

OVADAKATHÆ

## THE VENERABLE MAHÆSŪ SAYÆDAW

The Venerable U Sobhana Mahæthera, better known as *Mahæsu Sayædaw*, was born on 29 July 1904 to the peasant proprietors, U Kan Htaw and Daw Shwe Ok at Seikkhun Village, which is about seven miles to the west of the town of Shwebo in Upper Myanmar, once the capital of the founder of the last Myanmar dynasty.

At the age of six he began his studies at a monastic school in his village, and at the age of twelve he was ordained a Sæma¼era, (Novice) receiving the name of *Sobhana*. On reaching the age of twenty, he was ordained a Bhikkhu on 26 November 1923. He passed the Government Pæ'i Examinations in all the three classes (lower, middle and highest) in the following three successive years.

In the fourth year of his Bhikkhu Ordination, he proceeded to Mandalay, noted for its pre-eminence in Buddhist studies, where he continued his further education under various monks of high scholastic fame. In the fifth year he went to Mawlamyaing where he took up the work of teaching the Buddhist scriptures at a monastery known as 'Taung-waing-galay Taik Kyaung'.

In the eighth year after his Bhikkhu ordination, he and another monk left Mawlamyaing equipped with the bare necessities of a Bhikkhu (i.e. alms bowl, a set of three robes, etc.), and went in search of a clear and effective method in the practice of meditation. At Thaton he met the well-known Meditation Teacher, the Venerable U Nærada, who is also known as 'Mingun Jetawun Sayædaw the First'. He then placed himself under the guidance of the Sayædaw and at once proceeded with an intensive course of meditation.

He had progressed so well in his practice that he was able to teach the method effectively to his first three disciples in Seikkhun while he was on a visit there in 1938. These three lay disciples, too, made remarkable progress. Inspired by the example of these three, gradually as many as fifty villagers joined the courses of intensive practice.

The Venerable Mahæsu Sayædaw could not stay with the Venerable Mingun Sayædaw as long as he wanted as he was urgently asked to return to the Mawlamyaing monastery. Its aged head monk was gravely ill and passed away not long after the Venerable Mahæsu Sayædaw's return. The Venerable Mahæsu Sayædaw was then asked to take charge of the monastery and to resume teaching the resident monks. During this time he sat for the Pæ'i Lectureship Examination on its first introduction on the first attempt, in 1941 he was awarded the title of 'Sæsanadhaja Sri Pavara Dhammæcariya'.

On the event of the Japanese invasion, the authorities gave an evacuation order to those living near Mawlamyaing at the Taung-waing-galay Monastery and its neighborhood. These places were close to an airfield and hence exposed to air attacks. For the Sayædaw this was a welcome opportunity to return to his native Seikkhun and to devote himself whole-heartedly to his own practice of Vipassanæ meditation and to the teaching of it to others.

He took residence at a monastery known as *Mahæ-SŪ Kyaung*, which was thus called because a drum (Myanmar *si*) of an unusually large (*mahæ*) size was housed there. From that monastery, the Sayædaw's popular name, Mahæsu Sayædaw, is derived.

It was during this period, in 1945, that the Sayædaw wrote his great work, *Manual of Vipassanæ Meditation*, a comprehensive and authoritative treatise expounding both the doctrinal and the practical aspects of the Satipa¼hæna method of meditation. This work of two volumes, comprising 858 pages in print, was written by him in just seven months, while the neighbouring town of Shwebo was at times subjected to almost daily air attacks. So far, only one chapter of this work,

the fifth, has been translated into English and is published under the title "Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages" (Buddhist Publication Society).

It did not take long before the reputation of Mahāṣo Sayādaw as an able teacher of Insight Meditation (*vipassanā*) had spread throughout the Shwebo-Sagaing region and attracted the attention of a prominent and very devout Buddhist layman, Sir U Thwin, who was regarded as Myanmar's 'Elder Statesman'. It was his wish to promote the inner strength of Buddhism in Myanmar by setting up a meditation centre to be guided by a meditation teacher of proven virtue and ability. After meeting Mahāṣo Sayādaw and listening to a discourse given by him and to the meditation instructions given to nuns in Sagaing, Sir U Thwin was in no doubt that he had found the ideal person he was looking for.

In 1947 the Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha [Organization](#) was founded in Yangon with Sir U Thwin as its first President and with its object the furthering of the study (*pariyatti*) and practice (*paṭipatti*) of Buddhism. In 1948 Sir U Thwin donated five acres of land at Kokkine, Yangon, to the organization for the erection of a meditation centre. It is on this site that the present Thathana (or *Sāsana*) *Yeiktha*, i.e. "Buddhist Retreat", is situated, which now, however, covers an area of twenty acres, with a large number of buildings.

In 1949, the then Prime Minister of Myanmar, U Nu, and Sir U Thwin requested that the Venerable Mahāṣo Sayādaw come to Yangon and give training in meditational practice. On 4 December 1949, the Sayādaw introduced the first group of 25 meditators into the methodical practice of Vipassanā meditation. Within a few years of the Sayādaw's arrival in Yangon, similar meditation centres sprang up all over Myanmar, until they numbered over one hundred. In neighbouring Theravāda countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka, such centres were also established in which the same method was taught and practised. According to a 1972 census, the total number of meditators trained at all these centres (both in Myanmar and abroad) had passed the figure of seven hundred thousand: In the East and in several Western countries as well, Vipassanā courses continue to be conducted.

At the historic Sixth Buddhist Council (*Chaṭṭha Sangāyanā*) held at Yangon for two years, culminating in the year 2500 Buddhist Era (1956), the Venerable Mahāṣo Sayādaw had an important role. He was one of the Final Editors of the canonical texts, which were recited and thereby approved, in the sessions of the Council. Further, he was the Questioner (*Pucchaka*), that is, he had to ask the questions concerning the respective canonical texts that were to be recited. They were then answered by an erudite monk with a phenomenal power of memory, by the name of Venerable Vicittasārabhivamsa. To appreciate fully the importance of these roles, it may be mentioned that at the First Council held one hundred days after the passing away of the Buddha, it was the Venerable Mahā Kassapa who put forth those introductory questions which were then answered by the Venerable Upāli and the Venerable Ānandā.

After the recital of the canonical scriptures, the Tipiṭaka, had been completed at the Sixth Council, it was decided to continue with a rehearsal of the ancient commentaries and subcommentaries, preceded by critical editing and scrutiny. In the large task, too, the Mahāṣo Sayādaw took a prominent part.

In the midst of all of these tasks, he was also a prolific and scholarly writer. He authored more than 70 writings and translations, mostly in Myanmar, with a few in the Pāli language. One of these deserves to be singled out: his Myanmar translation of the Commentary to the Visuddhi Magga (*Visuddhimagga Mahā Tōkā*), which, in two large volumes of the Pāli original, is even more voluminous than the work commented upon, and presents many difficulties, linguistically and in its contents. In 1957 Mahāṣo Sayādaw was awarded the title of 'Agga-Mahā-Paḍāita'.

Yet even all of this did not exhaust the Mahæṣṭ Sayædaw's remarkable capacity for work in the cause of the Buddha-Dhamma. He undertook several travels abroad. The first two of his tours were in preparation for the Sixth Council, but were likewise used for preaching and teaching.

Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam (1952); India and Sri Lanka (1953, 1959) Japan (1957); Indonesia (1959); America, Hawaii, England, Continental Europe (1979); England, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand (1980); Nepal, India (1981)

In the midst of all these manifold and strenuous activities, he never neglected his own meditative life which had enabled him to give wise guidance to those instructed by him. His outstanding vigour of body and mind and his deep dedication to the Dhamma sustained him through a life of 78 years.

On 14 August 1982, the Venerable Mahæṣṭ Sayædaw succumbed to a sudden and severe heart attack which he had suffered the night before. Yet on the evening of the 13th, he had still given an introductory explanation to a group of new meditators.

The Venerable Mahæṣṭ Sayædaw was one of the very rare personalities in whom there was a balanced and high development of both profound erudition linked with a keen intellect, and deep and advanced meditative experience. He was also able to teach effectively both Buddhist thought and Buddhist practice.

His long career of teaching through the spoken and printed word had a beneficial impact on many hundreds of thousands in the East and the West. His personal stature and his life's work rank him among the great figures of contemporary Buddhism.

#### WRITINGS OF THE VENERABLE MAHÆṢṬ SAYÆDAW IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

##### (SELECTION)

The Progress of Insight through the Stages of Purification. With the Pæ'i text. (1)  
 Practical Insight Meditation. Basic and Progressive Stages. (1)  
 Practical Vipassanæ Meditational Exercises. (2)  
 Purpose of Practising Kamma#hæna Meditation. (2)  
 The Wheel of Dhamma (Dhammacakappavattana Sutta). (2)

(1) Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka.

(2) Buddha Sæsana Nuggaha Organization, 16 Sæsana Yeiktha Road, Yangon, Myanmar.

THE MOST VENERABLE BENEFACITOR MAHÆSŪ SAYÆDAW'S  
ADMONISHMENT ON THE EVE OF 26<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
OF CONGREGATION OF DISCIPLES FROM ALL  
MEDITATION CENTRES THROUGHOUT MYANMAR

(3<sup>rd</sup> WANNING DAY OF NATTAW 1334 ME./23.12.1972 A.D)

First and foremost I would like to express my satisfaction to see all of you meditation instructors, responsible administrators and devotees from meditation centres all over the country. I am also very glad to be aware of all your unwavering and unanimous effort in striving this year's anniversary congregation, a full success in MAHÆSŪ tradition. I would like to greet you with my warm blessing for your health, prosperity, security and deliverance from all suffering. Now I am going to give admonishment to meditation instructors and responsible administrators of various meditation centres as I have done in previous years.

I intend to give this admonishment under seven headings:-

- (1) Strict observance of vinaya
- (2) Profound reverence for dhamma
- (3) Correctness of method
- (4) Perpetuation of the centres
- (5) Co-operation and co-ordination
- (6) Next year's programme
- (7) Advice on preaching

(1) STRICT OBSERVANCE OF VINAYA:-

(Discipline or code of conduct for Buddhist monks)

*"Vinayo nāma Buddha sāsanaṣa āyu, vinaye thite  
sāsanaṣa thitamhoti"*

As expressed in commentary, Vinaya is the "life" of Buddha Sāsanaṣa. Sāsanaṣa is alive only when vinaya prevail. Prevalence of vinaya depends on those persons who observe and practise the strict discipline of vinaya. That is why everyone who reverence and care for the perpetuation of sāsanaṣa should practise strict discipline of the vinaya most respectfully and also direct and urge his followers and close associates to do the same. The Lord Buddha exhorted how to observe the strict discipline of vinaya as follows:-

*Idha bikkhave bikkhu sōlavā hoti,  
Pātimokkha samvarasamvuto viharati,  
Ācāragoccarā sampanno,  
Anu mattesu vajjesu bayadassāvā  
Samādaya Sekkhamti sekkhā padesu (AM 237 etc.)*

In this Sāsanaṣa Bhikkhu must observe strict morality (*sōla*), that is Pātimokkha Sōla. Pātimokkha means those who respectfully comply it can escape from the danger of lower existences (*apāya* sufferings): the animal world, ghost world, demon world and hell.

In brief, that is the abstinence from the two kinds of offenses such as committing the unwholesome deeds and speaking unwholesome speeches. Moreover, to safeguard the Pātimokkha sōla - *ācāragoccarā sampanno* - one must possess noble moral conduct and wholesome domain and associates. That is very wide and for detail explanation, can refer to *Visuddhi magga sōla niddesa* (Pg. 16, M 57 etc.). I hope you all must be mostly well versed with it.

Then, to observe Pætīmokkha fully and whole-heartedly- *Anumattesu vajjesu bhayadassævi*-seemingly tiniest offense must be observed as the greatest sin. There are seven groups of immoral conduct that can befall to bhikkhus. Out of these seven, *dukkata* and *dubbhæsita* are regarded as less offensive. Even the seemingly less offensive and less important code of conducts, if breached intentionally can send one to the four lower worlds (*apæya*). So, by realizing the danger of *Apæya* suffering one should strive to observe carefully to be free from even the smallest misconduct.

*Saddhæsædhano hiso patimokkha samvaro* Pætīmokkha Söla is to be fulfilled with strong faith. It would not be too much of a burden to observe for those who have strong faith. As you all have practised *satipaŵhæna* meditation, you all must have strong faith. So with unwavering determination you all should most humbly observe strict vinaya discipline. Nowadays most of bhikkhu are getting lax in observing the codes of conduct regarding the wearing of robes, eye discipline, money matters, dealing with supporting laities etc, etc.

As responsible persons of meditation centres you all should most earnestly observe all the vinaya discipline without any exception. Buddha exhorted *anumattesu vajjesu bhayadassævi*-seemingly tiniest offense must be taken as greatest sin which can result in abominable suffering. Whatever Buddha admonishes must be regarded as moral directive. I would like to remind you again, to observe the vinaya discipline most earnestly yourself and also urge your subordinates to do the same.

In this main meditation centre of Yangon, you all can see that we observe vinaya discipline to our utmost and also we try to fulfill the *appiccho-santutthi-sallekho* (Frugality-Contentment-Destruction) of defilements virtues as much as we can by abstaining smoking, beetle-chewing and other frivolous degrading habits. By such abstinence we gain more time for the noble cause of *pariyatti-paŵipatti* and respectability by the devotees.

I am very glad to hear that some of the branch meditation centres are also practising in the same tradition. So I most ardently wish that may you all be able to observe the strict discipline of vinaya and also practise the *pæsædika* virtues (gracious, amiable conduct) resulting in worthy benefits for you all and the *paŵipatti sæsanæ*.

## (2) PROFOUND REVERENCE FOR DHAMMA

What dhamma to revere? It is no other than the mindfulness, concentration and wisdom that you attain by practising the *satipaŵhæna vipassanæ* meditation. You all must practise yourself whenever you have a chance and also urge and instigate others to practise by inspirational preaching. The most important fact is that as you all are urging others to practise there should be no negligence on your part.

## (3) CORRECTNESS OF METHOD

People come to practise *satipaŵhæna* meditation in your centre with full confidence in you. So it is most important that meditation instructors should teach, instruct and guide the meditators precisely and fully to enable them to perceive the attainable concentration and insight. You must instruct them correctly the Mahæso Meditation method in accordance with the Mahæsatipaŵhæna sutta to attain seven visuddhi and sixteen *vipassanæ ñæ%a* (from *ñæmarppapariccheda ñæ%a* to *paccavekkha%æ ñæ%a*) by contemplating the physical and mental phenomena at the moment of occurrence.

It is learnt that some of the branch centres are teaching all kinds of meditation methods though they named their centres as Mahæso Meditation Centres. That is very unscrupulous of them. I would like to warn them through you as the name indicates, they should teach the precise and correct Mahæso meditation method only. I also would like you to convey my advice for them to scrutinize and assess the progress or otherwise of their meditators closely and carefully in accordance with the

sermon on progress of insight meditation and to give the methodical guidance correctly and precisely.

#### (4) PERPETUATION OF THE CENTERS

I refer to perpetuation of the meditation centres those you all are taking in charge. One day we all are going to pass away. At that time the meditation centre can continue functioning regularly only if the inheriting individual is able enough to maintain the meditation master's qualities in Mahāsa tradition. If he is unqualified and incompetent or irresponsible and negligent, the centre will just go down to the status of an ordinary monastery.

It is very important that you all should choose subordinates, assistants and inheritors on the basis of reverence for Dhamma. You should choose only those persons who had actually practised satipaṭṭhāna meditation to the satisfactory stage and those who revere Dhamma and have good moral and ethical conduct. Take care not to receive in your centre those persons who do not revere Dhamma, negligent, irresponsible with formidable conduct for any reason. If need be you can send them to the main centre in Yangon for necessary training.

#### (5) CO-OPERATION AND CO-ORDINATION

The main object of holding such annual congregation at this centre is to give you all a chance to co-operate and to co-ordinate. I started teaching satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā meditation at this centre on the full-moon day of Nattaw 1311 BE (4-12-1949 AD). Since the first anniversary in 1312 the annual congregation was held every year at this centre with the aim of instilling the spirit of co-operation and co-ordination among the responsible persons in promoting and propagating the paṭipatti sāsanā.

Here I would like to express my appreciation for your sincerity and faithfulness in making this annual congregation a success by your united efforts. I regard it as your reverence for dhamma and respect for your elders.

*Abhinham sannipātā sannipātabahula samaggā sannipatissanti.*

In accordance with the Lord Buddha's admonishment, frequent meetings, repeated conference, united efforts in co-operation and co-ordination are sure way to success and progress. In areas where there are more than one centre you all should co-operate and co-ordinate by working together in mutual respect and cordiality. You all should welcome and encourage whoever preaches or teaches the dhamma if it is in accordance with the correct way of satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā method. No matter who works for it, if it is for the promotion and propagation of paṭipatti sāsanā in correct way you all should cooperate.

Another warning I want to give you is not to have too much attachment for the dwellings, relatives, material properties and supporting laities. Here in our centre I do not encourage offering of the dwellings for personal ownership. I always direct the donors to offer to the sangha order for common use by the meditators. None of the buildings in this centre are my own personal property. So no possession, no bondage, no inheritance to take care of. I wish you all to follow this example of non-attachment, less problem and more time to devote for the progress of dhamma in a tranquil atmosphere.

## (6) NEXT YEAR'S PROGRAMME

To make the most benefit out of your precious time and talent, I intend to include dhamma recitation 30 min sections by you all, taking in turns. We shall start three days before the actual anniversary day. Recitation of suttas from Pæ'i cannon with brief Myanmar translations by meditation lecturers and preachers (4) in the forenoon and (4) in the afternoons. Major sermons will be given by selected famous masters (Dhamma kathikas) every evening. Detail programme will be drawn and prescribed by the authorities after due consultations with various responsible persons. Useful suggestions and advice are welcomed from you if you have any.

## (7) ADVICE ON PREACHING:-

Finally we come to the subject of advice on preaching. That is for you to give suggestions on most likely beneficial points regarding the preaching of dhamma. I would like to give you some outlines for you to discuss.

(a) Preaching by you as meditation masters should mainly confine to subjects on satipaṅṅhæna meditation practices as precisely and correctly with the original texts of Pæ'i cannon.

(b) Avoid reciting the Pæ'i stanzas and verses in melodious sounds and tunes.

(c) Do not use comical, imaginary and groundless frivolous tales and stories just to attract the lay audience.

(d) As you are under the patronage of Mahæṣṣ meditation centre give teachings and instructions according to the Mahæṣṣ meditation methods.

(e) Take care to avoid using statements and expressions or criticisms that are detrimental or degrading or insulting to other persons.

In conclusion, I wish you all may be able to practise yourselves the morality, concentration and wisdom to the fullest extent and urge and help your devotees and disciples to do the same. May you all by striving the promotion and the propagation of sæsanæ attain the noble bliss of Nibbæna and final deliverance of the suffering in the shortest and easiest way.

SÆDHU! SÆDHU! SÆDHU!

NOTE

THE MYANMAR WORD SAYADAW, MEANING 'VENERABLE TEACHER' IS AN HONORIFIC TERM AND WAY OF ADDRESS GIVEN TO SENIOR OR EMINENT MONKS.

NOTE

THAT IS ORGANIZATION FOR PROMOTING THE BUDDHIST RELIGION.