

Make Hay While the Sun Shines

U Bodhinyana*

The ascetic Siddhattha through his self-effort attained Enlightenment by the practice of *bhāvanā* – the mental development. Neither did he have affinity with any divine powers during his six years of his ascetic life nor did he attain Enlightenment by the aid or blessings of any supernatural being or beings, and henceforth he did not in any of his discourses, advise his followers to ask favour from any unnatural phenomena.

It is a salient and unique feature of Buddha's teachings in the history of mankind that he proclaimed a salvation which each person could gain for himself, and by himself, in this very life, without the least reference to any supernatural being, either great or small.

The term 'meditation' is not a suitable or meaningful English equivalent for the Pāli word *bhāvanā*. The English term 'meditation' is confusing and often vague to be used in the teachings of the Buddha. The Western and Middle-Eastern reader is liable to misunderstand what the follower of the Buddha means by 'meditation', and to imagine that it implies 'inactive' or 'passive' state or escaping from reality.

But in the teachings of the Buddha, *bhāvanā* – development or cultivation, is an activity in which one is engaged in subduing discursive thought, destroying unwholesome mental attitudes and nourishing wholesome mental states.

The readers may be familiar with the term *kammaṭṭhāna* and *samatha bhāvanā*. It is to be mentioned here that these terms and their application existed in India before the advent of Gotama Buddha. India has always been a land of mysticism and supernaturalism, by the *yoga* then prevalent that never went beyond a certain point.

The ascetic Siddhattha – the Bodhisatta at the end of six years saw the futility of *jhāna* – trance, and mystical experiences of rigorous ascetic discipline, and thereafter switched to *majjhimāpaṭipadā* – the middle path, applying him to *ānāpānasati* – mindfulness with breathing, which he had developed in his childhood, and then he finally sat under a tree at Gayā (now called Bodhgaya).

Having thus, gained perfect calm, he was able to develop *vipassanā*¹ that enabled him to understand things as they really are; to see the three characteristics: (1) *anicca* – impermanence or transience, (2) *dukkha* – suffering or un-satisfactoriness and (3) *anattā* – non-self or egoless-ness. He also saw the four features of suffering – popularly known as the Four

* The President of the Arakanese Research Society of Bangladesh, General Secretary of Buddhist Peace Fellowship of Bangladesh and Light of Sangha, he is also involved with various organisations. Formerly, (while he was a layperson) he was known as Maung Than Aye obtained B.Com. (Honours), M.Com in Management. Since his ordination as a *bhikkhu* (monk) he has been a leading proponent of Engaged Dhamma [distinct from popular Buddhism-a form of organised religion] in Bangladesh. He can be reached at email:

u_bodhinyana@yahoo.com This paper was published in Rakhine Tahaya Athung Magazine, Yangon in 2009.

¹*Vidarśanā* or *vipaśyanā* in Sanskrit.

Noble Truths (*catu ariya saccāni*), which are - (i) This is *dukkha*, (ii) This is the arising of *dukkha*, (iii) This is the cessation of *dukkha*, and (iv) This is the Path that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*, known as the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya atṭhangika magga*).

Apart from *anicca* and *dukkha* what was striking and unique in his discovery was the Buddha's doctrine of *anattā* – not-self, selflessness, non-selfhood: that all things without exception, including *nibbāna*, are not-self and lack any essence or substance that could properly be called a “self”. During that time *atta* was interpreted to have four forms: (i) *sāmi attā* – I own, so I am the owner or master or lord, (ii) *kāraka attā* – I do, so I am the doer, (iii) *vedka attā* – I feel, so feeling is mine, and (iv) *nivāsī attā* – inner dwelling soul, so I have a soul. So when we mean *anattā*, it means the antonyms of all the four forms mentioned above.

He further saw that there are three special aspects of suffering, which are: (i) *Dukkha-dukkhatā*, the ordinary sufferings of daily life – all mental and bodily sufferings, such as birth, ageing, disease, death, association with the unloved, dissociation from the loved, not getting what one wants, etc., (ii) *Sankhara-dukkhatā*, the sufferings that arise from grasping the five aggregates (*pañca-upadana-khanda*) i.e., of form, of sensation, of perception, of mental formation and of consciousness; briefly as *nāma-rūpa*- the five constituents of a sentient being. Beings and empirical world are both constantly forming and changing, and the unsatisfactoriness arises due to conditioned states, and (iii) *Viparināma-dukkhatā*, the suffering due to impermanence (*anicca*) – all the pleasant and happy feelings that man experience fade away and disappear, and there is no lasting bliss – for whatever is impermanent is unsatisfactory (*yadanicaam taṃ dukkham*).²

Knowing thus, seeing thus, his mind was liberated from the three taints: *kāmāsava* – taint of sense pleasures, *bhavāsava* – taint of becoming, and *avijjāsava* – taint of ignorance.³ It was by this *vipassanā* – insight vision, the Bodhisatta Gotama was able to burst out of the hard shell of ignorance to comprehend the ‘reality’ in all their fullness, the Dhamma – Eternal Verities and thus attain *sammāsambuddho* – the Supreme Enlightenment.

The word *vipassanā* – insight vision, literally means ‘special seeing’, ‘clear seeing’ or ‘extraordinary seeing’; while the popular English term uses ‘insight meditation’. Insight vision – *vipassanā*, therefore is a classic and ideal art, skill and technique of the Buddha, the unique *bhavanā* – the mental cultivation and development experience by the Master himself.

There has been misconception over the term ‘Buddhist Meditation’ as may be found in many theory-oriented books, which may run like this:

There are two basic kinds of (Buddhist) meditative practice. The first is the development of concentration, where we give the mind a single object and rest there (*Samatha*). The second kind is the development of mindful-awareness, in which we use the tranquility that arises from concentration in order to see the impermanent, changing nature of all our experience (*Vipassana*).⁴

This type of instruction would mislead a *yogi* – practitioner, who tries to apply the teachings of the Buddha into his daily practice.

² The other aspects of suffering are: (i) *paticchana-dukkha* – concealed suffering, (ii) *apaticchana-dukkha* – unconcealed suffering, (iii) *pariyaya-dukkha* – indirect suffering and (iv) *nipariyaya-dukkha* – direct suffering.

³ Some texts include *diṭṭhāsava* and thus making four.

⁴ The Seeker's Glossary of Buddhism: 1998, *Sutra Translation Committee of the U.S. & Canada*, p: 365.

In the Buddha's dispensation *samatha* and *vipassanā* go together and they occur simultaneously.⁵ Here *samatha* does not mean the doctrine that was practiced by Bodhisatta Gotama during his six years of his futile ascetic life; but that 'level of *samadhi*' which helped him developed the insight vision for attaining Enlightenment. Here the development of *vipassanā* combines with that of *samadhi*, and each function in a way that does not outstrip the other. Both gain uniformity of force. Through the overdoing of analysis there can be flurry. And indolence creeps in through too much tranquility.⁶

Vipassanā bhāvanā being the heartbeat of his dispensation, the Buddha often stressed its importance of mental cultivation. He urged and encouraged others to gain self-mastery. Once, the Buddha discoursing on generosity reminded Anāthapiṇḍika that alms given (*bhojeyya*) to the Sangha together with the Buddha is very meritorious; but more meritorious than such alms is the building of a monastery (*vihāraṃ kārāpeyya*) for the use of the Sangha; more meritorious than such monasteries is seeking refuge (*saraṇaṃ gaccheyya*) in *Tisarāṇa*; more meritorious than seeking refuge is the observance of (*pasannacitto sikkāpadāni samādiyeyya*) five-precept; more meritorious than such observance is meditation on (*mittacittaṃ bhāveyya*) loving-kindness for a moment; and most meritorious of all is the development of (*aniccasaññaṃ bhāveyya*) Insight as to the fleeting nature of things.⁷ It is evident from this discourse that though gift or donation is the first stage on the way of a person's life but the most important and most beneficial (*mahāpphalataran*) of all self-discipline is the *vipassanā bhāvanā* – insight vision meditation to realise things as they truly are.

Ānapānasati – mindfulness with breathing is a well-known *bhāvanā* liked and practised by many and is part and parcel of *vipassanā bhāvanā*. It was used by the Bodhisatta Gotama when striving under the *Bodhi* tree and after Enlightenment the Buddha himself was most emphatic on the importance of practising it, in his words: "Bhikkhus, one who speaks rightly should say *ānapānasati* is the *ariya* (noble) way of life, the *brahma* (sublime) way of life, the *Tathāgata's* way of life".⁸

An ardent practitioner may go through the book "Mindfulness with Breathing – A Manual for Serious Beginners" of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu translated from Thai by Santikaro Bhikkhu, Wisdom Publications, Boston, USA. In its Foreword, Larry Rosenberg, Director of Cambridge Insight Meditation Center wrote thus:

".....In this book, Ajahn Buddhādāsa will take you by the hand and lead you, as he did me, all the way from the first attempt to observe the in-breaths and out-breaths, to the kinds of insight that have the power to liberate. You will begin with merely a set of instructions, but then you must take these clear words of teachings and put them into practice. If you do, you will not be disappointed. The beauty of this work is its seamless integration of theory and practice. You (will) have in your hands a precious yogic manual, one that can decisively launch you into the practice of *vipassanā* meditation and set you firmly on the Buddha's path of liberation....."

The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Suttaṃ* – the Great Discourse on the Foundation of Mindfulness, which may be called the most important discourse of the Buddha on insight development. It is one of the discourses that is regarded with reverence and high esteem by those who follow the

⁵ *Yoganaddhāva, maggasampayuttā, sammapatipadā, tāva-pavattetabba.*

⁶ Soma 1949: p xvii in Piyadassi Thera 1987, *The Buddha's Ancient Path*, reprinted by CBBEF, Taiwan: 204.

⁷ Tipiṭaka, Aṅguttara Nikāya AN, ix, *Velāmasuttaṃ 20* in Gradual Sayings, vol. iv, p: 264-265.

⁸ *Samyutta Nikāya*, v, 326 in Piyadassi Thera 1987, Ibid: 214.

original teachings of the Buddha to practice *vipassanā bhāvanā*, that mindfulness can be cultivated to all, everywhere during one's daily life. The best and most illuminating commentaries written on this *sutta* be found in the book "The Four Foundations of Mindfulness" by Venerable U Sīlanandā, Wisdom Publications, Boston, USA, where Dr. Larry Rosenberg penned his Foreword thus:

".....These lectures (the basis for the present volume) and many personal discussions with the author provided me with greatly appreciated clarity in terms of the meaning of the *sutta* and its significance for *actual meditation practice*. Venerable U Sālanandā, being a scholar yogi, is able to harmonize doctrine and practice, so that there are no gaps between the two realms.....It will also be of considerable interest to practitioners of other schools because of the wealth of doctrine and practical Dhamma treasures it contains. The general readers will find it useful because of the unrelenting manner in which this *sutta* reminds us of the wide variety of opportunities that come along each day for us to choose attention rather than blindness....."

There is another well documented book "Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, The Great Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness" written by S. N. Goenka, published by the Vipassana Research Institute (VRI), Igatpuri, India, that is used as a handbook by meditation students of higher level attending Goenka retreats. There is a condensed version in another book "Discourses on Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta" written by S. N. Goenka published by VRI where the author wrote about *ekāyano maggo* thus:

This is not Hindu, Buddhist or Christian law, but simply the law. This is – the law, truth, or nature for one and all.....thousands of meditations around the world have had the same experience (who reached very high stages)..... *Satipaṭṭhāna* course to experience, and not just to hear the Buddha's words or a particular teacher's interpretation."

Patrick Given-Wilson in its introduction penned thus:

When teaching technique (*vipassanā*) he (Goenka) never omits to say that he received it from the Buddha through a chain of teachers down to his teacher (Sayagyi U Ba Khin), and his gratitude to them for the benefits that he has personally gained in his own meditation is evident. At the same time, he (Goenka) continually emphasises that he does not teach Buddhism or any kind of "ism", and that the technique that he teaches is universal, for people from any religious or philosophical background or belief.....Unfortunately around this time confusion arose among some meditations as to how to practice *Vipassana*. The question arose as to what was *Vipassana* and what was *Satipaṭṭhāna*. In fact *Vipassana* and *Satipaṭṭhāna* are synonymous. They are the same" Wilson quoted in it these words of Goenka, "Liberation can only be gained by practice, never by mere discussion".

Today we live in a world where all have to work hard physically as well as mentally. We spend, however, much of our time on our physical body: to feed it, to cleanse it, to wash it, to clothe it, to beautify it, to amuse it; but no spare time do we have to nourish our mental health. The Buddha said in the *Dhammapada* thus:

*Manopubbangamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā;
manasā ce pasannena, bhāsati vā karoti vā;
tato nam sukhamanveti, chāyā'va anapāyini.*

- Mind is the forerunner of (all good) states, mind is chief, mind-made are they;
If one speaks or acts with pure mind, because of that; happiness follows one, even as one's shadow that never leaves.⁹

When one is mindful, one knows how to purify and guide the mind – freeing oneself from mental disturbances, seeing many things that he had not seen with his flesh eye (*maṃsaṃ*

⁹ Dhammapada verse 2 in NARADA, Thera 1993 *The Dhammapada-PĀLI text & translation with stories in brief & notes*, reprinted by CBEBF, Taiwan, R.O.C: 5.

cakkhu). As mind is the nucleus of life, if the mind is restless and lacks peace the whole life will collapse. Many people do not realise this, but try to overcome their miseries through amusements and other means thus: they drink, sing, dance, gamble, go hunting –shooting birds and animals, go fishing –catching fish, trumpet with the victors, mourn for the victims, fooling himself, threatening others, terrorising societies, endangering nature, destroying nations and chartering the whole world. Many of these disorders and ills can be averted and avoided if people get deliverance from emotions and imaginations by healing their mental dipsomania, psychological stress, neurotic reactions, and other mental disorders

To practice *bhāvanā*, one must have strong determination, effort and patience. Full and final result cannot be expected instantly. The Buddha said: *khantī paramaṃ tapo titikkhā, nibbānaṃ paramaṃ vadanti buddhā* – fore-bearing patience is the supreme austerity, Nibbāna is supreme, says the Buddha.¹⁰ *Bhāvanā* helps one a great deal to have physical and mental health, and balance the mind to the circumstances.

In verse # 373 of the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Suttaṃ* the Buddha said about the five benefits of practicing *ekāyano ayaṃ bhikkhave maggo* – this is the only way, bhikkhu, that:

- (i) *sattānaṃ visuddhiya* – for the purification of beings,
- (ii) *sokaparidevānaṃ samatikkamāya* – for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation,
- (iii) *dukkhadomanassānaṃ* – for the disappearance of pain and grief,
- (iv) *atthangamāya ñāyassa adhigamāya* –for attainment of eight noble path, and
- (v) *nibbānassa sacchikiriya* – for the realisation of nibbāna.

Besides, many physical and mental ailments and disorders such as – hypertension, stress, insomnia, abnormal blood pressure, headache, migraine, emotional trauma, gastritis, indigestion, drug addiction, and host of psychological and functional disorders get relieved if people could spend some time a day to calm and relax their senses through the practice of *bhāvanā*.

It is very useful, specially the *vipassanā*, to help a person live peacefully despite various disturbances and distractions that are so prevalent in this hi-tech modern world. *Vipassanā* also helps people in taking steps and measures to face a happy death. Because, no friends or relatives will, unless one prepare oneself, when time comes, to welcome death – to pass away peacefully without pain and agony.

This teaching of the Buddha about non-fear, about no-birth is the cream of the whole body of the teachings. You may take up *vipassanā* to go deeper, to learn, and to practice so that you could become someone who has great capacity for being calm, without fear, without remorse, because the modern society needs more capable people having these qualities. And your children, our children, need people like this in order to go on.¹¹ Many teachers who had mastered *vipassanā* advised the beginners first to learn from an efficient *vipassanā* practitioners before they are adapt to do on their own. We should be cautious selecting such dedicated and efficient teachers in the present day of ‘free trade consumerist society’ as there are a lot of commercialised *vipassanā* centres spreading around the globe. Unlike the efficient

¹⁰ Dhammapada verse 184 in Ibid, p: 165.

¹¹ HANH, Thich Nhat 2001. All in One, One in All – The Nature of Interbeing, Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, Publication Unit, Singapore: 132.

practitioners they are unable to coach their pupils down the earth – the practical aspects of life – that they may have tons of bookish knowledge to lecture and entice the audience.

The name Anāthapiṇḍika has come to be synonymous with extreme generosity. However, this is not his only claim to fame. An interesting story about him goes like this: At the time of the Buddha, the role of the lay people was merely to provide material support to the Sangha. It was then not the practice to teach them the higher truths, which were reserved for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis only. When Anāthapiṇḍika¹² was seriously ill he sent a messenger to the Buddha to inform him about his condition and then to request the Venerable Sāriputta to visit him in his house.

As invited the Venerable Sāriputta, accompanied by Venerable Ānanda paid their visit to his house and found Anāthapiṇḍika on his deathbed. The Elder Sāriputta made an exception by conveying him a profound teaching on wisdom that made Anāthapiṇḍika to move to tears. When Ānanda saw him crying he felt sorry for the layperson. He said. “Dear friend why are you crying? Did you regret anything? Do you regret anything?”

Anāthapiṇḍika replied, “No, Lord Ānanda, I don’t regret anything. I am so happy and I practise so well. It is wonderful to practice with your presence here supporting me. Well, I practise very well”.

“Why do you cry then?” Ānanda enquired.

“I cry because I am so moved. I have been supporter of the Buddha and the Sangha for more than thirty years, but I have never learned and practised a teaching that is wonderful like this.” He was so happy the last moment of his life. He suddenly got the greatest gift he ever got – no fear.

Ānanda said, “Dear friend, you don’t know, but this kind of teaching, we monks and nuns receive almost every day”.

Anāthapiṇḍika said, “Lord Ānanda, I have a request. My last request. Please go home and tell Lord Buddha that although many of us are too busy in our lay life, there are those of us who are capable of receiving and have the time to practice this wonderful teaching to us, also, the lay people”.

Ānanda agreed to do so. And that was the last statement made by the layperson, Anāthapiṇḍika.¹³ It was as a result of this plea that lay people, may now be exposed to the higher teachings of the Buddha. So use it, live with it – while you are still alive.

¹² Tipiṭaka, Majjhima Nikaya, iii, *Anāthapiṇḍikovādasuttaṃ* 383-387.

¹³ Hanh 2001: 127.