It was like tiny puddles of water scattered far and wide in the hot searing sun, with hardly enough water to flow and nourish the land and life (to use Htay Hlaing’s rhetoric). After Medawi, there was an encouraging number of meditating monks in every generation. There were, for example, Htuhkaung Sayadaw (1798-1890) and Hpongdawgyi U Thila (1832-1907). Rain, as it were, began to fall, turning the puddles into small channels of water.

Then, from the forests and mountains more water flowed down: Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923), Theichadaung Sayadaw (1871-1931) and Mohnyin Sayadaw (1872-1964). The streams grew into flooded rivers, which then flowed like the Irrawaddy: there were Mingun Zeidawun Sayadaw (1869-1954),<sup>55</sup> Sunlun Sayadaw (1877-1952), Kanni Sayadaw (1879-1966), Webu Sayadaw (1895-1977), Mogok Sayadaw (1899-1962) and Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982).<sup>56</sup>

**2.3.2.2** The British annexation of Lower Burma, which began in 1824, started the 3 **Anglo-Burmese Wars** (1824-1855), which culminated in the conquest of Upper Burma in 1885, so ending Burmese imperial rule. The British colonized Burma until she gained independence in 1948. In important ways, colonization helped modernize Burma, and also exposed the British to Burmese culture and Buddhism. Foreign rule also stirred a sense of urgency in some perceptive Burmese that their nation and Buddhism needed to be strengthened; hence, the notion that “**to be Burmese is to be Buddhist**.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup> On the 3 characteristics, (*ti,lakkhaṇa*), see SD 1.2 (2); SD 18.2 (2.2).

<sup>53</sup> On the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*), see (**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56), SD 3.7; SD 3.7 (6+7). For details, SD 17

<sup>54</sup> Htay Hlaing 1973:113.

<sup>55</sup> Or Thaton Zeidawun Sayadaw (1870-1955).

<sup>56</sup> Htay Hlaing, *Yahanda hnin pouku htu mya*, 1981:33. Houtman, “The Burmese Wipathana meditation tradition selfconscious,” 1985:88. Also: <https://www.vridhamma.org/Ven-Ledi-Sayadaw>.

<sup>57</sup> *Buddha batha bama lou myo*, lit, “We Burmese are Buddhists.” To be Burman and to be Buddhist was a way of distinguishing the majority of **Burmans** (or Banmar) from other groups along ethnic, religious, and political lines: Mon, Shan, Karen, Kayah, Rakhine (Arakanese), Kachin, Chin, Karenni, Kokang Chinese, and other minority groups. Schober, “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist,” in Schober (ed), *Theravada Buddhism in Colonial Contexts*, 2018: 21-41; Ava Rezai, “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist”:

### 2.3.3 Ledi Sayadaw's early years

**2.3.3.1** From amongst this constellation of stellar monastics [2.3.2.1], the name of the famous scholar-practitioner monk, **Ledi Sayadaw** (1846-1923),<sup>58</sup> shines brightly to this day, guiding us with his reformist ideas and numerous works. He was born 4 decades before the British overran Upper Burma in 1885. His mature formative years as a monk were spent in a colonized country, which ended royal control of the country and patronage of Buddhism.

Ledi was troubled by the British refusal to play the role of sangha patrons and monitors, while subtly privileging missionary Christianity and Western education. This milieu of apprehension and foreign domination, as shown in Erik Braun's insightful study, *The Birth of Insight* (2013 ch 1), led Ledi to promote widespread study of Buddhist teachings and, eventually, meditation, even amongst the laity, as a means of protecting and propagating Buddhism and the nation.



Ledi Sayadaw

**2.3.3.2** One of the cultural factors favouring Ledi's intellectual mission was the high literacy rate of the people. Even in pre-colonial times, male education was stressed in the traditional monastic system. During colonial administration, the female literacy rate rose dramatically, too, especially with the founding of the Government High School in 1874, which became University College, Rangoon, in 1876. Burma's current literacy rate is well above 90% (similar to Thailand's).

**Printing** was already introduced into Burma before Ledi's time,<sup>59</sup> by Catholic priests in 1773. In 1776, the Propaganda de Fide press (Rome), the missionary arm of the Roman Church, published *Alphabetum Burmanum* (on the Burmese alphabet) in preparation to spread the Christian God's Word in Burmese.<sup>60</sup>

In 1807, the Serampore Mission (a British Baptist mission in West Bengal) extended its work into Burma. The Mission's press had printed several works in Burmese font, notably Scottish linguist John Leyden's *A Comparative Vocabulary of the Barma, Maláyu and T'hái Languages* (1810), which features both Burmese and Jawi scripts, and *A Grammar of the Burman Language* (1814) compiled by Felix Carey, the eldest son of the Baptist minister William Carey.<sup>61</sup>

The first American Baptist, Adoniram Judson, arrived in 1813, and set up the American Mission Press in Rangoon: it produced some of the earliest printed works in Burma. The Burma Herald Press, the first commercial press, set up in 1868, made widely available general works, legal texts, moral tracts and popular Burmese plays (*pya-zat*).

In 1868, Philip Rey, born in Burma, started **the Hanthawaddy Press** in Rangoon, which became a leading publishing house in Burma in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, known particularly for its publication of Burmese classics and Buddhist texts, including the Tipiṭaka. In 1864, the first royal printing press was set up in Mandalay by king Mindon.<sup>62</sup>

Young Ledi, lay-name Tet Khaung, was only 18 then. Two years later he became a monk, **Ñāṇa-dhaja** (the flag of wisdom), at the prestigious Thanjaun monastery, the country's leading Buddhist institution. His enthusiasm and brilliance quickly caught these senior monks' eyes, and he was given the task of being a teacher. At this time, printed books were just beginning to become widely available in Burma, and he learned to love the books, and read wisely and avidly.

<https://centerforcontemporarybuddhiststudies.wordpress.com/2016/09/19/to-be-burmese-is-to-be-buddhist-the-root-of-buddhist-extremism-among-monks-and-the-laity-in-contemporary-burma/>.

<sup>58</sup> His lay name was Maung Tet Khaung, and his monk name was Bhikkhu Ñāṇadhaja. For sources, see Houtman 1990:287-289. Biography: [https://host.pariyatti.org/treasures/A\\_Short\\_Biography\\_of\\_Ledi\\_Sayadaw.pdf](https://host.pariyatti.org/treasures/A_Short_Biography_of_Ledi_Sayadaw.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-16/issue-2/jul-sep-2020/earlyprinting>.

<sup>60</sup> <https://welcomecollection.org/works/bdvcpuu4>,

<sup>61</sup> <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-16/issue-2/jul-sep-2020/earlyprinting#fn:2>.

<sup>62</sup> <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-16/issue-2/jul-sep-2020/earlyprinting#fn:7>.

**2.3.3.3** Ledi's formative years were the fertile period when Burma's penultimate king, **Mindon** (r 1853-1878) was working hard to modernize the country, at first through Buddhist learning, and then with wider worldly learning, including modernizing the country to counter western hegemony.<sup>63</sup> At the forefront with modern ideas of sweeping reforms was the king's closest confidant, **Hpo Hlaing** (1830-1883),<sup>64</sup> his minister of interior (Atwinwun) (when he was only 28), deeply learned in politics, mathematics and Buddhist philosophy, and a keen student of western scientific knowledge, with his own sizeable library of Western books.

Exploiting his status as a monk, Ledi repeatedly visited the busy minister until the latter, perhaps exasperatedly asked why he kept coming. Ledi replied that he wanted to be skilled in literature like the minister.<sup>65</sup> Since then they became close friends, and he benefitted from modern learning and western culture from the Burmese Renaissance man.

**2.3.3.4** Ledi was clearly well aware of Burmese current affairs, foreign threats, and the benefits of modern learning, western science and technology. Two things are especially worth mentioning. Firstly, he gave up writing in the traditional style, dominated by the use of colourful, repetitive and rhyming words for rhetorical effect. Secondly, he used a very readable and well written style clearly stating the related doctrines and suttas so that they are effectively modern Burmese commentaries on the early teachings. It was on Hpo Hlaing's advice that Ledi rejected the old style and wrote in a "succinct and clear" modern manner.<sup>66</sup>

**2.3.3.5** **Hpo Hlaing** had an Italian textbook on anatomy translated into Burmese: *Anātamī ca so roma nuiñ' ñarñ*. After a study of this book, Hpo Hlaing reconciled the traditional Buddhist understanding of human anatomy to his new knowledge. He broke down the human body into its component parts as detailed in the suttas and Abhidhamma. He discussed the 28 most basic elements of matter (*rūpa*) and the 32 body-parts, as well as **the kalāpa** (molecular clusters),<sup>67</sup> the late Abhidhamma concept of subatomic particles comprising the 4 elements (*mahā, bhūta, rūpa*). This became his encyclopaedic Vipassana work, *Meditation on the Body* (Kāyanupassanā kyam) (1875).<sup>68</sup>

Clearly, this book had a profound influence on Ledi, and, surely, on the Burmese Vipassana tradition, too. The *kalāpa* doctrine, explained in Hpo Hlaing's tome, features prominently throughout the various Burmese Vipassana meditation methods even to this day [2.4.2.2].

### **2.3.4 Ledi Sayadaw's monastic learning**

**2.3.4.1** Ledi was a precocious child. Even as a novice, he mastered both the brahminical Vedas, and the Dhamma and Abhidhamma. By his 8<sup>th</sup> monastic year (*vassa*) as a monk, he had passed all the monastic exams and became a Pali teacher in San-Kyaung monastery (Mahā Jotik'ārāma), Mandalay.

After another 8 years, in 1882, when he was 36, he left for Monywa, in Sagaing.<sup>69</sup> After teaching in the day, he crossed the river to the west bank to spend the night in meditation in a small monastery

<sup>63</sup> In many ways, Mindon's contemporary, king Mongkut (r 1851-1868) was more successful in modernizing Siam, so that she was free from colonization, the only SE Asian country to be so.

<sup>64</sup> For refs, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pho\\_Hlaing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pho_Hlaing).

<sup>65</sup> Hla Pain 1967:63 f; Aung Mon 2007:163.

<sup>66</sup> Hla Pain 1967:64-66; Houtman 1993:203; Aung Mon 2007:163 f; Braun 2013:21-23. Cp Buddhadasa's similar style of speaking Dharma [5.6.4].

<sup>67</sup> *Kalāpa* or *rūpa, kalāpa*. Abhidhammattha, saṅgaha (Abhs) ch 6 compendium of matter (*rūpa, saṅgaha, vibhāga*), esp classification of matter (§§6-8); tr Abhs: BRS 246 + Table 6.3. Also: Y Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma*, HK: Centre of Buddhist Studies, Univ of HK, 2010:205-223 (ch 15).

<sup>68</sup> Rangoon: Hamsavati puṃ hnip' tuik', 1956. This work was done at the request of Salin Myosa, the king's daughter. Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Culture Politics*, 1999:201.

<sup>69</sup> Monywa (also Monywar or Monywe) is the largest city of Sagaing region, on the east (left) bank of the Chindwin river, c 60 km (97 mi) west of Mandalay.

beside the Lak-pan-taung mountain. It was probably during this period that he mastered Vipassana, focusing on the breath (*ānāpāna*) and feelings (*vedanā*).

**2.3.4.2** In 1886 (the year after the British overran Upper Burma), Ledi went into retreat in **the Ledi forest** (hence, his toponym), just north of Monywa. Over time, a growing number of students came to study under him. In due course, the Ledi-tawya monastery was built to house them. He retained his habit of retiring to his small vihara (monastic residence) across the river for his own meditation.

[2.3.3.1]

At the turn of the century, the layman **U Po Thet** (1873-1945) came to him and learned Vipassana. Ledi Sayadaw inspired him to work as a lay Dharma, dhuta: he came to be known as Saya Thetgyi<sup>70</sup> [2.4.6]. He, in turn, taught Vipassana to **U Ba Khin** (1899-1971),<sup>71</sup> who then taught it to S N Goenka (1924-2013), who popularized it to what it is to this day.<sup>72</sup>

### **2.3.5 Ledi's writings**

**2.3.5.1** Ledi Sayadaw wrote a total of **76 manuals** on Dhamma, Abhidhamma and insight meditation,<sup>73</sup> in Pali and in vernacular Burmese for the benefit of ordinary folks. His best-known manuals (in Pali) are the *Pāramattha Dīpanī* (the manual of ultimate meaning; 1880, 1897)<sup>74</sup> and the *Ānāpāna Dīpanī* (the manual of the breath (meditation), 1904).<sup>75</sup> Ledi Sayadaw's ideas and works are very close to those of the monk Medawi, who must surely have inspired him [2.3.1.3].

Amongst Ledi Sayadaw's vernacular books are **the Nwa-myitta-sa** (a poetic prose letter, 1886) and **the Go-maṅsa-māṭikā**, which urge people to abstain from killing cows and taking beef, and following a vegetarian diet; and **"On the impropriety of wearing shoes on pagoda platforms** [ie, in the temples]"<sup>76</sup> (1917). His works contain many comments which may, even by our standards, be said to be openly critical and remarkably modern for a Buddhist country steeped in tradition, but they inspired the change and growth for Buddhism in Myanmar then.<sup>77</sup>

**2.3.5.2 Ledi Sayadaw**, in his explanation of **the Ānāpāna, sati Sutta** (M 118) (the discourse on the mindfulness of the breath),<sup>78</sup> gives his most detailed meditation teachings on his Vipassana method. Basically, he allows the option of *not gaining dhyana*, but to move on to cultivate insight (such as reflecting on impermanence). It is such simplification of the meditation technique that made Ledi Sayadaw's method very popular.<sup>79</sup>

He describes how this is done in his **Ānāpāna Dīpanī** (a manual of breath meditation, 1904), ch 17, thus:

<sup>70</sup> *Sayagyi U Ba Khin Journal*, Igatpuri, 1998:75-86; <https://www.vridhamma.org/Saya-Thetgyi>. Braun 2013: 156 f. Also: [https://host.pariyatti.org/treasures/A\\_Short\\_Biography\\_of\\_Ledi\\_Sayadaw.pdf](https://host.pariyatti.org/treasures/A_Short_Biography_of_Ledi_Sayadaw.pdf).

<sup>71</sup> See Houtman, "Beyond the Cradle and Past the Grave," in (ed) Schober, *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, 1997:310-344. Braun 2013:157-159.

<sup>72</sup> Braun 2013:159 f.

<sup>73</sup> For a list of Ledi Sayadaw's works and downloads: <http://www.aimwell.org/ledi.html>. Biblio without download: [https://host.pariyatti.org/treasures/A\\_Short\\_Biography\\_of\\_Ledi\\_Sayadaw.pdf](https://host.pariyatti.org/treasures/A_Short_Biography_of_Ledi_Sayadaw.pdf). *Manuals of Buddhism* title downloads: <https://terebeess.hu/english/ledi.html>.

<sup>74</sup> This book is said to contain his answers to the 20 questions set by San-Kyaung Sayadaw during an examination for 2000 students. He was the only one who answered all the questions satisfactorily. It is also a comedy on Abhidhamm'attha, saṅgaha (Abhs), the best known Abhidhamma summary. Braun 2013: 45-62 (Ledi Sayadaw's Abhidhamma controversy).

<sup>75</sup> Eng tr, <http://www.aimwell.org/anapanasati.html#>.

<sup>76</sup> Maung Maung 1980:21. Schober, "To be Burmese is to be Buddhist," 2018: 30-32.

<sup>77</sup> Houtman, "Traditions of Buddhist practice in Burma," 1990a:38; Braun 2013:38 f.

<sup>78</sup> M 118/3:78-88 (SD 7.13)

<sup>79</sup> Braun 2013:137-139.

I shall now show concisely the work of the fourth tetrad.

#### **When can one proceed to Vipassanā?**

In the *Ānāpāna-sati Sutta* and the Commentary, the order of practice is to undertake the work of the fourth tetrad only after the attainment of the four *jhānas*. If one can adhere strictly to this order it is ideal.

However, if one finds oneself unable to follow this order of practice one may proceed to insight from the third *jhāna*. It is permissible to proceed to insight also from the second *jhāna*, or from the first *jhāna*, or from access-concentration before *jhāna* is attained, or from the connection stage, or even from the counting stage after the wandering tendencies of the mind have been overcome. (Ledi 2021:21, tr U Sein Nyo Tun)<sup>80</sup>

For a better practical understanding of Ledi Sayadaw's insight method of breath meditation, it is best to study his *Ānāpāna Dīpanī* carefully and practise accordingly. This would be very easy when we are already familiar with breath meditation. If not, it is wise to be personally coached by an experienced meditation teacher, so that we can fully benefit from this experience, and understand what is really happening here.<sup>81</sup>

Before we survey the other Vipassana teachers, let us recall the 2 key figures who inspired them. If we regard Medhavi as the founder of the Burmese Vipassana tradition, then, Ledi Sayadaw, for all his Dharma efforts and works must be regarded as **the founder of modern Burmese Vipassana**.<sup>82</sup> [2.3.1.4]

## **2.4 Vipassana, Ledi Sayadaw and the “new Burmese meditation”**

### **2.4.1 Vipassana, pure and dry**

**2.4.1.1** The Vipassana meditation started by **Ledi Sayadaw** at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, flourished into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to this day. Understandably, this was labelled the “**new Burmese meditation**” by a scholar.<sup>83</sup> After Ledi Sayadaw, the “new Burmese meditation” was further developed by **Mingun Jetawan**<sup>84</sup> **Sayadaw** (U Narada, 1868-1955) [2.4.3.2] and by **Mogok Sayadaw** (U Vimala, 1899-1962) [2.4.3.4]. What is unique and encouraging about this new Burmese method is that it was practised and promoted by both monastics and the laity.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the new Vipassana was popularised by layman **U Ba Khin** (1899-1971), the monk **Mahasi Sayadaw** (1904-1982), Thai layman (ex-monk) **V R [Vicitr Ratna] Dhiravamsa** (1935-2021) and Indian businessman, **S N Goenka** (1924-2013).<sup>85</sup> While monastics tend to follow the Vipassana as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw, others, especially those new to Buddhism or meditation, followed Goenka's method. [2.4.2]

**2.4.1.2** The new Vipassana stresses on the attaining of **insight** (*vipassanā*) through **satipatthana** (*satipaṭṭhāna*), the focuses on mindfulness, especially by closely observing bodily changes. Hence, its practitioner is said to be “one whose vehicle is insight” (*suddha,vipassana,yānika*) (Vism 18.5/588).<sup>86</sup> Note that this idea is not really new: it is found in Buddhaghosa's Visuddhi,magga. Its synonym, the

<sup>80</sup> For another tr, cf Ledi 1995:405 f @ Braun 2013:138.

<sup>81</sup> On Ledi Sayadaw's popularization of Buddhist meditation, see Braun 2013:101, 121, 123, 147 f, 164-168, 226 n45.

<sup>82</sup> Braun, *The Birth of Insight*, 2013:138-142.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Sharf, “Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience,” 1995:263.

<sup>84</sup> Burmese *zei-da-wun*.

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.dhamma.org/en-US/index>.

<sup>86</sup> Braun 2013:139, 162.

“dry insigher” (*sukkhā, vipassaka*), is even more common, found in most of the Commentaries (but not in any sutta).<sup>87</sup> [2.4.5.2]

**2.4.1.3** A key traditional teaching unique to Vipassana is that of the 10 “**imperfections of insight**” (*vipassan’upakkilesa*). These are mental states (*thāna*) that appear to be uplifting, even liberating, but are actually “traps” of which a Vipassana meditator are often reminded to be wary.<sup>88</sup> They are basically our own reactions to a Vipassana experience which we may mistake for final liberation or for some level of attainment.<sup>89</sup>

The 10 imperfections of insights are those of:<sup>90</sup>

(1) vision of radiance (light-forms)	<i>obhāsa</i>
(2) knowledge (theoretical understanding)	<i>ñāṇa</i>
(3) physical zest	<i>pīti</i>
(4) tranquillity	<i>passaddhi</i>
(5) joy	<i>sukha</i>
(6) determination	<i>adhimokkha</i>
(7) energy	<i>paggaha</i>
(8) heightened awareness	<i>upaṭṭhāna</i>
(9) equanimity	<i>upekkhā</i>
(10) attachment [delight]	<i>nikanti</i>

These imperfections arise only in a beginner or one inexperienced in meditation, who has not yet reached the path of awakening. They are said to “defile” the mind, but this term is not used for any of the 10 states [above], first mentioned in the 12<sup>th</sup> book of the Khuddaka Nikāya, **the Patisambhidā, magga**, a late canonical work, where this decad is first mentioned in a verse (Pm 2:102).<sup>91</sup>

There (in Pm), they are simply referred to as “these 10 states” (*imāni dasa thānāni*), described as causing us “restlessness” (*uddhacca*) in the sense of being mental hindrances, which may then “distract and defile” us (*vikkhipati c’eva kilissati ca*). Hence, they are called *vipassan’upakkilesa* by Buddhaghosa in the Visuddhi, magga (Vism 20.105-130/634-638). We should simply “disown” them as they arise—“This is not mine; this I am not; this is not myself”<sup>92</sup>—as taught in the suttas (Vism 20.127).

These teachings form the bedrock upon which the various teachers based their Vipassana teachings, each with their variations on the Vipassana theme. In other words, the differences we see in individual Vipassana teachers are often personal biases or preferences. In realistic terms, no matter how authentic or orthodox these teacher’s teachings may seem to be, at the bottom of it all lies their charisma, and organizational and marketing abilities. At least, this is the case for Vipassana methods and groups. Despite such human differences, when it comes to authenticity and orthodoxy, every teacher

<sup>87</sup> V 6:1291; DA 1:4, 2:512, 3:188, 899, 1032; MA 4:54, 67; SA 1:236, 2:127; AA 1:87, 2:127, 134 f, 147, 149, 3:113, 115, 132, 142, 332, 4:3, 137; KhpA 178, 183 SnA 1:278, 2:548; NmA 2:313; ItA 2:89; JA 3:473; DhA 1:12; ThaA 1:207, 3:208 f; PmA 1:194, 310, 319, 3:563, 584; DhsA 228; PugA 179, 191, 244.

<sup>88</sup> A *kalāla* is For Ledi’s discussion on the kalāpas, see Ledi 1995:450 f, but he focuses more on the 4 elements (*dhātu*) that comprise the kalāpas. [2.3.3.4]

<sup>89</sup> SD 56.22 (8.2.5); SD 32.7 (2.1.3.2); SD 32.10 (2.5.3).

<sup>90</sup> For explanations, see Vism 20.105-130/633-638; also AA 3:143; Pm 2:100. Cf the 11 mental impurities (*cittassa upakkilesa*), see **(Anuruddhā) Upakkilesa S** (M 128,16-27/3:158-160), SD 5.18, addressed to advanced meditators; also 16 mental impurities given in **Vatthūpama S** (M 7,3-4/1:36 f), SD 28.12, addressed to the sangha at large.

<sup>91</sup> Pm:Ñ 295.

<sup>92</sup> See eg M 22,26 f/1:138 (SD 3.12); S 22.59,12/3:68 n (SD 1.2). For a study of each of these: “**I**” SD 19.1; “**Me**” SD 19.2a; “**Mine**” SD 19.3.

would usually agree on these early Buddhist teachings without reservation. These are the classic themes on which these maestros play their masterly variations.<sup>93</sup>

### **2.4.2 Ledi Sayadaw's influence**<sup>94</sup>

**2.4.2.1 Ledi Sayadaw's** ideas and teachings continue to influence us to this day through a lineage of saintly and singular Burmese monks and laymen, almost all of whom taught and kept a good balance between theory and practice in Vipassana: between mindfulness (*thati*, P *sati*) and learning (*athi*, wisdom or knowledge). Even the economic slump in colonial Burma in the 1930s<sup>95</sup> did not deter the rise of Vipassana. Indeed, both Vipassana and nationalism rode the crest of the slump waves. Burma gained independence in 1948 [2.3.2.2].

**2.4.2.2** The Burmese social contexts and the personalities of the individual Vipassana teachers throughout the generations shaped Buddhist ideas and methods of Vipassana. It continued to light up the faith of the Burmese, inspired by the wisdom, vision and charisma of Ledi Sayadaw. Through him, Vipassana in Burma developed into a tradition of **mass insight meditation**.

During his lifetime, Ledi Sayadaw taught Dharma and Vipassana to numerous people, monastic and lay. We shall here mention those influential and diligent few who practised Ledi Sayadaw's Vipassana teachings and helped to develop them into such a mass insight meditation. A common trend in all these teachers is their propagation of the same simplified Abhidhamma approach used by Ledi Sayadaw, particularly the practice of observing of the 4 elements.

**2.4.2.3** Ledi wrote 2 special manuals to explain **the meditation of the 4 elements**. The 1<sup>st</sup>, the *Big Book on Meditation Objects (Kammattḥān' kyam' krī)*, like his earlier works, stresses the focus on the material elements as the basis for practice, devoting its last 2 chapters to their use by people of middling or keen abilities. His subsequent work, the *New Book on the Meditation Object of the Elements (Dāt' kammattḥāna' kyam' sac')*, highlights the benefits of focusing on the elements. Ledi explains the arising of the "great elements" (*mahā, bhūtas*) of *earth, water, fire, and wind*, and the nature of the 28 kinds of derived elements (*upādāya, rūpa*).<sup>96</sup>

All this formed the basis for his teaching on the *kalāpa*, "molecular clusters," although he did not make them a part of any meditation. After him, **U Ba Khin** would introduce the practice of scanning the body to observe these basic dynamic units of our being [2.4.8.2]. And then, **Pa-Auk Sayadaw**, in our own time, made it a key practice in his Samatha-Vipassana system [11].

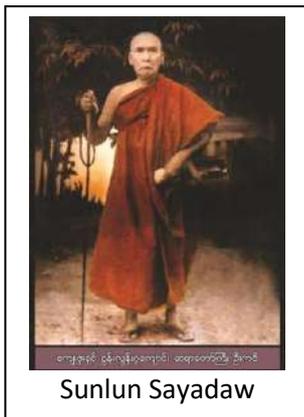
<sup>93</sup> For a similar sentiment, with more details, see Analayo 2012:30-42 (ii) Insight knowledges; 42-49 (III) Insight in the early discourses.

<sup>94</sup> A very helpful scholarly work on the development of the Vipassana movement in Burma and beyond is Erik Braun's *The Birth of Insight*, 2013. The rest of this section is based on the conclusion of Braun's book (2013:155-160).

<sup>95</sup> The socioeconomic downturn incl a slump in rice prices between 1927 and 1930 [Ian Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis*, 2005]; Indian-Burmese riots, 1930; and the Saya San rebellion, 1930-1931 [R L Solomon, "Saya San and the Burmese rebellion," *Modern Asian Studies*, 1969:209-223]; see Houtman 1990a:44.

<sup>96</sup> Ledi divides the *Meditation Object of the Elements* into 2 parts. the 1<sup>st</sup> in Pali and the 2<sup>nd</sup> in Burmese. In the Pali section, the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 pages lists the features of each of the 4 elements: (1) *uddesa*, or basic list of the 4 elements; (2) *niddesa* or more detailed description of each element; (3) *paṭṭiniddesa*, which elaborates on their qualities. The Burmese section contains the *nissaya*, a word-by-word commentary for the Pali. Then follows greater details in Burmese on the elements and how they work together to form physical matter (*rūpa*) [(**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56,7), SD 3.7; SD 17.13 (3.3.2.2)]. See Braun 2013: 47 f, 55, 106, 126, 132-136, 207 n91, 216 n19, 220 n64.

### 2.4.3 Lone-star Vipassana teachers



**2.4.3.1** Ledi Sayadaw may be the brightest star in the Burmese Vipassana constellation. There were a few other bright stars in that very same constellation. One such distant bright star was **Sunlun Sayadaw** (1878-1952), from the cave monasteries of Sunlun village, near Mingyan, middle Burma. He was an unschooled farmer and the fascinating, even macabre, circumstances leading to his renunciation to become a teacher in his own right is recounted by Kornfield.<sup>97</sup>

Sunlun Sayadaw learned—from 2 local friends—the **breath meditation** and to focus on the touch of the breath, and whatever physical action he was doing. On becoming a monk at 30, he retired to meditate in the caves. He was said to have progressed through all the stages of sainthood over time, and finally attained arhathood itself. Despite his lack of schooling, it is reported that he was able to answer any question related to the Dharma and meditation, and they were always in keeping with sutta teachings.<sup>98</sup> He was famous for his breath meditation which is described to be strenuous but often bringing quick results.<sup>99</sup>

**2.4.3.2** **Mingun Jetawana Sayadaw** (U Narada, 1869-1954) was perhaps the first Burmese monk known to have effected the idea of organizing some kind of group meditation training. He had a colourful ordination history. According to Gustav Houtman, Mingun became a novice at 14 but disrobed at 17 to attend to family affairs. He reordained at 18 (1887), and studied scriptures under a number of monks. After 6 rains (monastic years) he disrobed again. Then, he renounced again at 27 (1896), this time, studying under Aletawya Sayadaw (U Myit-zu-tha). Aletawya's teacher was **Thilon Sayadaw** (U Candima, 1786-1860),<sup>100</sup> whose teacher was **Kintawya Sayadaw** (U Khema).<sup>101</sup>

While training under Aletawya, he developed interest in meditation, especially satipatthana (*tha-di'pathan*).<sup>102</sup> When he was 37 (after 10 rains), he moved not too far away into his own small meditation temple. Mingun became a meditation teacher in 1907, when he was 40.<sup>103</sup> In 1911, with his supporters, he built, in Myo Hla (Shwegu Township, Bhamo Dist, Kachin State), the Myo Hla Bodegon Kamahtan Htana, the first meditation centre for the laity.<sup>104</sup> After teaching there for only 2 rains he left for Thaton, where the Zei-da-wun (Jetawana) was built for him. It was here that he taught Vipassana and wrote about it until his death.

**2.4.3.3** **Ledi and Mingun** were contemporaries: Ledi was 23 when Mingun was born; when Ledi died, Mingun was 54. We have no records (thus far) that they met. However, it is very likely that Mingun who was younger, would have known about the senior Ledi at least by reputation.

Most modern-day Vipassana teachers, especially in Burma, are connected either with the Ledi tradition or the Mingun tradition.<sup>105</sup> Mingun was not as charismatic as Ledi, did not write so prolific-

<sup>97</sup> Kornfield 1996: ch 6.

<sup>98</sup> Sunlun Shin Vinaya, *The Yogi and Vipassana* [tr sermons], Rangoon, nd:7; <https://satima.net/buddhist-meditation-the-sunlun-way-by-sunlun-shin-vinaya/> & <http://www.sunlun.com/smme.html>; see Houtman 1985: 104.

<sup>99</sup> Kornfield id; also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunlun\\_Sayadaw](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunlun_Sayadaw). See esp P P Kyaw, "The sound of the breath," 2019:1-45.

<sup>100</sup> Houtman 1990:294 f.

<sup>101</sup> Houtman 1990:304.

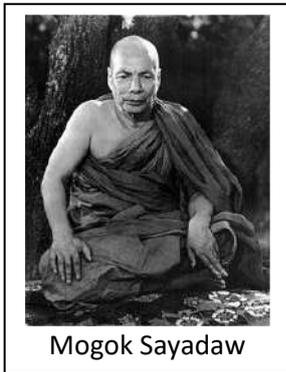
<sup>102</sup> Houtman 1990:44.

<sup>103</sup> Houtman 1990:289 f.

<sup>104</sup> Houtman 1985:89; *The Irrawaddy* 10,2 Feb 2002:2. (Braun 2013:161 n58 is unclear); this must be Mingun Jetawan Sayadaw (1868-1982), Mahasi's teacher. See Houtman 1985:311.

<sup>105</sup> Maung Maing 1980:113 f.

ally, and did not travel as widely as Ledi did. His best-known student, Mahasi Sayadaw [2.4.5], however wrote on Vipassana and made it known worldwide.



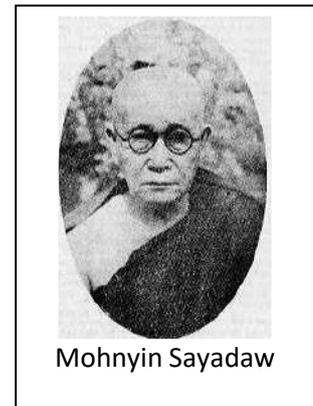
Mogok Sayadaw

**2.4.3.4** Another lone Vipassana star, **Mogok Sayadaw** (1899–1962), unlike Sunlun, was renowned for his learning, and even put together a meditation method based on a profoundly scholastic analysis of dependent origination. He was deeply learned in the Abhidhamma and even discussed it with U Paduma, one of Ledi's disciples, which means that he had exposure to Ledi Sayadaw's teachings.<sup>106</sup> Like Mohnyin Sayadaw [2.4.4], he required that his students had sufficient theoretical understanding before going into meditation. His method remained quite popular up to this day in Burma.<sup>107</sup>

**2.4.3.5** The growing public interest in Burma in Vipassana meditation was evident in the growth in the number of meditation centres in Burma. After independence (1948), with government patronage, Houtman notes that in 1956, the national statistics showed that Mahasi Sayadaw had 216 centres in the country.<sup>108</sup> In the early 1980s, Houtman estimated that the total number of meditation centres of Sunlun Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw and Mingun Sayadaw's student, Mahasi Sayadaw [2.4.5] was between 600-700, about half of which was Mahasi's.<sup>109</sup>

#### **2.4.4 Mohnyin Sayadaw (1872-1964)**

**2.4.4.1** During the difficult 1930s, Mohnyin Sayadaw stood out as perhaps the most popular monk in Burma. He began his monastic studies and meditative training under Ledi Sayadaw in 1901. During his 10<sup>th</sup> monastic year (1911), he entered the Mohnyin forest reserve (in Moe Hnyin district of Kachin State),<sup>110</sup> from which his toponym title comes.<sup>111</sup> At about 49, he started his meditation practice that went on for 10 years. From 1934 until 1939 (when World War 2 started), he taught every year in Rangoon to crowds of 10-20 thousand people.<sup>112</sup>



Mohnyin Sayadaw

**2.4.4.2** Mohnyin Sayadaw required that his students understand at least some theoretical level of Abhidhamma before allowing them to actually practise Vipassana. This was to ensure that they properly guided themselves in their practice, and also understood as well as possible in theoretical terms what they were experiencing.<sup>113</sup> Following Ledi Sayadaw, he also made up simple verses of topics on which he was teaching, making them recite them until they had committed them to memory. In his study notes, he would first list some Abhidhamma theory, and then how to apply it in practice. He often began with what was most obvious: the 4 elements to explain the nature of form, such as the body (*rūpa*).<sup>114</sup>

<sup>106</sup> U The Hluin, *Ra han tā hnañ" pugguil' thū" myā"* [Extraordinary Monks and Lay People], 1993:636.

<sup>107</sup> Houtman 1958:203-208, 1990:290; U The Hluin 1993:629-648; Kornfield 1996:209-234.

<sup>108</sup> BSC 1956. *Report on the situation of Buddhism in Burma since January 1955*. Rangoon 1956:17. (BSC = Buddha Sasana Council).

<sup>109</sup> Houtman 1985:89 + n12; 1990:259: [NBTA].

<sup>110</sup> Kachin is Myanmar's northernmost state, bordered by China to the north (Tibet) and east (Yunnan); Shan State to the south, and Sagaing Region and India (Arunachal Pradesh) to the west.

<sup>111</sup> Hla Pain, (Burmese) *Lay' tī gantha wañ' kyau mya" sa muiñ"*, 1967:341 f.

<sup>112</sup> Maung Maung 1980:115, 262 n8.

<sup>113</sup> Kornfield 1996: ch 11; 2007:199-213.

<sup>114</sup> Maung Maung 1980:115.

Next, he outlined the 6 kinds of consciousnesses (those of the 5 senses and the mind), that is, in terms of “the mind” (*citta*) how each should be observed for what they really are—very much in the manner that Ledi Sayadaw taught Vipassana.<sup>115</sup>

During the practice itself Mohnyin Sayadaw advised starting with contemplation of the body: “It is through the examination of the body and bodily sensations, especially those involved in various postures, that the yogi can best understand the ultimate Dharma.”<sup>116</sup> Ledi Sayadaw teaches the observing of physical states changing constantly in one’s movement like a movie frame by frame (in slow motion).<sup>117</sup>

### **2.4.5 Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982)**

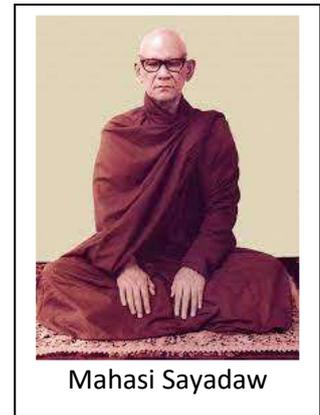
**2.4.5.1** Mingun Sayadaw’s most famous student was **Mahasi Sayadaw** (U Sobhana) who became Burma’s best known meditation teacher, largely due to the promotion of his technique by the prime minister U Nu (1960-62). Apparently, Mahasi also studied with Mohnyin Sayadaw<sup>118</sup> [2.4.4], a student of Ledi Sayadaw, which suggests that Mahasi had direct connections with Ledi. Anyway, it is obvious that he must have himself been familiar with Ledi’s works and methods, too.

In fact, Mahasi, like Ledi, often based his meditation teachings on the Abhidhamma. Although Mahasi put a strict emphasis on a specific technique and included in his introductory teachings, only sparse reference to doctrinal theory (in Dhamma and Abhidhamma), his general approach to teaching the laity was close to that of Ledi’s. **The Mahasi method** is to focus first on observing the breath at the abdomen (on a spot 2-fingers’ breadth above the navel), and then to extend the observation to all the processes of perception through the 6 senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch, and mind.

Each impingement upon a sense is observed by noting the cognitive event with simple “labelling” before letting it go. Hence, according to Mahasi Vipassana, upon hearing the sound of a door closing, we would simply note “hearing, hearing,” and then let that perception go, and to return to the breath (or move to labeling another perception if one arose immediately). This process is understood to develop a deconstructive moment-by-moment awareness that leads the meditator to directly see into true reality.<sup>119</sup>

**2.4.5.2** On the whole, Mahasi’s Vipassana basically follows **the 7 stages of purification** (*satta-visuddhi*) [2.2.2.5] upon which Buddhaghosa structured his Visuddhi, magga in Abhidhamma terms.<sup>120</sup> The Visuddhi, magga, however, has an important difference. As we have noted [2.2.2.5], Buddhaghosa includes detailed explanations of dhyana cultivation (Vism chs 3-11).

In contrast, the Mahasi Vipassana method is a “**dry insight**” (*sukkha, vipassaka*) or “pure insight” (*suddha, vipassaka*) practice [2.4.1.2] that utilizes only a simple level of momentary concentration (*khaṇika samādhi*) [4.1.3.2] as far as samadhi goes. Thus, Mahasi keeps to all the foundational teachings for the laity as taught by Ledi, keeping to Abhidhamma principles and downplaying concentration, while stressing on observing everyday reality.



Mahasi Sayadaw

<sup>115</sup> Ledi Sayadaw’s teaching on the 6 consciousnesses is found in his Vipassanā Dīpanī (which is not a meditation manual, but a basic handbook of Buddhist mind doctrines) 1915:23 f.

<sup>116</sup> Kornfield 1996:201.

<sup>117</sup> See Houtman 1990:290; Braun 2013:6, 84, 142, 147, 156.

<sup>118</sup> As claimed by Jordt’s informant: “Mass lay meditation and state-society relations in post-independence Burma,” 2007:23.

<sup>119</sup> Jordt 2007:65.

<sup>120</sup> For Mahasi’s description of this method, see Mahasi 1979. For 2 compelling personal accounts of the Mahasi method, see E H Shattock, *An Experiment in Mindfulness*, 1958 and Y Rahula, *One Night’s Shelter*, 1985.

In fact, the Mahasi Vipassana stresses “**pure insight**” without deep concentration to an even greater degree than Ledi or their contemporary followers did.<sup>121</sup> Traditional Buddhists see it as gratitude and good taste to keep up with the teachings and practices their predecessors had given. Notwithstanding this, some modern scholars may see that Ledi Sayadaw has profoundly influenced and shaped the Mahasi movement and others who followed.<sup>122</sup>

Only a modernist Buddhist, conditioned by Western values and categories, would see Mahasi as “lifting” ideas and methods from Ledi Sayadaw. A traditional true-blood Buddhist would see Mahasi as honouring Ledi by adopting his teachings, just as we follow the Buddha’s teachings. This is not an excuse that “imitation is the best form of flattery,” but rather that of looking up to that teaching as a reflection of the Buddha Dharma that will bring us closer to true reality and real freedom. In this sense, we are taking the teaching above the teacher.<sup>123</sup>

#### **2.4.6 Saya Thetgyi (1873-1945)**

**2.4.6.1** A direct disciple of Ledi, **U Po Thet**, known as Saya Thetgyi,<sup>124</sup> is noteworthy because he was one of the earliest examples of a layman empowered by a monk to teach meditation.<sup>125</sup> It was remarkable that Ledi Sayadaw was willing and able to promote a lay teacher of Vipassana, without being perceived as up-ending the monks. In an important way, he was highlighting the fact that if the laity were willing and able to meditate, even more so should the monks! It also meant that we would have a greater number of teachers—and lay teachers enjoy a greater latitude with the laity than monks do—and would clearly win greater support from the laity for his reforms and vision of propagating and prolonging the teaching.



Saya Thetgyi

As a man of great vision, Ledi clearly understood the problems of a dominant Christianity under British rule. As a perspicacious scholar, he must have known how Buddhism disappeared from India due to the Turkish raids during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. He must have also known how, ironically, the Jains who upheld non-violence survived the Buddhist holocaust almost unscathed: they had “lay recluses”

<sup>121</sup> However, differences did rear their ugly heads. Some decades after Ledi’s death (1923), U Ba Khin teachers and Mahasi teachers stopped teaching in the same centre in England mainly because they disagreed on the level or amount of calming practice that students needed to learn (Houtman 1990a:188). The calming prescribed before turning to insight practice in the U Ba Khin/Goenka method is still quite low, usually defined as the ability to keep one’s mind on respiration at the nose-tip for 5 minutes. (Braun 2013:228 n62).

<sup>122</sup> I was fortunate to spend a 3-month Vipassana retreat with Mahasi himself in Dutch architect-artist-philanthropist **Bruno Mertens’** retreat centre (an old orchard), Tidorp (Hogezoom, Burgh-Haamstede), **1979**, when he visited the Netherlands. Sadly, however, in the later years, Phra Maha Mettavihari (1942-2007), the charismatic Thai monk who had invited Mahasi for the retreat was expelled from the Waalwijk temple for child molestation: <https://www.achtzaamheid.nl/en/vipassana-mahasi-method/culture-of-silence-finally-broken/> [SD 7.9 (4.3.4.1)]. In 1995, Mertens (b 1914) moved with artist Susan Burki to New Zealand to set up Ti Tao (his new centre for art, crafts, healing and meditation) a 6-ha property, in Takou Bay, north of Kerikeri. As I recall, “Ti” is an old Dutch word for “ancient” and “Tao” is Chinese for “path, way” (P *magga*). In the 1930s, he spent 18 months as a monk in Thailand, and since then had never worn shoes, even in the winter snow. In Aug 2008, he donated the property to a Korean nun, Yasala, to turn it into Paññāraṃa (wisdom monastery park) Trust, a centre to teach Vipassana, his one great love. He died on 19 April 2010, aged 96. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/local-news/northland/northern-news/8134/Engineer-gifts-property-to-meditation-group>.

<sup>123</sup> For sources and details on Mahasi Sayadaw, see Houtman 1990:269 f, 289. On “putting the teaching above the teacher,” see **Puggala-p,pasāda S** (A 5.250), SD 3.14(9).

<sup>124</sup> Pronounced “saya taji” in Burmese.

<sup>125</sup> Saya Thetgyi received his first instructions from Theikchadaung Sayadaw, a monk-student of Ledi, but later studied directly under Ledi himself. (Houtman 1990a:284)

(*śramaṇôpāsaka*) or lay Dharma teachers who practised and propagated their faith in their own homes.<sup>126</sup> It is thus not difficult to see why Ledi promoted Thet as a Vipassana teacher.

**2.4.6.2 Saya Thetgyi** not only taught the laity, but Ledi had him teach the monks, too. He empowered Thet to teach them, saying:

“Take note, all of you. This layman is my great pupil U Po Thet, from Lower Burma. He is capable of teaching meditation like me. Those of you who wish to practice meditation, follow him. Learn the technique from him and practice. You, Dayaka [lay donor] Thet .... hoist the victory banner of Dhamma in place of me, starting at my monastery.”<sup>127</sup>

By empowering Thet, Ledi was declaring that even the laity can and should meditate. As for the monks, the message was even clearer: since the laity are meditating, monks should do so even more diligently do so. Whether monastic or lay, all should practise so that they attain the path in this life itself. This is **the universal purpose of the simplified Vipassana method**: it is within reach of everyone who is willing and ready to calm and clear his mind for happiness and freedom here and now.

**2.4.6.3** However, to this day, no other monk has granted any lay-teacher such a high position—as leader of the lineage—as Ledi. They himself was **a humble and simple teacher**, he never wrote any works on meditation. Upon his appointment by Ledi Sayadaw, Saya Thetgyi responded: “Among your pupils, I am the least learned in the scriptures” (VRI website below), but he was a quick learner, as attested by a biographer:

When he [Thetgyi] died in 1945, he could be confident he had followed Ven. Ledi Sayadaw’s instructions to him. Even though he was not learned in the Pali texts, through his own experience, and with the aid of manuals written by Ven. Ledi Sayadaw, he had been able to teach the Dhamma to many. He had thoroughly mastered the texts written by Ven. Ledi Sayadaw and almost knew them by heart. By comparing his own experiences with what was written in them, he had been able to see how he was progressing and teach himself.

(Chit Tin, 1999a; highlights added)

Both Ledi’s teaching and Thetgyi’s training-by-text testify to the power of printed matter and the visual media. We not only have the power of transmitting the Dharma by spoken teaching, that is, by others **hearing** it, but also by personal study of the suttas and by texts written by the meditation teachers for others to follow and practise.<sup>128</sup>

**2.4.6.4** This quote [2.4.6.3] highlights the importance of **textual study** as part of Vipassana meditation. Even in the case of Ledi Sayadaw himself, we have seen how the texts—the suttas and the Abhidhamma—acted as teacher. Ledi’s eagerness and ability to learn is, for example, inspiringly illustrated by his friendship with Hpo Hlaing [2.3.3.3].

By promoting **textual study** alongside meditation, Ledi Sayadaw was declaring that anyone willing to learn can cultivate his mind and awaken. We are reminded of the young Rāhula, rising in the morning, taking a handful of sand and asseverating: “May I today receive just as much advice from the Buddha, and my preceptor and teachers!”<sup>129</sup> It is on account of such diligence of Rāhula that the Buddha declared him as the foremost amongst those monks **desirous of training** (*sikkhā,kāmānaṃ*) (A 1:24).<sup>130</sup>

<sup>126</sup> See SD 36.1 (1.9.2.9).

<sup>127</sup> See the Vipassanā Research Institute website, <https://www.vridhamma.org/Saya-Thetgyi>. Accessed 14 Jan 2021. In the same website, under “Vipassana meditation” under “The chain of teachers,” we see this listing: “The Buddha, Ven Ledi Sayadaw, U Saya Thetgyi, Sayagy U Ba Khin, S N Goenka.”

<sup>128</sup> Braun 2013:22 f, 32 f.

<sup>129</sup> MA 3:134; AA 1:258.

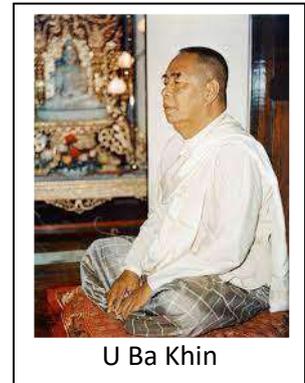
<sup>130</sup> SD 3.10 (1.0).

We should indeed be desirous of learning: the Buddha Dhamma is still with us. When we don't do this, then we are bringing upon us individually our own Dharma-ending. We are effectively throwing away not only our human potential, but relegating ourselves to the subhuman states even in this life itself. Ledi Sayadaw, by his own example, is still guiding us, inspiring, through Saya Thetgyi and Vipassana practice, or any early Buddhist meditation, that awakening awaits us here and now.<sup>131</sup> [2.3.1.1]

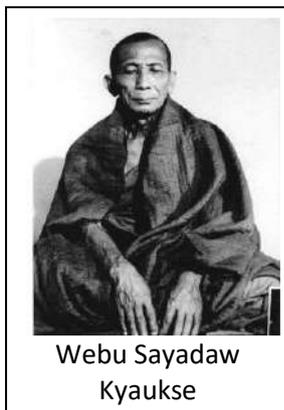
#### **2.4.7 U Ba Khin (1899-1931)**

**2.4.7.1 U Ba Khin**, a layman, began learning from Saya Thetgyi in January, 1937, and became his most famous student.<sup>132</sup> Both Thetgyi and U Ba Khin were married laymen, each with their own family. Thetgyi, as a **celibate lay renunciant** during his 13-year training with Ledi, lived apart from his family, visiting them only twice during that period.<sup>133</sup> U Ba Khin, however, was a family man with 6 children and working as a government official, going on to become the Accountant General in independent Burma, with a meditation room for workers in his office.<sup>134</sup>

Like the key actors in this Vipassana saga, U Ba Khin was a man of his times: he worked with the Burmese government in the 1950s with U Nu as the prime minister, when Buddhism and the state were closely linked.<sup>135</sup> In 1952, he set up his own International Meditation Centre, just 2 miles north of the Shwedagon Pagoda.<sup>136</sup> In a significant way, merging his active lay life with regular Vipassana practice made him more "socially engaged" than his teacher Thetgyi, who was a layman fully engaged in meditation practice, teaching and mission.



U Ba Khin



Webu Sayadaw  
Kyaukse

**2.4.7.2 U Ba Khin** also took instruction from another saintly meditation monk, **Webu Sayadaw Kyaukse** (1896-1977),<sup>137</sup> who was reputed to be an arhat. On account of his humble and reclusive life, fully dedicated to meditation, little is known about him, such as who his teacher was and so on. We do know, however, that his main teaching and practice was breath meditation, which he called "the short-cut to nibbana."<sup>138</sup>

U Ba Khin met him in July 1941. After an interview and meditation sitting, Webu approved of him and instructed him to teach the Dharma. Although Webu is not part of the Ledi Sayadaw lineage, his fame and saintliness added more weight to U Ba Khin's reputation as a teacher familiar with Webu's meditation method.<sup>139</sup>

**2.4.7.3** Like Ledi Sayadaw before him, U Ba Khin's approach to meditation was very much based on Abhidhamma concepts, and he stressed observation of impermanence in the body. He further simplified the approach and method more than Ledi had done. In U Ba Khin's Vipassana, the focus

<sup>131</sup> See Houtman 1990:293 f.

<sup>132</sup> Chit Tin 1999a:18.

<sup>133</sup> Chit Tin 1999a:19.

<sup>134</sup> Chit Tin 2003: 11, 40.

<sup>135</sup> The Burmese government issued a notice on 10 Oct 1950 allowing any government department to set up a Buddhist shrine-room for religious use. (Chit Tin 1999a:49).

<sup>136</sup> Confalonieri, *The Clock of Vipassana Has Struck*, 1999:25.

<sup>137</sup> Kyaukse is his village; his personal monk name was Kumāra, kassapa:

<https://www.vridhamma.org/Venerable-Webu-Sayadaw>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webu\\_Sayadaw](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webu_Sayadaw). See Houtman 1990:295.

<sup>138</sup> Bischoff, *Buddhism in Burma*, Kandy: BPS, 2003:4 f

<sup>139</sup> Chit Tin 1999a:32; also <https://www.ubakhin-vipassana-meditation.org/blog/webu-sayadaw-and-sayagyi-u-ba-khin>.

was on **the kalāpas** rather than the 4 elements, which comprise the kalāpas, an Abhidhamma and commentarial concept not found in the suttas.<sup>140</sup> [2.4.2.3]

U Ba Khin taught students to focus on kalāpas because they are evanescent, disappearing almost as soon as they appear, but are understood to be perceivable through meditation. The direct observation of such fleeting states shows that all things are in a constant state of flux. This method is not a dramatic departure from Ledi, but simply a fine-tuning in U Ba Khin's Vipassana.<sup>141</sup>

#### **2.4.8 Ledi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin compared**

**2.4.8.1** It is interesting to see that although Ledi Sayadaw had given clear and workable teachings on Vipassana, none of the lineage teachers actually followed everything exactly as he had taught them. There was always some variance, even departures or additions, to the method of each subsequent teacher. Yet, such adjustments were actually neither departures from nor disrespect to the founding teacher. They were skillful adjustments of methods and teachings brought to the level of the audience, just as Ledi simplified the Dharma for the benefit of the students of his own days.

**2.4.8.2** Hence, there are marked differences between **Ledi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin**, not only in meditation theory, but also in the practice. For example, while Ledi was flexible in his meditation instructions, U Ba Khin—being a civil servant—kept to a rigid timetable for practice throughout the day. As a first-time student or beginner, we were (and still are) required to go through a regimented 10-day retreat where we progressively learn both the more advanced teachings and the meditation method.

At the start, we are to take as many days as we need to be able to do **breath meditation** properly. This is actually simply samatha, based on watching the breath at the nostrils for some inner calm and focus. Then, we go on to **scan the body**,<sup>142</sup> that is, slowly and attentively sweep over the body bit by bit from head to toes, observing the rise and fall of the kalāpas within it.<sup>143</sup> [2.3.3.4]

This standardized and simplified approach is significantly a technique, diverging from Ledi's combination of textual study with flexible possibilities for practice. Instead, U Ba Khin would say that, through proper practice, the liberating truth of impermanence (*anicca*) "can be developed by persons who have no book-knowledge whatsoever of Buddhism."<sup>144</sup> This is an interesting departure from Ledi Sayadaw's emphasis on textual learning.

#### **2.4.9 A practical Buddhism**

**2.4.9.1** Unlike Ledi Sayadaw, **U Ba Khin** gave less stress on textual understanding by the laity when doing Vipassana. The emphasis was on the practice rather than on theoretical knowledge. This significantly narrowed down the initial practice in terms of techniques and their application. This theoretical knowledge was the basis for a better understanding of the meditation practice as laid out in the *Manual on Insight Meditation*.

**2.4.9.2** On the other hand, this is advantageous for those who are not inclined towards theoretical study or memorizing teachings. The lack of Dharma study may also be less intimidating to non-Buddhists. U Ba Khin felt he had a special mission to reach out to Westerners and others from non-

<sup>140</sup> A *kalāpa* is an Abhidhamma unit of matter, often equated to "a subatomic particle," comprised primarily of the 4 elements. For Ledi's discussion on the kalāpas, see Ledi 1995:450 f, but he focuses more on the 4 elements (*dhātu*) that comprise the kalāpas. [2.4.2.3]

<sup>141</sup> Confalonieri 1999:114. For sources, see Houtman, 1990:284.

<sup>142</sup> See Analayo, "Buddhist antecedents to the body scan meditation," *Mindfulness* 11 2020:194-202.

<sup>143</sup> For a description of the organization of a 10-day retreat, see Confalonieri 1999:207-218 (ch 8).

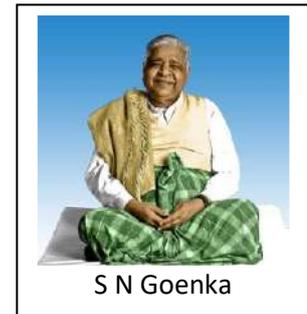
<sup>144</sup> See Confalonieri 1999:111.

Buddhist parts of the world.<sup>145</sup> For this reason, he called his meditation headquarters **the International Meditation Centre**, and he taught many non-Burmese and non-Buddhists at this centre.

This welcoming of all practitioners regardless of background or beliefs signaled a strict emphasis on practice that downplayed or ignored most aspects of the Theravāda tradition. This strategic openness was a skillful means that U Ba Khin called “**practical Buddhism**” (that is, Buddhism as practice, as meditation, not as beliefs and rituals) which were acceptable and inviting to most people in any religious or cultural context.<sup>146</sup> After all, people were more likely to come with an open mind to him as a layman, rather than if he were a monk. Moreover, a monk was less likely to take such a stand. Anyway, he required that all participants observe the 8 precepts, which helped set and keep the mood of the retreat.<sup>147</sup>

#### **2.4.10 S N Goenka (1924-2013)**

**2.4.10.1** U Ba Khin’s student, **Satya Narayana Goenka** [2.3.4.2; 2.4.1.1], was born in Mandalay, Myanmar, into a conservative Hindu Indian family. He was a successful businessman who suffered periodic migraine since young. In 1955, he suffered severe weekly attacks that left him debilitated.<sup>148</sup> When he failed to find medical relief, a friend suggested he consulted the Vipassana teacher, U Ba Khin. Though initially reluctant, Ba Khin eventually took him in as a student, and Goenka subsequently trained under him for 14 years, that is, until 1969.<sup>149</sup>



S N Goenka

**2.4.10.2** In 1969, Goenka emigrated to **Mumbai**, India, and began to teach meditation there, first to his family but soon to others who heard about him. His courses, free of charge, were popular with those from other countries, especially young Westerners on the “backpacker trail.”<sup>150</sup>

He started running the 10-day retreats in India and, with the appointment of overseas teachers, they quickly spread throughout the world with centres in every continent.<sup>151</sup> In 1982, Goenka appointed his first Western-born assistant teachers.

In later years, he himself traveled to Europe and the US to promote his Vipassana meditation. Currently, there are over 120 permanent meditation centers within the Goenka Vipassana network on every continent. Elsewhere, courses were conducted in temporary retreat venues suitable for resident meditators.<sup>152</sup>

**2.4.10.3** Goenka played down the religious aspects of Vipassana even more drastically than U Ba Khin did. If U Ba Khin’s vision was to reach out to non-Buddhists, Goenka envisioned the whole world as his mission field. Hence, he had to present Vipassana in a manner acceptable, at least non-intimidating, to everyone. In Goenka, we see Vipassana almost as a system in itself, and Buddhism playing only a supporting role, as it were. Perhaps, this is the vision he hoped others would see so that they

<sup>145</sup> Confalonieri 1999:25. No doubt, his being a government official helped in his spreading the message and attracting people to his Centre (Houtman 1997:317).

<sup>146</sup> Chit Tin 1999b:1.

<sup>147</sup> Chit Tin 1993b:53.

<sup>148</sup> “Master of the Dharma: An interview with S N Goenka,” *An Inquiring Mind* 4,1 summer 1987: <http://www.inquiringmind.com/Articles/MasterOfTheDhamma.html>. S N Goenka, *Pioneer of Secular Meditation Movement, Dies at 90*, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, 1 Oct 2013.

<sup>149</sup> “Infinite Devotion towards the Buddha,” *Vipassana Newsletter* (VRI ed) 29,1 21 Jan 2019:2; D M Stuart, *S N Goenka: Emissary of Insight*, 2020.

<sup>150</sup> W Cadge, *Heartwood: The first generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*, 2005:35. For descriptions of Goenka retreats among those on the “hippie trail,” see Y Rahula 1985; E Lerner, *Journey Into Insight*, 1977.

<sup>151</sup> Cadge 2005:36.

<sup>152</sup> See <http://www.dhamma.org/en/alphalist.shtml>. Accessed 15 January 2022.

may practise a **non-religious yet Buddhist meditation**. After all, the test is in the pudding itself: the diner need only to taste it for himself.

**2.4.10.4** This is where Goenka was often criticized by traditional Buddhists, especially in the vision of **Buddhism** that he presented to his clients. To him (at least in his words), the Buddha never taught Buddhism or any religion: it was “**an art of living**,” rooted in the calm and clarity of meditation. This is easy to understand, but when put into words, it can be anything to anyone depending on their biases.

Ledi Sayadaw, in his own time, was one of those to use the term **bokda,batha** (P *buddha,bhāsā*), literally meaning “buddha language,” but which connoted the Buddha religion and culture (like “Christianity” in the West). Ledi spoke of the 4 religions or *batha*: Buddhism, Brahmanism, Christianity and Islam. We must imagine that Goenka was referring to Buddhism as Bokda-batha: we should not impose our culture upon others.<sup>153</sup>

In Goenka’s view, then, we should only teach others *how the Buddha himself had lived, meditated and awakened*. In this, Goenka was in total harmony with Ledi’s ideas. And like U Ba Khin before him, Goenka presented Vipassana to the unawakened so that they can meditate and live “like the Buddha,” with physical and psychological wellbeing.<sup>154</sup> One may wonder whether Goenka gave up all his Hindu views [2.4.10.1], or whether they still influenced him and, if so, to what extent? Having lived in Burma and been trained by U Ba Khin, Goenka must surely have a good idea of Buddhism. We must imagine then that he presented Buddhism in the way he understood and accepted it but prioritizing Vipassana in his teaching and courses.

### **2.4.11 Goenka’s Vipassana rhetoric**

**2.4.11.1** Celebrity teachers either arise from a **myth** dear to a supportive crowd, or they would weave a myth into the hearts of an admiring crowd. Some become great teachers benefiting practitioners; others rise as Gurus to great heights to fall hard into the very dust they rose from. With the kind of crowd that looked up to Goenka, whatever myth<sup>155</sup> he spun would be readily believed or at least accepted without much thought.

Goenka had created such a myth about the Buddha and his teachings in his Vipassana teachings. He saw himself as the guardian and giver of Vipassana as a “noble heritage” handed down, almost Zen-like, unchanged, yet changing lives, from the Buddha himself:

“Five centuries after the Buddha, the noble heritage of Vipassana had disappeared from India. The purity of the teaching was lost elsewhere as well. In the country of Myanmar, however, it was preserved by a chain of devoted teachers. From generation to generation, over two thousand years, this dedicated lineage transmitted the technique in its pristine purity.”<sup>156</sup>

**2.4.11.2** Basically, Goenka was stating that the Vipassana (not the Dharma, or even the suttas), as he taught and practised it, went back to the Buddha himself. So far as we know, neither Saya Thetgyi nor U Ba Khin ever made such a claim. It was Goenka’s *own Zen-like transmission, outside the teachings, not dependent on the word, directly pointing to the human mind, seeing one’s own nature*.<sup>157</sup> Clearly, Goenka never had the intention to kill the Buddha. For he (the Buddha) shines peacefully in the hearts of the Vipassana yogis who have benefitted from his teachings and practices in the first place.

<sup>153</sup> On the neologism *bokda,batha*, see Houtman 1990b; A Kirichenko 2009:33-36; Braun 2013:85.

<sup>154</sup> W Hart, *The Art of Living*, 1987:18.

<sup>155</sup> “Myth” is here a psychosocial construct by which an individual sees society and history that gives him meaning and purpose in life and his role in society. Indeed, such a vision is what holds a community or society together in an empowering manner. See SD 51.11 (3.1.2).

<sup>156</sup> See <http://www.vri.dhamma.org/general/vipintro.html>.

<sup>157</sup> On how Zen fell victim to its own rhetorical iconoclasm, see SD 40b.5 Transmission outside the scriptures.

It is such a “Zennification” of Vipassana that is said to be “modernist” by way of being “a **rhetoric of meditative experience.**” A scholar would use a word like “rhetoric” here to evoke a polite, perhaps a sarcastic, tone of disapproval. On one extreme, we may muse on this as meaning that Goenka was experimenting with the best strategy of selling Buddhism to the open world; the possibility is that he wasn’t sure how people would react to Buddhism (he saw Buddhism as not immediately appealing to others): hence, when we cannot convert them, let us not confuse them.

To be fair, rhetoric is a wonderful literary weapon, especially when a scholar’s incisive mind is piercingly penned, such as in Robert Sharf’s essay: “Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience” (1995). The sword cuts both ways. The middle way is the joy of inner peace and freedom. It’s one effective way to clear away Buddhism’s thick undergrowth around the Bodhi tree.

**2.4.11.3** Clearly then, Goenka’s emphasis was on **method**, not text, and on **authority**, not inquiry: that is, he was in charge. Some may see this as a classic “Indian Guru model.” This is understandable since he was neither a monk nor a cult Guru who would naturally command the respect of his students. Textual study was not encouraged by Goenka probably because he thought this involved reading, thinking and doubting, especially for those new to Buddhism, which would distract them from their practice.

Despite these apprehensions, the Goenka tradition clearly looked up to Ledi as the founding teacher of their lineage, and it often drew from Ledi’s teachings. The method was basically the same as that of U Ba Khin: keeping to a 10-day retreat with progressive instructions and focusing on the kalāpas.<sup>158</sup> [2.5.1.2]

In Goenka’s Vipassana, however, meditation was no longer taught as a “Buddhist” practice, not overtly anyway. Sutta teachings were used by Goenka in his taped lectures during the 10-day retreat, but Buddhism was not mentioned in name. In other words, Goenka was not rejecting the Pali canon altogether, but he was silent on Buddhism as a religion. He was, as it were, going back to the Buddha, giving his Vipassana a non-sectarian tone. In fact, it should be noted that Goenka’s Vipassana Research Institute (VRI) was responsible for the extremely well-done and user-friendly digitization of the Pali canon, the CSCD.<sup>159</sup>

**2.4.11.4** Goenka’s idea was that Vipassana should be seen as a **universal practice** freely available to everyone, those from all religions or who follow none. He was not preaching to the Buddhists; he was teaching Vipassana to the world, especially to those outside of Buddhism. Indeed, in this he was very successful: his Vipassana centres are now found on every continent [2.4.10.2].

Through Goenka, the Vipassana tradition has grown into a highly influential worldwide movement: Vipassana was even taught in prison programmes.<sup>160</sup> Kiran Bedi, India’s inspector-general of Tihar prison (New Delhi), the largest prison complex in Asia, initiated a Vipassana programme for prisoners there, for which she was awarded the Magsaysay Prize<sup>161</sup> in 1994.<sup>162</sup>

<sup>158</sup> As mentioned, while U Ba Khin highlighted watching the kalāpas, Ledi stressed on the 4 elements [2.4.2.3].

<sup>159</sup> The “Chaṭṭha Saṅgīti” CD (now in its version 4): <https://www.vridhamma.org/Chattha-Sangayana-Tipitaka-Software>.

<sup>160</sup> Vipassana prison missions: <https://prison.dhamma.org/>; <https://www.vridhamma.org/research/Vipassana-in-Prisons>. For a movie based on Goenka’s Vipassana: “Doing Time, Doing Vipassana” (1997): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doing\\_Time,\\_Doing\\_Vipassana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doing_Time,_Doing_Vipassana). “The Dhamma Brothers” (2007) Prison Vipassana in North America: <https://vimeo.com/386565498>. Prison contemplative programmes: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prison\\_contemplative\\_programs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prison_contemplative_programs).

<sup>161</sup> Established in 1957, the Ramon Magsaysay Award was founded to preserve former Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay’s example of integrity in governance and idealism in a democratic society. It was funded by the Rockefeller Brothers as trustees with Philippine government’s agreement. <https://www.rmaward.asia/awards>.

<sup>162</sup> [https://www.inquiringmind.com/article/1602\\_6\\_bedi-meijer\\_interview/](https://www.inquiringmind.com/article/1602_6_bedi-meijer_interview/). Her work inspired the movie: “Doing Time, Doing Vipassana” (1997): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doing\\_Time,\\_Doing\\_Vipassana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doing_Time,_Doing_Vipassana). “The

## 2.5 DEVELOPMENTS IN THE VIPASSANA MOVEMENT

### 2.5.1 Goenka and the IMC teachers

**2.5.1.1** Goenka was not the only student of U Ba Khin whom he empowered to teach, or the only teacher to extend the Ba Khin lineage beyond Myanmar. U Ba Khin authorized a number of teachers, including Westerners, such as John Earl Coleman (1930-2012) of the US, Ruth Denison (1922-2015) who ran her centre in the Mojave Desert, California, and Robert Hover of La Mirada, California. In Myanmar, he authorized Daw Mya Thwin (1925-2917), known as Sayamagyi (“revered female teacher”). Sayamagyi went on to teach at **the International Meditation Center, UK**, an affiliate of the original International Meditation Center in Yangon.<sup>163</sup>

**2.5.1.2** The most successful of these Vipassana teachers clearly was **Goenka**. His method comprised rigorous stay-in retreats of minimum 3 days, most commonly 10 days; in either case, with a minimum of 2 hours sitting daily. For experienced meditators, there are retreats of up to 3 months. The practice focused on the kalāpas [2.3.3.4], alongside progressive instructions. [2.4.11.2]

Courses are free, and donations are accepted. Since, in later years, most of the practitioners are salaried professionals or those with surplus income, and the various centres functioned independently, the movement has had no financial issues. Through Goenka’s efforts, this “Vipassana movement” is now a worldwide network of centres running regular courses with trained teachers and audio-visual instructions by Goenka himself.<sup>164</sup>

**2.5.1.3** In the early 1980s, Daw Mya Thwin, John Coleman, and other Burmese teachers at the IMC [2.5.1.1], split with Goenka and his followers. The split was, apparently, due to 2 issues. Firstly, Goenka’s refusal to charge for the courses and, secondly, his approval of a newsletter produced by his followers with the statement that meditation was an “art of living.”

Disagreeing with Goenka, the IMC teachers felt that it was acceptable to suggest participants each give a donation. More importantly, they believed the description of meditation as *a way of life*, especially as an ideal way, relegated meditation to be a mundane practice when it is meant to lead beyond this worldly cycle of rebirth.<sup>165</sup>

### 2.5.2 Vipassana in the US

**2.5.2.1** In terms of meditation lineages in Myanmar, there are **2 most influential ones**, that is, the Ledi Sayadaw line and the Mingun Jetawana Sayadaw line. Similarly, in the spread of meditation overseas, especially the West, these 2 lineages predominated. However, even as these overseas lineages keep closely to their respective meditation methods, they, especially in the US, largely diverge from, even rejected, the cultural contexts of Myanmar and Theravada.

Scholars of sociology/anthropology of religion tell us that a nation’s or community’s **culture** is neither monolithic or fixed. Culture is about how people live, experience life and make sense of things: we tell stories about our heroes, invent myths about how or why we do things, we celebrate significant events, we communicate our history, ideas, feelings, emotions and thoughts in idiosyncratic ways, and so on.

Dhamma Brothers” (2007) Prison Vipassana in North America: <https://vimeo.com/386565498>. Prison contemplative programmes: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prison\\_contemplative\\_programs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prison_contemplative_programs).

<sup>163</sup> Chit Tin 1999a:125 f. For a list of teachers authorized by U Ba Khin:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sayagyi\\_U\\_Ba\\_Khin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sayagyi_U_Ba_Khin).

<sup>164</sup> <https://www.dhamma.org/en-US/index>.

<sup>165</sup> Mya Thwin, John E Coleman, Tint Yee & Ba Pho. 1982. “A Notice of Clarification.” *Vipassana Newsletter, IMC-UK* spring 1982:1-3.

Understandably, meditators, even Buddhists, in a different culture, are likely to find it meaningless, irrelevant or difficult to adopt the ways native to the Theravada countries. Some cultural features like caste distinction and deva worship in Sri Lankan Buddhism, time-conception and nat-worship in Burmese Buddhism, and royal language and spirit-worship in Thai Buddhism, power distance in Malaysia,<sup>166</sup> and class-defined status in Singapore,<sup>167</sup> simply would not be acceptable in other Buddhist communities, especially in the West.

**2.5.2.2** As Buddhism seeps deep into new communities, especially in the West, the tension between such cultural traditions and idiosyncrasies, and local cultures (such as that of the US, which is itself diverse), needs to be resolved. Western society has for centuries been crushed by Roman dominance, Christian indoctrination and European imperialism; they have fought devastating religious wars, suffered injustices, and laboured with education, science and social justice to enjoy their current freedom.

They would not so quickly and easily accept even the teachings of Ledi Sayadaw and other teachers that Asian Buddhists look up to; they may even reject those Buddhist teachings that we take for granted but which they see as cultural or alien to their culture. We need diligence and dexterity to present such teachings to appeal to both their minds and hearts, and we can best do that with the Buddha's teachings that bring *insight, peace and freedom* to them.<sup>168</sup>

**2.5.2.3** The most successful Vipassana (or insight meditation) movement in the West centres on **the Insight Meditation Society (IMS)** (Barre, MA, in the USA),<sup>169</sup> which is rooted in the "new Burmese meditation" [2.4] starting with Ledi Sayadaw, and the Thai forest tradition of **Ajahn Chah** [3.3.1] of the famed forest tradition of NE Thailand. The IMS, run fully by lay Buddhists, has grown into a renowned centre for Theravada practice and learning, with regular meditation and Dharma courses run by a wide range of teachers, mostly lay.<sup>170</sup>

In 1985, a group of meditation students and teachers, including Jack Kornfield, incorporated the Insight Meditation West in Northern California. In 1986, Kornfield and his family moved to San Anselmo, CA, where he gave regular meditation classes. In 1988, an anonymous donation went to the purchase of a 412-acre undeveloped land in the San Geronimo Valley (about an hour north of San Francisco). In 1998, it opened as **the Spirit Rock Meditation Centre** with a residential retreat.<sup>171</sup>

**2.5.2.4** The IMS approach, inspired mostly by founder Jack Kornfield's vision, is to "provide a secluded retreat environment for the practice of meditation in the Theravada Buddhist tradition."<sup>172</sup> More recently, the IMS revised their mission statement to read thus: "We offer meditation retreats and online programs rooted in the **Early Buddhist teachings** of ethics, concentration and wisdom."<sup>173</sup>

---

<sup>166</sup> Malaysia, in 2012, had a staggering 104 points on the Hofstede power distance index (PDI), the highest in the world then, an extreme that is traceable to the influence of British colonialism and a legacy of the Malay feudal system.

<sup>167</sup> In Singapore, command of Buddhism is defined by social status, titles (Dr, etc) and wealth (esp amongst the affluent younger generations who distance themselves from those of "lower classes," wealth-wise).

<sup>168</sup> Cadge 2005:11 f.

<sup>169</sup> Founded in 1975 by Jack Kornfield (b 1945), Joseph Goldstein (b 1944) and Sharon Salzberg (b1952) in 1975. IMS premises comprise Retreat Centre (1230 Pleasant St, Barre MA 01005) & Forest Refuge (97 Lockwood Rd, Barre, MA 01005). It also runs IMS online. See IMS setup and activities: <https://www.dharma.org/>; Braun 2013: 162-166. In 1991, Goldstein and Salzberg founded Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (BCBS), focusing on the study aspect of Buddhism. It is located about ½ mi away from IMS at 149 Lockwood Rd, Barre, MA 01005.

<sup>170</sup> For refs, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vipassanā>.

<sup>171</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit\\_Rock\\_Meditation\\_Center](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit_Rock_Meditation_Center).

<sup>172</sup> From a 1-page 1976 flyer: Cadge, *Heartwood: The first generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*, 2005: 29.

<sup>173</sup> <https://www.dharma.org/about-us/mission-and-values/>.

This shift in emphasis significantly highlights the IMS's focus on Buddhism *as taught by the Buddha himself* without the later additions and cultural baggages.<sup>174</sup>

Goldstein explained: "I'm not so concerned with any labels or the cultural forms of the tradition, although I do appreciate the many ways the dhamma has evolved in Asian cultures. Instead, what inspires me is the connection with the original teachings of the Buddha—with what, as far we know, he actually taught during his lifetime."<sup>175</sup> The IMS, above all, prioritizes **meditation** as the heart of the Buddha's original teachings—often neglected by Asian and ethnic Buddhists who tend to see Buddhism as a calendar of cultural beliefs, religious rituals and church-like socialization.<sup>176</sup>

**2.5.2.5** The IMS offered teacher-led courses and self-retreats in "**insight meditation**," that is, Vipassana, in the Burmese tradition of U Ba Khin and Mahasi Sayadaw [2.4.11] and the Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah [5.12].<sup>177</sup> Goenka [2.4.10] was conspicuously absent from this list, partly due to his views, partly due to his policies.

Although Goenka claimed not to teach Buddhism but only "pure dhamma," he assumed a traditional cosmological world-view that included rebirth.<sup>178</sup> Such a teaching is, as a rule, not taught by the IMS to beginners nor to those who are only interested in meditation. Otherwise, the IMS teachers and students generally accept, even favour, sutta teachings presented in a rational and open modern setting.

Perhaps, many American Buddhists—at least, those from the IMS, led by experienced and insightful Buddhists—are concerned that Goenka projected a cult Guru figure, which American New Age latitude and licence tend to attract and favour.<sup>179</sup> Most informed Buddhists would find it simply unjustifiable to accept and preposterous to make the statement that *Vipassana (as a modern construct) goes back to the Buddha himself*, and in the same breath to declare that *we are not teaching Buddhism!*<sup>180</sup> [2.4.11.1]

**2.5.2.6** If the US is the "land of the free," we would have expected that Goenka's Vipassana, so well accepted worldwide would have been wildly popular in the US. Perhaps, in this case at least, we may conjecture to say that *freedom does not mean licence*. Clearly, then, we can say that while the IMS is *actually* promoting the Buddha's teaching, Goenka champions [2.4.11.1] not Buddhism but Vipassana itself. This is like *a doctor peddling a particular medicine or even treatment instead of highlighting good health and the prevention of disease*.

On the other hand, for professional psychologist like Jon Kabat-Zinn,<sup>181</sup> who created **MBSR** (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction), it was:

never meant to exploit, fragment, or decontextualize the dharma, but rather to *recontextualize* it within the framework of science, medicine (including psychiatry and psychology), and healthcare so that it would be maximally useful to people who could not hear it or enter into it through the more traditional dharma gates.

(In J Wilson, *Mindful America*, 2014:91)

<sup>174</sup> Cadge 2005:29 f; Braun 2013:163.

<sup>175</sup> Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters*, 1997:590; Cadge 2005:29 + n70.

<sup>176</sup> Kornfield, *Living Dharma*, 1996:6; Fronsdal, "Insight Meditation in the United States," 1998:171.

<sup>177</sup> IMS 1977 brochure (Cadge 2005:225 n56); P K Ling, "The Intensive Buddhist Meditation retreat and the self," PhD diss, 1981; "Intensive meditation," Bucksport, ME: Free Press, 18 Sep 1975.

<sup>178</sup> Western Buddhists who have difficulties with the idea of rebirth is prob because (1) their Christian conditioning, (2) rationalist and scientific bias, or (3) it is almost impossible to prove that rebirth exists (like the God-idea!).

<sup>179</sup> The US of the 1970s-90s, eg, was devastated by sexual and money scandals in the Zen community (Richard Baker; Eido Shimano) and the Vajrayana community (Chogyam Trungpa): **Bad friendship** (SD 64.17)

<sup>180</sup> See also Braun 2013:159.

<sup>181</sup> Kabat-Zinn was a student of Zen Buddhist luminaries like Philip Kapleau, Thich Nhat Hanh and Seung Sahn, and a founding member of Cambridge Zen Center (Cambridge, MA). However, he did not consider himself as a Buddhist, preferring to "apply mindfulness within a scientific rather than a religious frame" (Wilson 2014:34).

**2.5.2.7** Here is a cheeky way of rewording the sentiments of these words of the professionals: *Of course, we love **Cinderella**, and will always let her live in the kitchen; we will even let her dress fittingly as a princess, but she shall never marry the Prince since she must be in our perpetual service.*

Buddhism seems indeed a Cinderella in the American context, where “mindfulness”:

can “reinvigorate our traditional, commonly held American values”; and for Goldie Hawn (of all people) and “mindfulness promoter” Elizabeth Thoman, mindfulness is the means of “re-imagining of the American dream” (180). In the hands of Thich Nhat Hanh (169, 182), [Singaporean] Chade-Meng Tan<sup>182</sup> (Google executive and mindfulness author, 159), and especially Democratic congressman Tim Ryan (165-66, 178), mindfulness has been refashioned to save America.

(A Wynne,<sup>183</sup> 2018:53; pages within parentheses refer to Wilson, *Mindful America*, 2014)

The IMS, as a community of serious Buddhist practitioners, clearly wants to have nothing to do with this **Cinderella syndrome**: it aims to awaken us from the “American dream” and live a full Dharma-spirited Buddhist life, calm, clear and free.

We will now examine some of the key individuals who have preserved and propagated the meditations and teachings that reflect what the Buddha teaches. We are going back to the still forest pool.<sup>184</sup>

---

<sup>182</sup> NY Times 5 July 2013 gives this criticism: “there’s a bit of a disconnect between the (perfectly commendable) pursuit of these benefits and the purpose for which meditation was originally intended. Gaining competitive advantage on exams and increasing creativity in business weren’t of the utmost concern to the Buddha and other early meditation teachers. As Buddha himself said, ‘I teach one thing and one only: that is, suffering and the end of suffering.’ For Buddha, as for many modern spiritual leaders, the goal of meditation was as simple as that. The heightened control of the mind that meditation offers was supposed to help its practitioners see the world in a new and more compassionate way, allowing them to break free from the categorizations (us/them, self/other) that commonly divide people from one another.” See <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/opinion/sunday/the-morality-of-meditation.html>.

<sup>183</sup> Alexander Wynne’s “Buddhism without Nirvana, or Nirvana without Buddhism?” (2018)—reviews on Braun, *The Birth of Insight* (2013) and *Mindful America* (2014)—is an incisively insightful paper very relevant to our study. [https://www.academia.edu/36634130/Buddhism\\_without\\_Nirvana\\_or\\_Nirvana\\_without\\_Buddhism](https://www.academia.edu/36634130/Buddhism_without_Nirvana_or_Nirvana_without_Buddhism).

<sup>184</sup> For Christopher Titmuss’ feedback on the Goenka 10-day retreat: <https://www.christophertitmussblog.org/10-day-goenka-courses-in-vipassana-time-to-make-changes-12-firm-proposals>