

Gems of Mahāsi Thought

(One day Retreat April 4, 1998)

I would like read to you some selections from this book. This book contains selections from Mahāsi Sayādaw's discourses. There are many books by Mahāsi Sayādaw. But most books were originally talks he gave on different occasions. And many of those talks were transcribed and edited and published as books. That is why in Burmese his books are not so difficult to read and understand.

This is the selections from his books in English and published by the Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka. Mahāsi Sayādaw taught on different subjects. Actually he based his talks on a discourse given by the Buddha and explained it in detail and also with the reference to the actual practice of meditation. That is why his talks are unique in that he always related to the practice. Here some of his talks which we will call "Gems of Mahāsi Thought".

The first one I want to read to you is called "Putting knowledge into practice". For Buddhists practice is most important because Buddha's Teachings are like medicine. We must take the medicine if we want to enjoy the benefits of that medicine. Just having medicine or just knowing about medicine will not help us to get rid of ailments or illness. In the same way Buddha's Teachings are for practice. Only when we practice His Teachings, can we enjoy benefit from the practice. Here Sayādaw talked about putting knowledge into practice. He said,

"According to the Buddha, knowledge relating to the Noble Path transport one to the stage where all suffering ceases. But it must always be borne in mind that the path offers salvation only to those who actually practice it. In your travels a vehicle takes you to your destination, but those who stand by it are left behind. Knowledge about the Noble path is like that vehicle. If you ride in it, you will be conveyed to your destination. And if you merely stand by it, you will be left behind. Those who desire to be liberated from all sufferings should use that vehicle. That is to say they should use knowledge they gained for practical purposes. The most important task for you while you were born in this dispensation is to practice dhamma so that you reach Nibbāna where all sufferings cease.

Buddha's Teachings are always aimed at helping beings get out of suffering or get rid of suffering. If we want to get rid of suffering, Sayādaw said, "We should practice what the Buddha talked. Only when we practice His Teachings, can we get the benefits of His Teachings."

When we practice, sometimes we have doubts about the practice. Is it really true that just by paying attention to the objects at the present, we can see their true nature or we penetrate into the true nature of things? I think everybody has such doubts. In one of his talks, Sayādaw said, he also had doubts about the practice. He said,

"Some people who have never meditated may have some doubt. And no wonder. For only seeing is believing and their skepticism is due to their lack of experience. When you have not experienced yourself, you may have doubts about the practice." And Sayādaw said,

"I myself was a skeptic at one time. I did not then like the Satipaṭṭhāna method as it makes no mention of Nēmar|pa anicca, anatta and so forth. But the teacher who taught the

method was a learned monk. And so I decided to give it a try. At first I made little progress because I still had a lingering doubt about the method which in my view had nothing to do with ultimate reality. It was only later on when I had followed the method seriously, that its significance dawned on me. I realized then that it is the best method of meditation since it calls for attentiveness to everything that is to be known, leaving no room for absent mindedness. So the Buddha described the Satipaṭṭhāna method as the only way."

In those days people thought that when you talked about Dhamma or when you teach you had to use the technical terms. If you did not use high words and just used everyday language, people did not think much about your talk. In the practice also, people want to use the words like Nāmarūpa; mind and matter, impermanence and so on. But it seemed that the teacher who taught Mahasi Sayadaw did not deliberately use those words. He used only the everyday language. At first people did not like him because they thought that teacher was making the Dhamma seem cheap, or something like that. But later on when they followed his instructions and practiced and began to get results, they followed him.

Mahasi Sayadaw was also at first doubtful about that method. Because that teacher did not use the words from the scriptures. But that Sayadaw, I mean the teacher of Mahasi Sayadaw, was a very learned and famous teacher. So Mahasi Sayadaw wanted to give the method a try. He practiced it, but a little progress in the beginning because he had not cleared his doubts about the method. Later on he followed the method seriously and so he came to see the efficacy of that method.

It is important that we do not have doubts about the method. If we have, we need to remove the doubts by reading books or by having discussions with the teachers or some knowledgeable persons. If doubt arises during your practice, then what must you do?

Just make that doubt the object of attention. That means just take that doubt as an object and be mindful of it or make mental notes as 'doubt', 'doubt', 'doubt' or 'doubting', 'doubting', 'doubting'. There is no other way when you have sat down and practiced meditation. But before you practice meditation, if you have doubts about the method, then you can read books and talk with other people who can help you remove your doubts.

The next selection I am going to read is about physical pain. Sayadaw said mindfulness practice is a very effective remedy for physical pain. He said, "If you suffer from ill-health or disease, and if you have no other remedy to alleviate the pain and suffering, the meditational practice upon the suffering of illness can give at least some relief, if it cannot give you a complete cure." If the pain and suffering remain in your body, the meditational practice can render relief to your mind. But if you are angry or irritated by the physical suffering, your mind will suffer too.

Buddha compared this cure suffering to being pierced by two thorns at the same time. Let us say a man has a thorn in his flesh and he tries to extract the thorn by piercing another thorn into his flesh. The second thorn breaks into the flesh without being able to extract the first thorn. Then the man suffers the pain from two thorns at the same time. So also a person who cannot make a note of the physical pain in a meditational manner, suffers both physical and mental pain. But if he can ponder well upon the physical pain, that means if he can

practice mindfulness on the physical pain, he will suffer only that pain and will not suffer mental pain. This kind of suffering only physical pain is like that suffered by the Buddha and Arahants. For they too suffer from physical pain, they suffer from the ill-effects of heat and cold, insect bites, and other kinds of discomfort. Though they suffer from physical Dukkha or physical pain, their minds remain stable. They do not suffer mental pain. The meditation method is a very effective remedy for physical pain and suffering.

Sayadaw said, "If you have no other remedy to alleviate pain and suffering ..." Sayadaw did not want to substitute meditational practice for medical treatment. "If you have physical pain, you can get it treated by medical methods. But if there is no other remedy, then try this mindfulness practice. By practicing mindfulness on the pain itself, the pain may go away. If you persevere on noting the pain, and when your concentration gets stronger, pain may disappear. Even chronic diseases have been reported to have been cured or removed by the practice of Vipassanā meditation."

When you try to be mindful of the pain, you begin to see pain clearly. You see what pain is, and that it arises and disappears. Pain is impermanent. Then you do not feel mental pain; you just experience physical pain and physical body. Your mind is not disturbed. When your mind is not disturbed, you are pierced only by one thorn. If your mind is disturbed and you are irritated, you are sorry, you are depressed, then you are doubly suffering. Buddha compared it to a man suffering from two thorns. First there is a thorn in the flesh and then he tries to take the thorn with another thorn and so he suffers twice.

When you are suffering from some kind of pain, and there is no other way to get rid of it, and try practicing mindfulness of Vipassanā meditation. The doctors in this country are now finding that mindfulness practice is very beneficial to their patients. They are prescribing mindfulness meditation to patients who are suffering from chronic pain and depression and even cancer and so on. They found out that mindfulness method is the best to deal with such chronic illnesses. I think at some hospitals there are classes or courses that teach patients to practice mindfulness.

The next one is about depression. We should keep in mind the law of Kamma or the Buddha's Teaching that everything happens according to one's actions and bear our misfortunes calmly. The best remedy in a crisis is the practice of Samatha (calm meditation) or Vipassanā (insight meditation). If sorrow, grief or depression afflicts us during hours, such unwholesome states of consciousness must be noted and removed. Buddha described that Satipaṭṭhāna is the only way to get over grief and to end all suffering. So long as we keep ourselves mindful according to Satipaṭṭhāna Teaching, depression may not arise at all. Or if it arises, it passes away when we force our attention on it. This is one way of dealing with emotions, not only depression actually. But Sayadaw was talking here about depression.

When you feel sorrow or grief or depression, then what you should do is to note at that state of mind or to be mindful of it or to make mental note. If you are depressed, then turn that depression into useful object of meditation or turn your attention to it or be mindful of it or make mental notes as 'depression', 'depression' or 'depress', 'depress', or 'sorry', 'sorry' or 'grieving', 'grieving'. When your concentration gets strong, then it will disappear. Because

when you are aware of depression, actually it has already passed. But it seems to stay longer because it repeats. It comes back now and then. If you are mindful of it, it disappears. And then it comes back again and again. You are dwelling on it and you are making notes on it when it comes back. In the end your concentration gets stronger and you are able to remove it or get rid of it. So when you feel depressed or other feelings as sorrow, grief, try practicing mindfulness on it.

And despair. Some meditators are reluctant because of their weak concentration at the outset. But as a result some redouble their effort and attain unusual insight. So the meditator may benefit by his despair at the stage. That is using despair as a springboard, and not giving up. But using despair as a springboard, he can make more effort and attain insight and so on. So meditator may benefit by his despair at this stage. According to the commentaries, we should welcome the despair that results from the non-fulfillment of desire and connect with renunciation, meditation, reflection, and Jhāna and so on. Sometimes we do not get to practice renunciation or we do not get to practice meditation. We feel depressed and despair. Such despair can motivate us to real practice.

Buddha said this kind of sorrow is to be welcomed. This kind of sorrow when it comes from frustration over any effort to promote one spiritual life such as the effort to join the holy order, the effort to attain insight and so forth. We should welcome such sorrow, for it may spur effort and lead to progress on the path. The best thing is to have wholesome joy in the search for enlightenment. But sometimes despair does arise in our minds. So when there is despair, when there is something like frustration because you cannot concentrate and so on, then you make that despair the object of meditation. Such despair is here said persuadable or maybe acceptable or to be welcomed. So not all despairs or not all these unpleasant feelings are bad. They are bad in their nature but we can use them as to spur more effort to get rid of them.

Then strenuous effort. Strenuous, relentless efforts in meditation practices for achievement of concentration and insight should not be misconceived as a form of self-torture. Leaving aside meditation practices -- even the keeping of moral precepts which may entail some physical discomfort and abstention -- is not to be regarded as a practice of self-mortification. You know Buddha taught the Middle Way; avoiding the two extremes indulging in sensual pleasures on the one hand and self-mortification on the other.

There are some people who think if you do something entailing some sacrifice or something, then you are torturing yourself. When you keep precepts, you are torturing yourself. So it is self-mortification [according to them]. When you practice meditation, you are torturing yourself. And it is self-mortification. But Sayadaw said that it is not to be taken in that way. It is not to be regarded as a practice of self-mortification. In the practice of concentration and insight meditation, patience as self-control plays an important role. You have to be patient with everything. It is an important factor for the successful practice. Unpleasant physical discomfort should be borne with patience. The self control practiced thus is not self-mortification and as much as its core is not afflicting and enduring of pain but once progress in virtue, concentration and wisdom as enjoyed by the Buddha.

Some people say, "When you have pain and you try to bear it and you are torturing yourself. So it is self-mortification and not to be practiced." But actually we have to practice, forbearance. If we patiently try to be mindful of the pain rather than making changes will get concentration. But we make changes very often, we cannot get concentration. So patience is very important when you practice meditation and it can help us to get concentration. So patience as self-control should be practiced every where, especially when we practice meditation. Although we are not to make too much effort, we need to a great effort and a strenuous and sustained effort to get concentration.

Then about insight knowledge. Insight knowledge or Vipassanā knowledge is attained by observing the actions of mind and body, or mind and matter in the state of impermanence, suffering and no-self. It is not attained simply by casual observation but by indirect observation of the actions as they are happening without leaving anyone of them unobserved. Thus the observation should be on all actions such as seeing, hearing, smelling, eating and so on as they are happening and without failing to observe any single action. That is why we have to be mindful of every action however small it may be. Because in Vipassanā there is nothing which is not important, everything is important. So we have to be mindful of every action; great or small.

Here Sayadaw said insight knowledge is attained by observed the actions of mind and matter in the state of impermanence and so on. Only when you observe the objects observed mind and matter when they arise and when they are existing, can you see them clearly and can you see their true nature. The observation should be on all actions; seeing, hearing, smelling, eating, etc. as they are happening. That is as they arise and without failing you observe any single action. We must make our minds to be mindful of every action without failing to observe any single action. But we do miss. Sometimes we forget to be mindful. Sometimes we get rid of our thoughts, say after thirty seconds or maybe even one minute. We remember all and then cut it away. In that case we are not guilty. We should acknowledge that forgetting or missing by making notes as 'forgetting', 'forgetting', or 'missing', 'missing' two or three times before we go back to the home object. Forgetting or missing is also an object of Vipassanā meditation, because this failure to be mindful is a mental state. We have to be mindful of it.

I can go reading on this selections but the tape is finished. If you have a copy of this book, I think it is very good to read it, not during practice but at moments. It is good to read because they are short excerpts. Today we practice meditation from 8 am to 6.30 pm the whole day. And by practice meditation we gain a lot of merit because Buddha said mindfulness is a heap of merits. How much merit we get? Nobody can tell because as you know billions of thought moments can arise and disappear in a second.

Today we spent how many hours?

About ten hours?

Yes, about ten hours. So we get a lot of merit and it is good to share merit with other beings. Sharing merit means to let other beings get chance to get merit themselves by having them rejoice at our merit. So sharing merit is we say to them, "Please share our merit and if they accept our merit, and if they acknowledge, the acceptance of our merit then they them-

selves get merit and they will enjoy the benefits of merit. So it is always good practice to share merit with other beings whenever we do meritorious deeds such as practicing charity, or keeping moral precepts or practicing meditation. And merit gained through meditation is said to be the best of merit. So now we will share merits with all beings. So please repeat after me.

May all beings share this merit,
which we have thus acquired.
For the acquisition of
all kinds of happiness.

May beings inhabiting space and earth,
Deities and others of mighty power,
Share this merit of ours!
May they long protect the Teachings.

SĒdhu! SĒdhu! SĒdhu!