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Traditional practice of meditation in Myanmar

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Abstract:

Myanmar is one of the Theravāda Buddhist countries and the meditation practice also is very influence among Buddhist people. Therefore, there have been a lot of meditation centers, many scholars of meditation techniques. All meditation centers are followed the methods of Buddha by Theravāda view. The main aim and objective of this study are to criticize and analyze the meditation, such as *Samatha* meditation and *vipassanā* meditation by the focusing of the traditional ways to practice the meditation in Myanmar. The practice of meditation is to eliminate the defilements (*kilesas*) and to attain *nibbāna* (liberation). The research problem is to point out the situation of traditional meditation and how the practice was developed and how to reduce the stress of the people in Myanmar.

According to the historical Canonicals, meditation practice started on the Buddha's time. In Myanmar, Ledi Sayadaw who wrote a lot of books (*Dīpanī*) started to practice meditation in the Centre. Then, Mahasi Sayadaw established the Meditation Centre in Yangon. The technique is the intensive of *vipassanā* practice. Another one is Pa- Auk Taw Ya Meditation Centre and the founder is Sayadaw U Āciṇṇa. The practical method is based on the concentration meditation (*Samatha bhāvana*). Here, many Meditation Centers are left in this study because of time situation. So, I will explain these three meditation teachers as much as I can. Therefore, to reduce all the stress, meditation practice is very famous for Myanmar Buddhism who follows the traditional ways. If someone has used to practice the meditation, the environment was very peace and the people were unity.

Keyword: *Samatha*, *Vipassanā*, traditional method, mental health, peace and unity

Introduction

Myanmar is one of the Theravāda Buddhist countries in South East Asia. Meditation practices gain widespread acceptance by Buddhists in Myanmar. Many meditation centres and techniques have been modified by its Theravādan masters who focus on the techniques of *Samatha* and *vipassanā*. Before going further to the discussion, firstly, I give a short of the background of Myanmar. The practitioners who are mostly from foreign countries have the common problems such as misinterpreted the techniques that they had learnt and some became madness; they did not have the best guidance and given up in the middle process, etc. Hence, my research questions are:

1. Are the meditation techniques based on the concept of masters themselves or a genuine Theravada tradition?
2. Is it true that by doing meditation regularly, able to earn the mental happiness?

And the aims are to analyze the meditation skills in each center and to enhance a unity within society. The objective of the Buddha is to emphasize the disciples in doing meditation, to purify the mind that freed from five hindrances, cankers and reaching the final goal, it is *nibbāna*.

The history background of meditation in Myanmar

According to *Sāsanavaṃsa*, over 2500 years ago, the Buddha, the supreme one, appeared in this world and preached the *Dhamma*, the teachings, all of His life at many places including Myanmar. After finished the Third Buddhist Council, the situation of Buddha *sāsanā* was brighten again in Myanmar. Later, in Pagan Period, king Anuruddha believed Theravada Buddhism and supported the *sāsanā*. Therefore, the Theravāda Buddhism is very influence in Myanmar till now.

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According to the duty of monk, he has two kinds of duties: teaching the *Dhamma* (*gantha dūra*) and practice of meditation (*vipassanā dūra*). King Mindon started and interested to practice meditation so he encouraged his followers to repetition meditation. Thus, a lot of meditation methods and teachers were appeared in Myanmar. In this paper, I will point out the traditional practice of some meditation teachers and methods such as Ledi Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, Pa Auk Sayadaw, and so on.

Traditional practice of ledi sayadaw (1846- 1923)



The picture of Ledi Sayadaw

During the period king Mindon, Ledi Sayadaw, U Nana, who was the eldest famous teacher found the theory of *Dhamma* (*pariyatti*) and the practice of *Dhamma* (*patipati*). In 1882, Sayadaw moved from Mandalay to Monywa. Then, in day time, he taught the *Dhamma* to the monks and novices and in the night, he practiced meditation on the side of Lakpantaung Mountain. In 1886, he went to Ledi forest and established the Leditawya Monastery where was built for laity to practice meditation. Ledi sayadaw shared the taste of *Dhamma* which could be realized through *vipassanā* meditation in traditional ways: with *ānāpāna* (respiration) and *vedanā* (sensation). At first, the meditator needed the undertaking of tranquility (*samātha*) meditation then upgrading to insight (*vipassanā*) meditation.

Over ten years of practicing, he published the first book, *paramattha dipani* (Manual of Ultimate Truth), that based on the *Visuddhimagga* and commentaries to spread the *Dhamma* to all levels of society in 1897. Therefore, his fame spread not only within Myanmar but also across the world through his well-known compilation treatises on various fields in Buddhism. Among his lineage, there were many well-known monks and lay meditation teachers such as Venerable Mohynin Sayadaw (1872- 1964), Theik- chaung Sayadaw (1871- 1931), Nānacāgī Sayadaw (1901- unknown), Anāgam Sayā Thet Gyi (1873- 1946), Sayāgyi U Ba Khin (1899-1971), Shri S.N Goenka (1924- 2013) and so on.

Traditional practice of mahasi sayadaw (1904- 1982)



The picture of Mahasi Sayadaw

After the sixth Buddhist Council, Mahāsi Sayadaw, U Sobhana, who developed “New Burmese Method” became one of the famous *vipassanā* meditation masters in Myanmar. In 1949, he founded a *Thathana Yeiktha* meditation center in Yangon installing by government. Sayadaw trained the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna* meditation for two years in 1937-1938 from Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw (1868- 1955) who was the foremost meditation master and also recovered meditation from Ledi Sayadaw. They followed just Theravāda Tradition and there did not have any direct traditional lineage masters in that time. Mahāsi Sayadaw did a revolution in *vipassanā* meditation practice and newly introduced his meditation technique which was focusing on rising and falling of abdomen. This technique is the starting point for meditator and this is his own practical method: *satipathāna vipassanā* meditation.

Mahāsi meditation method skipped *Samatha* and *jhānas* then trained to *vipassanā* directly because by practicing of *vipassanā* could develop *jhānas* automatically. The masters of meditation who were the pupils of Mahāsi Sayadaw went to propagate Mahāsi meditation method to abroad including Sri Lanka in 1956. Therefore, Mahāsi meditation method has been widely spread around the world and known the most-practiced *vipassanā* meditation nowadays. There are many lovely meditation teachers who were the pupils of Mahāsi Sayadaw such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍitābhivaṃsa (1921- 2016), Sayadaw U Kuṇḍalābhivaṃsa (1921- 2011), Sayadaw U Silanandābhivaṃsa (1927- 2005), Chanmyay Sayadaw and so on.

Traditional practice of pa- auk sayadaw (1934----)



The picture of Pa- Auk Sayadaw

Another famous meditation teacher who did revolution in *Samatha* meditation practice in Myanmar was Pa- Auk Sayadaw. His technique is based on *Visudhimagga* and meditator must start with *Samatha* meditation. Because *Samatha* is the basic of meditation and it can develop deep and powerful concentration and then continue *vipassanā* meditation. Therefore, Pa- Auk meditation method starts *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness-of-breathing) and then need to continue another forty kinds of *Samatha* meditation. Even though the teacher of Pa-Auk Sayadaw was Mahāsi Sayadaw and Sayadaw Paṇḍita, he did not accept to practice *vipassanā* meditation first. According to *Visuddhimagga* in Theravāda Tradition, he practiced systematically and encouraged to practice his followers this *Samatha* methods. So, his technique was criticized previously but, it is widely accepted and enhances a lot of branches of meditation centers around the world now. Many people (foreigner and local) came and practiced the meditation in whole year.

The enhancement of mental health

There are many benefits of meditation for mental health and physical health. Such as promote emotional health, enhance self-awareness, reduce stress, control anxiety, and so on. For example, one of my teachers who practices meditation seriously has big kidney problem. But, when we see him, he looks healthy and can go here and there. For non-yogis, they may be laid on the bed and unable do anything properly. So, meditation practice has an ability to reduce mental and physical problems. In the time of pandemic of Covid- 19, I had attacked by Covid- 19 and many people had also similar problems. When I got Covid-19, I went to the hospital and took medicine. And I did home quarantine and practiced meditation at least four hours to check my ventilation and calm mind per day. Therefore, my situation is recovered very soon. That is why, I would like to encourage all my friends to practice meditation for mental and physical health in the free time of our life.

Conclusion

According to the canonical, mostly the meditation masters are mastery in the teaching of Buddha and practiced themselves following the method of Theravāda Buddhism for a long time. The methods are shared to the people who interest in practicing meditation and contributed upon the publications by their standard. Without the practical of meditation, the experts cannot teach the right method to reduce mental illness such as stress, anxiety, purify the mind and free from hindrances (*nīvarana*) and defilements (*kilesasa*), and attain *nibbāna* at last.

Therefore, the scholar Myanmar monkhood invented the meditation systems deal with their standard of *Samatha* and *vipassanā* meditations in Theravāda Tradition and extended the meditation centers even in abroad. The meditation practice can probably purify the mind and free from hindrances (*nīvarana*) and defilements (*kilesasa*), and attain *nibbāna* at last. The mental and physical of human beings are interconnected each other. Thus, by doing meditation practice, people can contribute well to mental health and also enhance the peace of mind and live-in harmony among society.

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