An Interview with Mahasi Sayadan THAMANAYKYAW



An Interview with Mahasi Sayadaw

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(Translated by Hla Myint Kyaw)

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Contents

	Preface	12
1:	Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, did you	
	have full faith in Satipatthana	
	Vipassana practice when you started	
	it?	13
2:	Venerable Sir, could you explain the	
	meaning of Satipatthana?	15
3:	Venerable Sir, I believe you made	
	very fast progress in your practice	
	arousing one insight knowledge af-	
	ter another. Didn't you?	16
4:	Venerable Sir, is it possible to ex-	
	perience phenomena in an ultimate	
	sense by merely observing 'going',	
	for example, as going in a concep-	
	tual way?	18
5:	Venerable Sir, what do we have to	
	note when we start our practice?	
	When going, for example, are we	
	supposed to note the mind and body	
	involved?	20

6:	Venerable Sir, did you initiate the	
	observation of 'rising-falling' of the	
	abdomen when breathing?	21
7.	Would it not be harmful to one's	
<i>f</i> •	health if one practiced too inten-	
	sively?	22
۸.	Venerable Sir, in Vipassana Practice	
U.	is it necessary to label or name an	
	object such as 'rising falling' etc.?	23
g.	Venerable Sir, do you always en-	
	courage us to label an object?	24
10	:Venerable Sir, is there any disad-	
	vantage by not labeling a medita-	
	tion object, like rising, falling, sit-	
	ting, standing, doing, laying and so	
	on?	25
11	: Venerable Sir, if noting "sitting, sit-	23
i i		
	ting" when one is sitting serves	
	one's purpose, why is one instructed	
	to note "rising, falling" when one	
1 4	is sitting?	26
12	: Venerable Sir, how does a yogi keep	
	the balance between concentration	
	and energy by noting 'rising and	
	falling'?	27

13: Venerable Sir, what is the purpose	
for the rotation of one-hour sitting	
and one-hour walking in practice?	
(The daily schedule at Mahasi	
Meditation Center includes alter-	
nate hours of sitting and walking.)	28
14: Venerable Sir, if one notes 'rising	20
and falling', will one be expected	
to be solely aware of the abdomen	
itself rising and falling?	29
15: Venerable Sir, can you mention	
suitable postures of sitting?	30
16: Venerable Sir, do you advise yogis	
not to speak at all during practice?	31
17:Is it possible to note an object a mo-	
ment after it takes place?	32
18: Venerable Sir, by allowing a yogi	
to listen to the talk on the progress	
of insights, are you confirming that	
he or she is a Sotapanna (who has	
reached the first stage of enlighten-	
ment)?	33
19: Venerable Sir, what types of diffi-	
culties have you encountered in	
your teaching of Vipassana?	34
Jour constitute or Arpubbuna.	J 1

20: Venerable Sir, what is the maxi-	
mum amount of "Puňňa" or merit	
that can be accumulated by practic-	
ing Vipassana meditation?	36
21: Venerable Sir, how much time	
should we spend noting at the din-	
ing table?	37
22: Venerable Sir, what is a yogi expected	
to be aware of, when he or she is	
walking, noting "right foot, left foot",	
or "lifting, pushing, and dropping"?	38
23: Venerable Sir, what is a yogi ex-	202 204
pected to be aware of, when stand-	
ing?	39
24: Venerable Sir, what is a yogi ex-	
pected to be aware of, when sitting	
or laying?	40
25: Venerable Sir, what should a yogi do,	
if or when he or she finds the obser-	
vation of 'rising, falling' too easy, or	
a gap noticeable between them?	41
26: Venerable Sir, is it the temperature	
element, or unpleasant sensation	
(Dukkha), when a yogi is aware of	
cold or heat?	12
COIU OI IICAL!	42

Mahāsi Sayadaw

27: Venerable Sir, how long does it take	
a yogi to accomplish his or her	
progress of Vipassana insights?	43
28: Venerable Sir, how long is it likely	
to take a yogi to reach the certain	
level of insight, called Udaya-	
bbaya-nana (the insight into arising	
	11
and passing away of phenomena)?	44
29: Venerable Sir, what does a yogi	
need to do to see phenomena	
clearly?	45
30: Venerable Sir, how does a yogi ex-	
perience apo-dhatu, the water ele-	
ment?	46
31: Venerable Sir, is it necessary to ac-	
cept nothing but practical experi-	
ence?	47
32: Venerable Sir, why do you instruct	
yogis to start their practice with not-	
ing 'rising and falling'?	49
33: Venerable Sir, are there only two	
objects to note, 'rising and falling'?	50
34: Venerable Sir, do some people be-	50
come enlightened while merely lis-	<i></i>
tening to a Dhamma talk?	31

35: Venerable Sir, does age make a dif-	
ference in one's practice?	52
36: Venerable Sir, is it possible to bring	
about insight knowledge by observ-	
ing the objects like going or right	
step, left step, which are known in	
common sense to every body?	53
37: Venerable Sir, what does it mean	
by the word, 'noting'?	54
38: Venerable Sir, for what purpose do	J 7
you instruct us to act very slowly?	55
39: Why could Jhana-achievers not dis-	J
cover mind and body to be imper-	
manent, etc. despite their attainment	5 C
of Jhana?	36
40: Venerable Sir, does our concentra-	
tion or awareness make a difference	
in our experience of pain?	57
41: Venerable Sir, is it true that Magga,	
Phala cannot be realized in this day	
and age, however hard we work?	58
42: Venerable Sir, does one's sex make a	
difference in making faster progress	
in practice?	59
43: Venerable Sir, is it possible for us	

Mahāsi Sayadaw	9
to attain Magga, Phala, in these	
days?	60
44: Venerable Sir, can you describe	
what one's experience of magga-	
phala enlightenment is like?	62
45: Venerable Sir, is it true that for	
learned persons, their knowledge	
forms an obstacle to the progress in	
their practice?	63
46: Venerable Sir, is there any differ-	
ence between meditators and non-	
meditators when they face with a	
painful illness?	64
47: Venerable Sir, is there any kind of	
pain or discomfort which belongs	
to the practice itself? If so, how do	
we have to deal with it?	65
48: Venerable Sir, what are we sup-	
posed to note when the rising and	
falling fade away?	66
49: Venerable Sir, should we insist on	
practice without spiritual aptitude	
(Parami) strong enough for magga,	
phala enlightenment?	67
50: Venerable Sir, can you describe	

someone who, you believe, experi-	
enced Nibbana?	68
51: Venerable Sir, what are the descrip-	
tions of Nibbana made by those	
who, you believe, have attained it?	69
52: Venerable Sir, how many people do	
you believe to be enlightened un-	
der your guidance?	71
53: Venerable Sir, is it realization of im-	
permanence, when we see, for ex-	
ample, a pot break down, or of suf-	
fering when we have a pain caused	
by a thorn in our flesh?	72
54: Venerable Sir, can you describe	
how we are supposed to realize	
egolessness in an ultimate sense?	73
55: Venerable Sir, what do we have to	
do to realize impermanence of mind	
and body?	74
56: Venerable Sir, which touching point	
should we note among others?	75
57: Venerable Sir, should we rather ob-	
serve stiffness, motion or movement	
when walking if we are supposed to	
be aware of the characteristics?	76
AND THE PROPERTY OF THE PROPER	

Preface

This booklet, entitled "An Interview with Mahāsi Sayadaw" is compilation of remarkable points regarding satipatthana vipassana extracted from the discourses given by the late Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw, with questions I have suggested. It is intended to offer better access to, and a deeper understanding of exquisite explanations about satipatthana vipassana, made by Mahāsi Sayadaw for those who want to put them into correct practice.

Tha-ma-nay-kyaw

QUESTION 1: Venerable Māhasi Sayadaw, did you have full faith in Satipatthana Vipassana practice when you started it?

No, frankly I didn't. I did not initially have full faith in it. So, I don't blame anybody for not having faith in practice before they start it. It is only because they have little or no experience of it. In 1931 when I was in only eighth Vassa (monastic year in terms of seniority), much to my curiosis and confusion, a meditation master called Mingon Zetawin Sayadawji, was teaching: Note going when going; note standing when standing; note sitting when sitting; note laying when laying; note bending when bending; note stretching when stretching; note eating when eating. I got confused by the fact that there was no object to observe in ultimate sense, such as mind and body, and their impermanence, suffering and egolessness. But I gave it some consideration and thought: "How strange the way Sayadawji teaches," I'm sure "he is highly learned, and is teaching from his own experience. It may

be too early for me to decide whether it is good or bad before I myself practice it. Thus I started to practice with him.

(The discourse on Ariya-vasa Sutta, p.84)

Q 2: Venerable Sir, could you explain the meaning of Satipatthana?

Satipatthana means mindfulness, or remembering constantly. What one is supposed to remember without fail are all physical, sensational, mental or general phenomena the moment they occur to him or her.

(The discourse on Satipatthana)

Q 3: Venerable Sir, I believe you made very fast progress in your practice arousing one insight knowledge after another. Didn't you?

No, I didn't. I could not appreciate the practice three or four weeks after I had started because I did not yet exercise enough effort. Some of the yogis here, however, even though the practice is new to them, manage to develop enough concentration and mindfulness after a week or so, to see impermanence, suffering, and insubstantiality to some extent. For me, I could not make any remarkable progress in the practice even after a month or so, let alone four or five days. I was then still at zero progress in my practice. This is because my faith in the practice was not strong enough, and I did not make enough effort. At this point, skeptical doubt called Vicikiccha, usually hinders the insight knowledge and Magga-Phala from taking place. So it is very important to do away with such doubt. But, I was wasting my time by mistaking the skeptical doubt for productive analysis.

I thought, it was only a conventional or conceptual way of practice, and not in the ultimate sense that one observes objects such as going, bending, stretching, etc. The Venerable Sayadawji taught me in that way as a basic training. Perhaps, later he would teach me how to distinguish between mind and body, etc. Later on, while continuing with this practice I spontaneously realized: "Wow! This is not just a basic training, but noting physical and mental behaviors, like going, bending, stretching, etc. are also intermediate advanced instructions too. These are all I need to observe. Nothing else.

(The discourse on Ariyavasa Sutta)

Q 4: Venerable Sir, is it possible to experience phenomena in an ultimate sense by merely observing 'going', for example, as going in a conceptual way?

There are three kinds of "I". The first is the "I" mistaken for a person or ego in terms of wrong view (Ditthi). The "I" taken as someone important in a sense of pride (Māna) is the second one. And the last one is the "I" we use in every day language in a conversational sense. When you note 'going' as going, the 'I' involved is the third kind, which was used even by the Buddha and Arahats, as it has nothing to do with ditthi and māna. So I instruct yogis to note in every day language every step they take as 'going'.

Although conventional language is used, a yogi is bound to experience phenomena in an ultimate sense beyond the concepts when his concentration gets strong enough. When going, for example, at some point he or she is bound to experience the intention to take a step, the stiffness, tension or motion in-

volved, and their constant changes. He or she will not find solid form or shape, but the phenomena arising and passing away on their own accord. In due course of time, he or she will see not only objects to observe, but also the concurrent noting mind itself arising and passing away immediately. If you don't believe it, try it. I ensure you that if you follow my instruction, you will indeed experience it for yourself.

(The discourse on Ariyavasa Sutta)

Q 5: Venerable Sir, what do we have to note when we start our practice? When going, for example, are we supposed to note the mind and body involved?

"Yatha-pakatam Vipassana-bhiniveso" = "Vipassana stays with any obvious object" it is said in the sub-commentary on the Visuddhimagga. So, one is instructed to start his or her Vipassana by noting an obvious object, i.e., an object easy to note. You should not start with subtle or difficult objects thinking that you will accomplish the practice sooner rather than later. For example, when a student begins schooling, he should begin with easy lessons. He could not be given difficult ones. In the same way, you should start the practice with the easiest observations. The Buddha teaches the easy way: "when going", for example, "note 'going". That's it.

(The discourse on Ariyavasa Sutta, p. 207)

Q 6: Venerable Sir, did you initiate the observation of 'rising-falling' of the abdomen when breathing?

No, I'm not the one who initiated the observation of 'rising-falling'. Actually it was the Buddha who did it because he taught to observe *Vayo-dhatu* the air-element included in the five aggregates. The rising and falling is constituted of the air element.

Initially, some people questioned the observation of the rising and falling of the abdomen. However, encouraged by friends, they tried later on, they appreciated it so much that they even criticized the former nitpickers. I'm sure every one who tries it will appreciate it from his or her own experience, just like the taste of sugar which one can appreciate directly from one's own experience.

Q 7: Would it not be harmful to one's health if one practiced too intensively?

It is said in the Pali texts: "kaye ca jivite ca anapekkhatam upatthapeti = with no regards to one's life and limbs." This encourages one to practice with heroic effort, even to sacrifice one's life and limbs. Some may think: "how horrible the practice is!" In fact, no one has died from intensive practice, and it is not even harmful to one's health. Actually, there are many testimonies that some people have been cured of chronic diseases by practicing this meditation.

(The discourse on Ariyavasa Sutta, p. 118)

Q 8: Venerable Sir, in Vipassana Practice is it necessary to label or name an object such as 'rising falling' etc.?

Names, whether they are in technical terms or in ordinary language, are all conceptual or conventional, and not that important. What matters most is to be aware of the phenomena involved in an object like 'rising and falling of the abdomen when breathing.' In reality, just being aware of an object without labeling at all, will serve the purpose.

Without labeling, however, it may be difficult to be fully aware of an object precisely and accurately. Also, it will not be easy for the yogi to report his or her experience to the teacher, or for a teacher to give advice to the yogi. That is the reason why the yogi is instructed to label an object when he or she notes it. Even then, it would be difficult to use technical terms for all objects a yogi encounters. That is why I instruct yogis to use ordinary language like 'rising, falling' when he or she practices. ('To Protect Buddha's Sasana From Dangers')

Q 9: Venerable Sir, do you always encourage us to label an object?

No, not always. There are times you find objects occurring to you so fast that you have no time to label them each. Then you have to keep up with them by being merely aware of them moment to moment, without labeling. It is also possible to be aware of four, five or ten objects spontaneously, although you are able to label only one of them. Don't worry about that. It also serves your purpose. If you try to label all the objects occurring, you are likely to get soon exhausted. The point is to be scrupulously aware of objects, i.e., in terms of their characteristics. In this case, you can also note objects occurring through the six senses moment to moment instead of noting routinely,

(Summary on How To Practice Vipassana, p.55)

Q 10: Venerable Sir, is there any disadvantage by not labeling a meditation object, like rising, falling, sitting, standing, doing, laying and so on?

Yes, of course, there are some disadvantages in not labeling a meditation object: inaccurate concurrence of mind and meditative object, superficial awareness, energy reduction, and so on.

(Purposes For Practice, 27)

Q 11: Venerable Sir, if noting "sitting, sitting" when one is sitting serves one's purpose, why is one instructed to note "rising, falling" when one is sitting?

Of course, it serves one's purpose to note 'sitting, sitting' when sitting. But if one observes a single kind of object for long, it would become so easy that he may lose balance from little energy and too much concentration. This would result in sloth and torpor and shallow or weak awareness. That's why one is instructed to observe "rising and falling" as a main object when one is sitting.

(The discourse on Sila-vanta Sutta)

Q 12: Venerable Sir, how does a yogi keep the balance between concentration and energy by noting 'rising and falling'?

Noting 'rising and falling' demands neither too much concentration as it is not a monotonous kind of object, nor excessive enthusiasm as it's only two types of object to note. Thus the balance can be kept between concentration and energy.

(The discourse on Sila-vanta Sutta)

Q 13: Venerable Sir, what is the purpose for the rotation of one-hour sitting and one-hour walking in practice? (The daily schedule at Mahāsi Meditation Center includes alternate hours of sitting and walking.)

Too much walking tends to arouse more energy, but less concentration, and may harm one's health. So one is scheduled to sit and walk alternately an hour each. Thus the balance can be kept between concentration and energy.

(The discourse on Sila-vanta Sutta)

Q 14: Venerable Sir, if one notes 'rising and falling', will one be expected to be solely aware of the abdomen itself rising and falling?

Yes, indeed, in the beginning of practice, one is plainly aware of the abdomen itself. There is no problem in that. Enlightenment of magga phala is not expected in the beginning, of course. Even Nama-rupa-pariccheda-nana, (the first and foremost insight distinguishing between mind and body) cannot be gained. In the beginning of practice, one has to work to keep the hindrances (wandering thoughts) away by noting them closely. Only when the hindrances are kept away for quite a long time (Vikkhambhana), and the mind is free of them, will a yogi start to experience true phenomena involved in the 'rising and falling', such as stiffness, tension, vibration and so on, beyond the plain abdomen.

(The discourse on Ariyavasa Sutta)

Q 15: Venerable Sir, can you mention suitable postures of sitting?

There are three postures of cross-legged sitting, the first is the sitting with both soles facing up like a Buddha statue does; the second is with one's calves kept parallel, or on each other; and the third is the way Myanmar women do with their knees folded underneath, which is called addha-pallanka (half cross-legged sitting). Any one is suitable. For women, they can sit the way they like unless in public. The point is to be able to sit for a long time, so that concentration will get chance to take place, develop eventually resulting in insight knowledge.

(A Talk given at The Yangon University, p. 73)

Q 16: Venerable Sir, do you advise yogis not to speak at all during practice?

No, I don't. It is not advisable to do so. It would be wise, however, not to speak of anything frivolous or unnecessary. One should only speak of things necessary, beneficial or doctrinal, and in moderation. Thus, both worldly and spiritual progress can be made.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta)

Q 17:Is it possible to note an object a moment after it takes place?

No, of course not. Even though you can buy something on credit and pay for it later, no credit is given in the case of Vipassana. So, you must note an object the moment it takes place lest you become attached to it.

(The discourse on the Basic Vipassana. p. 84)

Q 18: Venerable Sir, by allowing a yogi to listen to the talk on the progress of insights, are you confirming that he or she is a *Sotapanna* (who has reached the first stage of enlightenment)?

No, not at all. We never make judgments of one's spiritual status. When we are sure, however, that a yogi is good enough at practice, we allow him or her to listen to the talk given by one of our meditation teachers, expounding on how the insight knowledge advances up to the enlightenment of magga and phala. The purpose is to help a yogi to be able to decide his or her spiritual level by checking his or her own experience with the talk given. Mcreover, this will offer him or her a chance to enjoy his or her achievement, and give encouragement to work harder for further development. It is not for us to decide what level of enlightenment he or she has attained. So it is simply a misunderstanding that we confirm that a yogi is Sotapanna by allowing him or her to listen to that talk.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta, p. 193)

Q 19: Venerable Sir, what types of difficulties have you encountered in your teaching of Vipassana?

In 1939 I started teaching this satipatthana vipassana in my native place, Mahasi monastery, Saik Khon village, Shwe Bo township. At that time, the abbot from the adjacent monastery was not happy with my teaching. But, he dared not condemned it openly in my presence because he knew I was highly learned. So he did it in my absence only. There were also some monks and lay people who supported him. However, I never acted in response, but kept on teaching as usual. Whatever condemnation they made, nothing could shake or waver me because I was teaching through my own experience. Later, more and more people began to prove my teaching to be true from their own direct experience.

Later, the monk who had condemned my teaching, unfortunately had an affair with a woman, and disrobed within a few years. He passed away four or five years later. Again, when I started teaching in Yangon, one of the newspapers kept on condemning my teaching for some time. But, I never acted in response. And then, a book entitled "The Ladder To Pure Land" apishly criticized my teaching. Moreover, there was a journal that continually expressed articles condemning my teaching. I did nothing, however, to respond to them, considering that the *dhamma* doctrine was the Buddha's, but not mine. So those who appreciated my teaching would come to me. Otherwise, they went to another teachers. Again, I kept on teaching as usual, and found no failures, but only success in my spiritual career year after year.

I opened this Yangon meditation center with 25 yogis in the year of 1950. Now, in summer, there are about one thousand of yogis practicing here in this center. Even in the winter when usually less yogis practice, there are some two hundred yogis practicing in the center. Indeed, that indicates no failure but success.

(The discourse on Tuvataka Sutta, p. 237-8)

Q 20: Venerable Sir, what is the maximum amount of "Puňňa" or merit that can be accumulated by practicing Vipassana meditation?

One moment of noting is available in each second. Thus 60 moments in a minute, 3600 in an hour, and 72,000 a day except for the four hours for sleeping. This is a huge pile of merit!

(The discourse on Sakka-panha Sutta, p. 237)

Q 21: Venerable Sir, how much time should we spend noting at the dining table?

If or when you have your meal alone, and can note precisely and accurately, you may have fifty or sixty moments of noting within a single morsel. Thus, it would take you about an hour or so to finish your meal. But when you are eating in a group, it is impossible for you to note in that manner. You should determine to note as much as possible.

(The discourse on Malukya-putta Sutta, p. 144)

Q 22: Venerable Sir, what is a yogi expected to be aware of, when he or she is walking, noting "right foot, left foot", or "lifting, pushing, and dropping"?

The sensation in the foot or body of a yogi is what he or she is to be aware of. In technical terms, *vayo-dhātu*, the air-element characterized by stiffness, pressure, motion or vibration; *tejo-dhātu*, the fire-element characterized by temperature: cold, warm or hot; *pathavi-dhātu*, the earth-element characterized by hardness, softness or smoothness. But, especially *vayo-dhātu* is prominent to observe most of the time.

(The discourse on Malukya-putta Sutta, p. 149)

Q 23: Venerable Sir, what is a yogi expected to be aware of, when standing?

When standing, just note continuously "standing, standing." If it becomes monotonous because it is a single object, then a prominent touching point should be added to it, noting "standing, touching; standing, touching." Or you can note rising and falling of the abdomen, instead.

(The discourse on Malukya-putta Sutta, p. 149)

Q 24: Venerable Sir, what is a yogi expected to be aware of, when sitting or laying?

When sitting, just note "sitting, sitting," continuously." If it is boring and monotonous since it is a single object, then a prominent touching point should be added to it, noting "sitting, touching; sitting, touching." Or you can note rising and falling of the abdomen, instead, focusing on the sensation of the air-element characterized by stiffness, movement. Similarly with laying down.

(The discourse on Malukya-putta Sutta, p. 150)

Q 25: Venerable Sir, what should a yogi do, if or when he or she finds the observation of 'rising, falling' too easy, or a gap noticeable between them?

A yogi, adding the sitting posture to the 'rising, falling' should note three objects: rising, falling, sitting; rising, falling, sitting. He or she must be aware of 'sitting' in the same manner as 'rising, falling'. Even then if a gap is found in between, note four objects by adding a prominent touching point to it: 'rising, falling, sitting, touching'. When laying down, note in similarly way: 'rising, falling, laying, touching', or 'rising, laying, falling, laying, (How to Practice Vipassana II, p.12)

Q 26: Venerable Sir, is it the temperature element, or unpleasant sensation (*Dukkha*), when a yogi is aware of cold or heat?

When a yogi is simply aware of heat that is the experience of the temperature element. If he or she finds the heat uneasy or uncomfortable, that's experience of *Dukkha*. Similarly with cold wind or water, it can be temperature, or unpleasant sensation accordingly.

(The discourse on Malukya-putta p. 165)

Q 27: Venerable Sir, how long does it take a yogi to accomplish his or her progress of Vipassana insights?

It depends. Only a few people can describe their accomplishment of insight knowledge within a week or so, while most people usually mention their complete set of insight knowledge after one and a half months, or two. There are, however, some people who have to take three or four months to accomplish it. If, however, one practices seriously as instructed, he or she is likely to describe his or her achievement within a month or so. That's why a yogi is typically encouraged here to practice for at least a month.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta, p. 191)

Q 28: Venerable Sir, how long is it likely to take a yogi to reach the certain level of insight, called Udaya-bbaya-nana (the insight into arising and passing away of phenomena)?

Most people, if they work hard, may take a week or so to attain this insight knowledge. However, a few exceptional people, may be one or two in a hundred, can accomplish it within three or four days. But there are some people who have to take ten or fifteen days to reach this insight because of insufficient effort, or weak mental faculty. Also there are some people who cannot reach to it even after a month or so because of some deficiency. Anyway, a yogi is normally expected to accomplish this insight within a week or so, if he or she works diligently.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta, p. 181)

Q 29: Venerable Sir, what does a yogi need to do to see phenomena clearly?

At night, for example, one cannot see things clearly. But if one uses torchlight, things can be clearly seen in the spot light. In the same way, concentration can be compared to the light, through which one can see phenomena clearly: the manner of rising and falling, and the tension, tightness and movement etc.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta, p. 113)

Q 30: Venerable Sir, how does a yogi experience apo-dhātu, the water element?

(Actually, the water element is untouchable, but) a yogi can experience it as "liquidity or wetness" being connected with other elements. So when one feels tears, phlegm, saliva and sweat flowing down, the *apo-dhātu*, water element can be experienced as "liquidity or wetness" in any part of the body. Actually, there is no water element which cannot be observed, which normally prevail in twelve parts of the body such as bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat and so on.

(The discourse on Salleka Sutta, p. 121)

Q31: Venerable Sir, is it necessary to accept nothing but practical experience?

It is not practical for you to accept only practical experience. In other words, there is no reason not to believe in non-empirical reality. Although you cannot see something with your naked eyes, it may be seen through a microscope or telescope. Although you have never been to some parts of the world, it is reasonable for you to believe in what is said of it by those who have been there. Of course, we have to accept the discoveries of astronauts although we have never been in outer space.

The law of the Dhamma is very subtle and delicate. The reason one may not experience it, is probably because of deficiency in spiritual talent and effort, or obstructions like Kamma, Kilesa, Vipaka, Vitikkama and Ariyupavada¹. Most often, however, insight

¹ Kamma here is of five kinds: murder of one's own mother, father, or an Arahat, wounding a Buddha, or causing division in the community of monks. Kilesa here means the wrong view that there are no good or

knowledge is not realized due to a weakness in one's effort and concentration. So if you don't practice as seriously as others do, you cannot expect to realize something special as the others do.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta, p. 184)

bad deeds and their good or bad results. Vipaka here means one's inborn deficiency in spiritual talent. Vitikkama here means an activity against the Buddha's authority, i.e., breaking monastic rules. Ariyupavada here means insulting Noble Persons (enlighteners).

Q 32: Venerable Sir, why do you instruct yogis to start their practice with noting 'rising and falling'?

It will take time to develop concentration if you note an object too varied, or too subtle, while it can be aroused faster if you observe an obvious and limited object. That is why we instruct yogis to start their practice with watching the abdomen characterized by stiffness, pressure, vibration, which are identical with vayo-dhātu, the air-element.

(The discourse on Dhamma-cakka, p. 172)

Q 33: Venerable Sir, are there only two objects to note, 'rising and falling'?

Yes, one is instructed to note initially only two objects, 'rising and falling'. He is, however, instructed to note thoughts also if they occur to him, and then to go back to the main object. Similarly with pain. He should go back to the main object when the pain fades away, or after a moderate amount of time even if the pain persists. The same is true with bending or stretching his limbs, or changing his posture. He should note each and every activity or behavior involved in it, and then go back to the main object. If one sees or hears something predominant, one must note it as it is, i.e., 'seeing', 'hearing' and so on. After noting them three or four times, one must go back to the main object with full energy.

(The discourse on Dhamma-cakka, p. 173)

Q 34: Venerable Sir, do some people become enlightened while merely listening to a Dhamma talk?

No, it was not by listening to the talk that some were enlightened. In order to attain magga phala enlightenments, awareness of body, feeling, mind or general phenomena is essential.

(The discourse on Dhamma-cakka, p. 158)

Q 35: Venerable Sir, does age make a difference in one's practice?

Yes, there is some differences between the old and the young. In order to reach to a certain level of insight knowledge, one man, for example, at the age of twenty or thirty may take about a month, and another in his sixties or seventies has to take two or three months. It is because the young are physically healthier, mentally active, and less worried than the old. Of course, the older they get, the sicklier they become. The old have weaker memory and understanding, and stronger commitments and worries.

As for a monk, it would be great if he would practice soon after his ordination. Because he is, as a newly ordained monk, still young, and has strong faith in the practice, and his moral conduct is also still flawless. So in my opinion, however important his study is, a monk should practice soon after his ordination, for three months at least. There were some monks who unfortunately passed away before they could practice. What a pity!

(The discourse on Hemavata Sutta, p. 320)

Q 36: Venerable Sir, is it possible to bring about insight knowledge by observing the objects like going or right step, left step, which are known in common sense to every body?

You know the *Ana-pana* practice, the observation of in-and-out breath. The object, 'inhalation and exhalation' seems not to be observed, as it's known by common sense to everyone. But no one dare to criticize like that. In the same way, it makes no sense if you criticize that mindfulness, concentration and insight knowledge cannot be developed by noting 'right, left' which is compared with military training. The military training is taken for the purpose of sport or health, while the noting is used to develop mindfulness, concentration and insight knowledge. If you reject this part of the practice, that will mean you are rejecting the teaching of the Buddha.

(The discourse on Dhamma-dayada Sutta, p.83)

Q 37: Venerable Sir, what does it mean by the word, 'noting'?

The word, 'noting' means to pay attention to a meditative object with the purpose to be aware of phenomena that are really happening from moment to moment.

(The discourse on Nibbana, p. 216)

Q 38: Venerable Sir, for what purpose do you instruct us to act very slowly?

It is only when you act slowly that your concentration, mindfulness and insight knowledge can keep up with the objects. That's the reason why you have to start the practice by doing everything slowly and mindfully. Indeed, in the beginning, if you do things fast, your mindfulness or awareness cannot follow,.

(The talk on the Silver Anniversary, p.86)

Q 39: Why could Jhana-achievers not discover mind and body to be impermanent, etc. despite their attainment of Jhana?

Because they do not observe mental and physical phenomena, which really prevail every moment they go, stand, sit, see, hear and so on, they cannot discover mind and body to be impermanent, etc.

(The talk on the Silver Anniversary, p.86)

Q 40: Venerable Sir, does our concentration or awareness make a difference in our experience of pain?

When your concentration and awareness are not yet strong, you will find the pain increasing while noting pain, stiffness, or heat. But you should keep on noting it with patience and persistence. They often fade away when concentration and awareness are strong enough. Sometimes, while you are noting it, you may find it disappears on the spot. Such type of pain may no longer come back.

(The discourse on Anatta-lakkhana Sutta, p.46)

Q 41: Venerable Sir, is it true that *Magga*, *Phala* cannot be realized in this day and age, however hard we work?

Those who have such opinion will fail to practice for sure, let alone the attainment of *Magga* and *Phala*. That view is simply an obstruction to the holy path.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta, p. 294)

Q 42: Venerable Sir, does one's sex make a difference in making faster progress in practice?

I often find that women work harder along with strong faith in their teacher and his guidance. As a result, they develop concentration sooner rather than later. This in return arouses insight knowledge faster. Thus, I often find women make faster progress in practice than men do. I also found, however, some women who wasted their time with their wandering thoughts, and made no progress. There are several reasons why they make little or no progress in their practice, such as laziness, old age, poor health and so on. Of course, there are also men and monks who make fast progress in their practice when following the instructions strictly.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta, p. 124)

Q 43: Venerable Sir, is it possible for us to attain Magga, Phala, in these days?

Why not? Suppose, if you have a formula for a drug, then you can make medicine and take it to get cure of your disease. In the same way, the teaching of the Buddha, like a formula, is present, and you also have spiritual aptitude, so all you need to do is put it into practice. You will surely attain *Magga* and *Phala*. Keep it in your mind. Moreover, no Pali canons say it is impossible to be enlightened nowadays. In fact, they even say that one can become an *Arahat* with Triple Occult (*Te-vijja*) in these days. Even the commentary on *Vinaya* says, to a minimum extent, that one can become *Anagami*, the third noble one.

The best reference here to cite is: "Ime ca subhadda bhikkhu samma vihareyyum, asunno loko arahantehi assa, "Oh Subhadda," said the Buddha, "as long as there are monks who practice properly, this world will never be empty of arahats." We can find, in these days too, those who practice in a proper way

under good guidance. So I am sure, the world is not empty even now, of noble persons including arahats.

("A Talk on Maha-sati-patthana" on radio, p.68)

Q 44: Venerable Sir, can you describe what one's experience of magga-phala enlightenment is like?

One's mental state changes remarkably and abruptly when he or she realizes Magga, Phala enlightenment. He or she may feel as if he or she were newly reborn. His or her faith and confidence distinctly flourish resulting in strong rapture, ecstasy and great happiness. Sometimes, these mental states prevail so much that he or she cannot penetrate into objects like before even though he or she focuses attention on them. Hours or days later, however, such mental states tend to be mild, and he or she can do well again in the practice. For some people, they may feel relaxed; or apparently unwilling to practice; or seemingly satisfied with what they have just achieved probably because they might not intend to achieve higher.

(Summary On How To Practice Vipassana, P.55)

Q 45: Venerable Sir, is it true that for learned persons, their knowledge forms an obstacle to the progress in their practice?

No, it's not suitable to say so. It is impossible that one's knowledge is an obstacle to the practice. As you may know, a highly learned monk called Potthila became an *Arahat* sooner rather than later, by practicing under the guidance of a young novice. In view of this, it is clear that one's education or knowledge cannot be an obstruction to the progress in the practice.

As a matter of fact, the real obstacles are pride in one's education or knowledge, little or no faith in the practice, skeptical doubt, failure to follow strictly the guidance of the teacher, lack of heroic effort and so on. Such are real obstacles to the development of concentration and insight knowledge.

(The Progress of Vipassana, p107)

Q 46: Venerable Sir, is there any difference between meditators and non-meditators when they face with a painful illness?

Yes, of course. Non-meditator can only remember to take precepts, to listen to the Paritta chanting, to donate robes or food and so on. What a pity, they can only perform charity and morality! As for meditators, they remember to perform high-level practice until they become enlightened by noting closely their discomfort itself moment to moment.

(A Talk As a greeting io Shwe Bo)

Q 47: Venerable Sir, is there any kind of pain or discomfort which belongs to the practice itself? If so, how do we have to deal with it?

Yes, you may experience several kinds of unpleasant sensations like itchiness, heat, pain, ache, heaviness, stiffness and so on when your concentration gets very strong. They tend to disappear once you stop practice. But, they may reappear if you resume your practice. Then, that is surely not a disease or illness, but just unpleasant sensation which belongs to the practice. Don't worry. If you keep on noting, eventually it will fade away.

(How to Practice Vipassana II, p. 19)

Q 48: Venerable Sir, what are we supposed to note when the rising and falling fade away?

When the rising and falling fade away, you are supposed to note: "sitting, touching", or "laying, touching". You can change touching points. For example, you note "sitting and touching" paying attention to a touch point on the right foot, and then note "sitting, touching" focusing a touching point on the left foot. Thus, you can shift your attention from one touch point to another. Or, you can shift your attention to four, five or six touch points alternately.

(How to Practice Vipassana II. p. 17)

Q 49: Venerable Sir, should we misist on practice without spiritual aptitude (*Parami*) strong enough for *Magga*, *Phala* enlighter nent?

If you do not practice, your spiritual aptitude (*Pārami*) can, by no means, be formed. In other words, even if your *pārami* is fully accumulated, you cannot be enlightened without practice. On the other hand, if you practice, your *pārami* will be formed, which will help you experience Nibbana sooner. If your *pārami* is fully developed, you will be enlightened in this very life. Or it will serve, at least, as a seed for enlightenment in the future.

(How to Practice Vipassana II, p.47)

Q 50: Venerable Sir, can you describe someone who, you believe, experienced Nibbana?

Yes, I can. Among those who first practiced under my guidance, my cousin called U Pho Chon was impressive. When he reached the stage of *bhanga-ňāna* (the fifth level of Vipassana insight), he started to find trees or people fluxing. He thought something was wrong with his view because he had learned from a teacher that things like a tree, log, post, stone, human body, etc., last for a due period, while physical phenomena caused by one's *kamma*, or mind, passed away immediately after they arose. On the contrary, he saw, at that time, things flux.

So he came and asked me what was wrong with his view. I encouraged him saying that nothing was wrong with his view, but it was *bhanga-ňāna*(the fifth level of Vipassana insight), which helped him to see things passing away immediately. After a few days, he clearly described his experience of Nibbana, the cessation of mind and body. (To Protect the Buddha's Sasanā from Dangers, p. 75)

Q 51: Venerable Sir, what are the descriptions of *Nibbana* made by those who, you believe, have attained it?

Some descriptions of *Nibbana* made by those who, I believed, realized it, are as follows:

- 1. I found objects and noting mind to cease abruptly.
- 2. I discovered that objects and noting mind were cut off like a creeper chopped down.
- 3. I saw objects and noting mind fall down immediately like a heavy burden unloaded.
- 4. I perceived objects and noting mind drop down as if I lost my hold on them.
- 5. I felt as if I escaped from objects and noting mind.
- 6. I found out that objects and noting mind ceased abruptly like a candle light blown out.
- 7. I felt as if I got out of the objects and noting mind, like coming into the light out of the darkness.

- 8. I felt that I escaped the objects and noting mind, as if I got into clarity from obscurity.
- 9. I found both objects and noting mind submerged as if they were to sink into the water.
- 10. I discovered that both objects and noting mind stopped suddenly like a sprinter who was pushed back from the front.
- 11. I found both objects and noting mind disappeared suddenly.

(How to Practice Vipassana II, p. 38)

Q 52: Venerable Sir, how many people do you believe to be enlightened under your guidance?

I believe there are thousands of people who have reached, within a week, the insight knowledge distinguishing between mind and body from one's own experience, by practicing strictly as instructed, and arousing strong concentration. And also there are thousands of those who experience mind and body interacting and constantly changing, i.e., cause and effect, and impermanence, suffering and egolessness of the phenomena. And also there are thousands of people who are believed to accomplish *Magga*, *Phala* enlightenment after they have developed mature insight knowledge by observing mind and body moment to moment.

(The discourse on Sakka-panna Sutta, p. 133)

Q 53: Venerable Sir, is it realization of impermanence, when we see, for example, a pot break down, or of suffering when we have a pain caused by a thorn in our flesh?

Sometimes, you discern impermanence when you find a pot break down, or suffering when you have a pain caused by a thorn in your flesh. That is, actually conventional knowledge of impermanence, which cannot help you to realize egolessness in an ultimate sense.

On the other hand, the real realization of impermanence takes place when you see present phenomena arising and passing away, and that of suffering when you see them tortured by the flux. Only then, can you realize the egolessness in an ultimate sense.

(The discourse on The Eight-fold Noble Path, p.77)

Q 54: Venerable Sir, can you describe how we are supposed to realize egolessness in an ultimate sense?

Some believe that realization of egolessness takes place if or when you lose your sense of body shape or form by visualizing physical body as particles. Actually, it is not the realization of egolessness that you merely lose the sense of solidity or form of the body by practicing whatever way. It is because you are clearly experiencing the knowing mind, and identifying it with "I" or ego. This is similar to the celestial beings called *arupa brahama*, who have no physical body, but still mistake their mind for "I" or ego. So the mere loss of sense of solid form cannot mean realization of egolessness.

Only when you observe mind and body the moment they take place, and see them arising and passing away on their own accord, without anyone's authority, do you realize the egolessness in an ultimate sense.

(The discourse on Sila-vanta Sutta, P. 142)

Q 55: Venerable Sir, what do we have to do to realize impermanence of mind and body?

If you watch mind and body moment to moment, you are bound to experience true characteristics of phenomena, and to see them starting to arise, and vanishing immediately.

(The discourse on the Eight-fold Noble Path, p.71)

Q 56: Venerable Sir, which touching point should we note among others?

Any touching point is possible to note. If you note, for instance, a touching on one's buttock as 'touching, touching', that is correct; note it on one's knee, as 'touching, touching', that is correct; note it on one's hands as 'touching, touching', that is correct; note it on one's head as 'touching, touching', that is correct; note in-and-out breath as 'touching, touching, touching', that is correct; note it in one's intestines or liver as 'touching, touching', that is correct; note it on one's abdomen as 'touching, touching', that is correct; note it on one's abdomen as 'touching, touching', that is correct.

(The discourse on Vammika Sutta, p. 180)

Q 57: Venerable Sir, should we rather observe stiffness, motion or movement when walking if we are supposed to be aware of the characteristics?

The Buddha said: "Be aware of going, when going". When we walk, the *air-element* prevails, which is experienced as pressure, or stiffness in terms of its characteristics, or motion, pushing or movement in terms of its function. The Buddha, however, did not instruct us to note it as 'pressure', 'stiffness', 'movement', 'motion' or 'pushing'.

The Buddha's actual instruction is: "Be aware of going, when going". That's all. The reason is he wanted to give the easy and understandable way. Noting in conventional language is quite familiar and easy to every body, of course.

(The discourse on Vammika Sutta, p. 192)

Q 58: Venerable Sir, is it true that by realizing impermanence, one is supposed to spontaneously appreciate suffering and egolessness?

Yes, indeed. Whatever is impermanent is regarded to be suffering, and at the same time, egoless. Actually they are in an ultimate sense the five aggregates constituted of mental and physical phenomena although they have different names.

(The discourse on Vammika Sutta, p. 257)

Q 59: Venerable Sir, it is, some say, unreasonable that a meditation teacher is unable to confirm that so and so yogi among his students becomes Sotapanna. Is that true?

Yes, it may be unreasonable from their point of view, but it is very appropriate to *Sāsana* tradition, that a meditation teacher is not able to confirm that so and so person among his yogis becomes *Sotāpanna*. The Buddha is the only one in this position, to confirm someone's enlightenment, such as *sotā-panna*, *sakadā-gāmi*, *anā-gami or arahat*. Even Venerable Sāriputra never did it that way. So we never do this way, either. This is the appropriate way in the *Sāsana* tradition.

(The discourse on Sallekha Sutta, p. 193)

Q 60: Venerable Sir, is it not too soon for one to describe his or her progress of Vipassana insights within a month or so?

No, it is not too soon because the Buddha claimed that his method is excellent enough to help one to become *anāgami* or *arahat* even within a week. So, if someone states that it is impossible to bring about enlightenment within a month no matter how intensively a yogi practices, then he is blemishing the Buddha's teaching, and hindering people from practice.

(The discourse on Salleka Sutta, p. 192)

Tha-ma-nay-kyaw November 17, 2001

Translated by Hla Myint Kyaw January 21, 2002



AR INTERVIEW WITH MANAYKYAW

Than Myint Aung