

**The interface of samatha and vipassanā in the Insight Meditation methods of
Goenka, Mahāsī, Mogok and Pa Auk**

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Abstract: This article traces interface among four renowned Burmese masters of the Insight Meditation Movement, its political-historical context, and their distinct theoretical understandings and practical ways of dealing with two interrelated aspects of meditation: samatha (concentration) and vipassanā (wisdom). Two main approaches are found: samatha as a preparation for vipassanā, and vipassanā without samatha as a prerequisite. Whereas Goenka and Mogok promulgate a short practice of samatha, Pa Auk focuses on achieving the four jhanās (deep samatha absorption) before vipassanā can be practiced. By contrast, Mahāsī teaches vipassanā without preparatory samatha (dry insight), as momentary concentration develops the required level for insight practice.

Keywords: vipassana; insight meditation; Goenka; Mahasi; Mogok; Pa Auk

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Introduction

The Insight (*Vipassanā*) Meditation movement is a meditation revival Buddhist movement of the Theravāda tradition from Myanmar which has started in the mid XIX century in response to the pressure of the implementation of the English language and Christianity, under British colonization. In order to reorganize the Buddhist communities, in 1871 the 5th Buddhist Council was organized, in which, different from all the other councils, just Burmese monks attended. On that occasion the monk Ledi Sayādaw (1843 – 1896) stood out and in the following decades he has implemented relevant changes in the way meditation was being taught, many of them regarding to the spread of the meditation among lay people. Although the first meditation center had been constructed in 1911 by the other main monk of the meditation revival in Myanmar, Mingun Zetawun Sayādaw (1869-1954), the movement came to perceive a relevant development just after the II World War, mainly after the organization of the 6th Buddhist Council in 1954.

In the monastic traditions up to the time of Ledi, devotional practices, reciting the Suttas and following the Vinaya² (the code of conduct) were the main practices, and, hence, achieving *Nibbāna*³ at that specific time was no longer strongly believed among the community members, as states Braun: “The believe that attaining *Nibbāna* was impossible in these degenerate days was a common one at the Theravāda world at the time”. (Braun 2013,

² The Theravada Buddhist canon is composed by three series of books: (i) Sutta Piṭaka, composed by five speech collections (*nikāya*), attributed to Siddharta Gautama, the historical Buddha; (ii) Vinaya Piṭaka, which is the ethical code, composed by two books; (iii) and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, composed by seven books, which are later teachings, more technical and analytical than the sutras, considered the Buddhist metaphysics.

³ The transliteration of Pali and Sanskrit words follows IAST (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration).

29)⁴ In contrast, one of the main characteristics of the *vipassanā* movement was putting back the meditation as the main practice, as it can be noticed by comparing the timetables of the monasteries before and after the revival.⁵ (Bond 1992, 153). Furthermore, a long and deep previous theoretical knowledge was no longer required to begin the meditation practice, although the learning of the Abhidhamma as the students advance in the practice was advocated (Braun 2013, 137).

In this *vipassanā* tradition, there are two main types of meditation, or we should say, interrelated practices: concentration or tranquility meditation, known as *samatha*, and insight or wisdom meditation, known as *vipassanā* (Houtman 1990, 176). Whereas in *samatha* the concern is in developing concentration, focusing on just one object and ignoring all the others, therefore calming the mind, *vipassanā* the attention and the awareness are directed to whatever objects arise in mind, developing wisdom by seeing and known the Three Marks of Existence (*tilakkhaṇa*): impermanence (*anicca*), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and egolessness or non-self (*anattā*) in the inseparable relation of the mind-matter (*nāma-rūpa*) phenomena (Mahāsī 1991, 202).

⁴ It must be noted that *Nibbāna* is understood in two moments: the *saupādisesa* (in-life enlightenment or *Nibbāna* with a reminder – meaning the five aggregates or *kandhā* are still present), which is attained during life, and the *anupādisesa-nibbāna* (post-life enlightenment or *Nibbāna* with no reminder), related to *paranibbāna*. According to the author, at the time before the modern *vipassanā* schools and mass meditation movement – beginning of XX century – the monks believed that the only option to achieve *Nibbāna* was to perform enough merits to be reborn in the presence of the future Buddha, called Maitreya. (Braun 2013, 2) Therefore, it can be inferred that, in general, the monks did not expect to attain any of those *Nibbāna* stages.

⁵ Although Bond's (1992) analysis is on the Insight Movement in Sri Lanka, both countries faced similar phenomena.

The relationship between both practices also faced some changes with the Insight Movement, and not so much time was given to the practice of *samatha* techniques, or none in some cases. Such change in the approach responded to the needs to suit it to the political and social demands of spreading the meditation among the laity and diving deeper into it among the monks and nuns (Houtman 1990, 184). The result was the spread of the *vipassanā* meditation to the point that presently it is called in some circles as ‘the mass insight meditation movement’ (Jordt 2017).

Presently there are a various⁶ masters who teach *vipassanā* in Myanmar and worldwide and who have different approaches regarding the relationship between *samatha* and *vipassanā*. Based on the method of some prominent and renowned masters of the movement, there are two main approaches worth taking into consideration: first the hierarchical and most widespread, which the *samatha* practice serves as a base for *vipassanā*; and second the practice of *vipassanā* without previous *samatha* techniques, known as dry-insight, supported by the view that the *vipassanā* itself develops the required concentration (Nimala 2007; Analāyo 2012; Wen 2009; Oosterwijk 2014; Kornfield 2007).

It is a common practice in Myanmar, both for monks and lay people, to experiment and debate about different methods, thus adding new knowledges from each one and, at some point, choosing which one best fits to them, or perhaps developing their own way of practice. Inspired by such tradition, this article aims to compare the relationship between *samatha* and *vipassanā* among four renowned masters of the Insight Movement, not just stating the focus, amount of time and effort spent in each meditation – which has been greatly shown by

⁶ Oosterwijk (2012) describes twenty-one *vipassanā* methods from different teachers.

several scholars⁷ – but describing and analyzing their methods as well the organizational aspects of the retreats. Then, as far as it is possible, I wish to draw some conclusions outlooking the interfaces among them.

Based on the recognition in Myanmar and abroad and on the different approaches regarding the relationship between both aspects of the meditation, the four following masters seem to be the most appropriate for this study:

(1) Mahāsī Sayādaw (1904 – 1982), from the lineage of Mingun Sayādaw, is the most known and influential in Myanmar, and teaches pure *vipassanā* without a previous *samatha* preparation, with focus on postures.

(2) S.N. Goenka (1924 – 2013), from the lineage of Ledi Sayādaw, although not so influential in Myanmar, is definitely the most known throughout the world, and teaches some *samatha* before starting with *vipassanā*, and the focus is on feelings.

(3) Mogok Sayādaw U Vimala (1899 – 1962), whose *vipassanā* teachings are based on the Law of Dependent Origination and gives just a slight attention to *samatha*,

(4) and Pa Auk Sayādaw Bhaddanta Ācinna (1934 -), who stands out from the *vipassanā* movement for having a great focus on *samatha* meditation, aiming at developing the four *jhānas* before moving on to *vipassanā*, with focus on the elements.

In order to accomplish this task, it will be presented: (i) *samatha* and *vipassana* and the two main approaches towards them; (ii) the method of the four masters, giving a special

⁷ Houtman 1990; Analāyo 2012; Cousins 1996; Nimala 2007; Wen 2009; Boddhi 2012; Ñāṇapaṇṇika 1992; Ariyajyoti 2017.

attention to the relation between both aspects of the meditation; (iii) possible interfaces among the methods.

1 – The interrelations between *samatha* and *vipassanā*

The words *samādhi* (concentration) and *paññā* (knowledge) are commonly used in place of *samatha* and *vipassanā* respectively and may be considered synonymous. From another point of view, one can understand that *samatha* (serenity) leads to *samādhi* (concentration) and that the practice of *vipassanā* (insight meditation) leads to *paññā* (knowledge or wisdom). Therefore, we understand that although *samatha* \ *samādhi* and *paññā* \ *vipassanā* are taken as synonyms, they are used in different contexts. (Gombrich 2006, 113). Meditators who follow *samathabhāvanā* are called *samathayanika* (one who makes serenity his vehicle), whereas meditators who follow *vipassanābhāvanā* are called *vipassanāyanika* (one who makes insight his vehicle), the two systems being approaches to the development of insight.

Hence, it is possible to summarize the various objects and methods of meditation expounded in the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures in two interrelated systems: one called the development of serenity or tranquility (*samathabhāvanā*) or the development of concentration (*samādhibhāvanā*); and the other the development of insight (*vipassanābhāvanā*), or wisdom (*paññābhāvanā*) (Gunaratana 2015, 1). Both can be accompanied by the word *bhāvanā*, which can simply be understood as meditation, though etymologically means ‘to become’, ‘grow’ or ‘cultivate’ (Nyanatiloka 2004, 35-36), for no matter what the quality of the ground is, it can always be cultivated and developed. The terms *keto-vimutti* are also used for the practice of *samatha* and *paññā-vimutti* for the practice of

vipassanā, where *vimutti* means release from the bonds, fabrications, or mental conventions (*āsavas*) (2004, 226).

The practice of tranquility meditation (*samathabhāvanā*) is about developing concentration by focusing on one point (*ekaggatā*), and aims at developing a calm, sharp, luminous mind as a means of experiencing inner peace and serves as a basis for the development of wisdom (*paññā*). Therefore, *samatha* can be understood as “the steadying, settling, and unifying of the mind” (Sujato 2012, 136). Forty objects (*kammaṭṭhāna*) can be used as a basis for developing concentration, which should be indicated accordingly to the personality of each meditator. In general, the most common object is the breathing, which stands for a meditation known as *ānāpāna*, explained in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (2006). The practice of *samatha* leads to the progressive attainment of ever deeper levels of concentration, passing through Access Concentration (*upacara samādhi*) – when the Five Hindrances (*pañcanīvaranā*)⁸ are eliminated - and reaching Absorption Concentration (*appana samādhi*) – when the Five Factors of *Jhāna* (*jhānangani*)⁹ are fully developed. Besides, there is one more type of concentration called Momentary Concentration (*khanika samādhi*) – in which attention shifts from object to object.

In turn, the practice of insight meditation (*vipassanābhāvanā*) aims to achieve a direct understanding of the true nature of *nāmarūpa* phenomena (mentality \ materiality). (Gunaratana 1995, 3). In the etymology of the term *vipassanā*, there are *vi* = in a special way, from within, through or intense, and *passanā* = see¹⁰; therefore, the term can be translated as

⁸ (i) Sensory desire (*kāmacchanda*); (ii) ill-will (*byāpada*); (iii) sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*); (iv) restlessness and worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*); (v) and doubt (*vicikicchā*).

⁹ (i) applied thought (*vitakka*); (ii) sustained thought (*vicarra*); (iii) rapture (*pīti*); (iv) happiness (*sukha*); and (v) one-pointedness (*ekaggata*).

¹⁰ Author’s research and understanding. Can also be found on Nyanatiloka (2004, 231).

“seeing clearly, seeing from within or in a certain and special way”, thus denoting a direct perception, opposed to the knowledge derived from reasoning or argument. Therefore, *vipassanā* is to observe, explore and discern something clearly and precisely, seeing each component as distinct and penetrating deeply to perceive the most fundamental reality (impermanent, painful, and non-self) of the *nāmarūpa* phenomena as well as their causes and effects.

Vipassanābhāvanā was taught in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10)¹¹, considered the most important discourse on daily meditation and practice, and the basis for all Insight Meditation Tradition techniques. In *satipaṭṭhāna* there are *sati* = memory, remembering, mindfulness, awareness of what is happening and *paṭṭhāna* = that which continually plunges or penetrates.¹² Memory is related to remembering the Buddha's teachings and using them at the crucial moment (Sujato 2012, 131), whereas awareness to every phenomenon, one by one, that goes on within the frame of the body is essential to plunges into it. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is divided into four *anupassanā* (observation of body, feelings, mind and mental contents)¹³, as *anu* means a ‘very small particle’, an ‘atom’, ‘subtle’, therefore the term can be understood as “seeing a very small and minute particle”, and points more to a practice.¹⁴ Thus, all these terms (*bhāvanā*, *satipaṭṭhāna* and *anupassanā*) are closely related to *vipassanā* and can be considered synonyms.

After shortly describing the basic concepts of the *samatha* and *vipassanā* practices, now let us see the two main relations between them: the hierarchical one, where *samatha* is a

¹¹ The *Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (2000) is a sutra of equal content, with the addition of the Four Noble Truths presentation at the end of the discourse.

¹² Author’s research and understanding. Can also be found on Nyanatiloka (2004, 194).

¹³ Respectively in Pāli: *Kāyānupassanā*, *vedanānupassanā*, *cittānupassanā* and *dhammānupassanā*.

¹⁴ Author’s research and understanding. Can also be found on Nyanatiloka (2004, 18).

prerequisite for *vipassanā*, and the practice of *vipassanā* without *samatha*, called *suddha-vipassanā* or bare insight (Wen, 2009).

The first and most obvious perspective, widely found in the sutras, is the hierarchical relation or the “gradual training” (*anupubbāsikkhā*), where the development of *samatha* is a prerequisite for *vipassanā* practice. This is probably the most widespread approach, which suggests that both methods should be employed, but without giving priority to either. (Gombrich 2006, 114). From this perspective, the degree of concentration required – meaning types (access or absorption) and levels (*jhānas*) of absorption concentration – to be attained to begin practicing *vipassanā* is a controversial topic among the different masters. While some say it requires a deep level of concentration, which means attaining the four *jhānas* (Pa Auk’s approach) or, as according to Oosterwijk (2012, 86), at least the first, as most scholar-monks state, to then shift to *vipassanā*, others defend that reaching an initial level of concentration (Goenka’s and Mogok’s approach), meaning the Access Concentration, is already enough to start the insight meditation. (Analayo 2012, 29). Still, the level of concentration needed before beginning the development of insight is, according to the sutras, undetermined, although they point to the need of attainment of the first *jhāna*. (Oosterwijk 2012). Saying that, it must then be stated that for the meditator who first attains a deep level of concentration (*jhānas*), it is required emerging from such states of absorption to practice *vipassanā*, for only with a mind aware of the six senses can one discern the characteristics of each phenomenon and uses it as a basis for cultivating insight.

The second approach refers to the possibility of practicing *vipassanā* without a previous practice of *samatha*, known as dry or bare insight. This perspective leads to the understanding that the former is superior to the latter, as it develops concomitantly concentration – therefore there is still a connection with *samādhi* – and insight, and that the

practice of *samatha* alone would never be sufficient to reach *Nibbāna* (Gombrich 2006, 115). Regarding to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, although some meditation practices can induce the *jhanās*, most of them are oriented towards the insight (Bodhi 202).

Therefore, whereas *samatha* aims at alleviating lust – which stands for all emotional aspects – and refers to the emotional aspects of our minds, the heart qualities such as peace, compassion, love, and bliss; *vipassanā* aims at eliminating ignorance, and refers to the wisdom qualities such as understanding, discrimination and discernment (*Vijjabhagiya Sutta*, 2020, 1). Thus, although there is a clear conceptual distinction, they cannot be considered as two separate baskets or two different types of meditation, but rather a pair of mental qualities to be developed by means of the Eightfold Path, as to say, two complementary aspects of meditation (Sujato 2012, 137). Furthermore, it is also possible to relate the two systems of meditation to the Second Noble Truth, the origin of suffering, where the development of concentration (*samatha*) eliminates desire \ passion \ greed \ greed (*rāga* or *lobha*) and aversion (*dosa*), whereas the practice of wisdom (*paññā*) eliminates ignorance (*avijjā* or *moha*)¹⁵, which is the root cause of the other two, thus justifying such relation.

¹⁵ Both terms are synonyms and frequently used interchangeably. One has ignorance, or delusion, when one sees the mind-body phenomenon as the opposite of the Three Marks of Existence (*tilakkhaṇa*): *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering) e *anattā* (non-self).

2 – Four *vipassanā* methods and their approaches to *samatha* and *vipassanā*

Having understood both techniques, we now proceed to analyze and then trace interface among the four methods of the Insight Meditation Movement, taking into account the two approaches stated above: the hierarchical relation, and practicing *vipassanā* without previous development of *samatha*, known as dry or bare insight.

2.1 The Mahāsi's method

Mahāsi Sayādaw's technique (Mahāsi 1991) or the New Burmese Method is known as 'dry or bare-insight', because *samatha* is 'moistened', which means that the meditators since the first minute practice pure *vipassanā* without previous experience with *samatha*. However, *samādhi* (concentration) is not neglected, as it is achieved with the practice of the Momentary Concentration (*khanika samādhi*). Its characteristics is that it does not fix in just one object, but it shifts from object to object, always to the one that most calls one's attention. The primary objects of meditation are the 'rising' and 'falling' movements of the abdomen, which must be mentally noted as 'rising' and 'falling', and the secondary ones are all the five senses as well as the mind. The meditations are practiced in the sitting and walking postures; as for the latter, the main objects of awareness are the movement of the foot and the sensations. All six senses (the five ones and the mind) are liable to be noted. While hearing a sound 'hearing, hearing', while seeing 'looking, looking', while thinking 'thinking, thinking', and so on, as well as for any posture, 'standing, standing', 'lying, lying', 'walking, walking' and 'sitting, sitting'.

Mental 'noting' is the main technique, and not just at the time of the formal meditations but all daily actions must be noted, from waking up to the time before sleeping.

In order to do that in a proper way, the meditator is stimulated to perform the daily activities in slow motion, and therefore it is said that the slower one moves, the faster he progresses. The aim of the noting technique is to distinguish mind (*nāma*) from matter (*rūpa*), which is the First (Analytical Knowledge of Body and Mind) of sixteen Insight Knowledges (Mahāsī 1995), and it is also based on the mental ‘noting’ technique that the meditator will develop throughout all the following Insights. Regarding the First Insight Knowledge just mentioned, while the movement of the abdomen is *rūpa* or materiality / body, the awareness of it and the noting are *nāma* or mentality / mind.

After this brief explanation of the Mahāsī technique, it can be noticed that, as there can be no profound observation and no insight without sustained concentration on the object, concentration (*samatha*\samādhi) is developed together with the progress of the Insight Knowledges, therefore although pure concentration is not practiced it is surely not neglected. Moreover, as *samatha* is mostly practiced in the sitting postures and the laities do not spend so many hours of the day practicing sitting meditation, the *vipassanā* as taught by Mahāsī fits to their needs, as it develops constant awareness in the daily activities. And to help remembering to maintain *sati* (mindfulness) along the day, the walking meditations are of great aid, as by noting the movements and the sensations awareness is brought to the mind-body relationship at all times.

2.2 The Goenka’s method

S.N. Goenka’s (1924 – 2013) *vipassanā* technique is based on his teacher’s method, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, who is said to have shaped it the way it is presently taught. The lineage goes back to two more teachers, Saya Thetgyi and Ledi Sayādaw, and just the latter was a monk. Therefore, it is said to be a non-sectarian tradition directed to lay meditators, and

although monks do take the retreats, they do not get ordained in it. The technique follows the Noble Eightfold Path, which is divided in (1) *sīla* (morality); (2) *samādhi* (concentration) based on *ānāpāna* (mindfulness of breath); (3) and *paññā* (wisdom) based on the contemplation of feelings (*vedanānupassanā*) through the scanning or sweeping of the body; the teaching is completed by a short practice of *mettā* (loving-kindness) meditation¹⁶.

In order to learn the technique, the meditators must firstly take the ten-day retreat; after this they are allowed to take the three-day or one-day retreats, as well as serve as volunteer. After taking three ten-day retreats and serve once as volunteer, the meditators can take the 8-day *Satipaṭṭhāna* retreat, which follows the same schedule but with evening *dhamma* talks on the Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (2000). Thereafter there are 20, 30, 45 and 60-day retreats, each one with specific demands to be accepted. The meditations are all guided with few instructions, and at the end of each day there is a *dhamma* talk, both with recorded audios. Interviews are held twice a day for those who wish to ask questions. As seen, the retreats are all very well-structured and regulated, making it easy for the practitioners to learn and to keep the practice, which is one of the reasons why it is the most widespread *vipassanā* meditation tradition around the world.

The meditators must follow the five precepts as a way to practice (1) *sīla*; for those who take the second retreat onwards it is not allowed to eat after noon, although they do not take the eight precepts. In all retreats one third of the time is devoted to the practice of (2) *samatha* meditation based on the *ānāpāna* technique. It starts focusing on the flow of the air, and then on the sensation of the air touching the upper lip. Besides aiming at calming down

¹⁶ This section was written based on the author's own experience. However, regarding the bibliography of Goenka's tradition, the following two books can be considered the main ones for the theoretical understanding: Hart (2009) and Goenka (1997). Besides, a great range of material can be found on the website of the Vipassana Research Institute.

and preparing the mind to the practice of *vipassanā*, another benefit of it for the beginners is that they start experiencing subtle sensations on this part of the body, similar to the ones they will find on the framework of the body.

From the fourth day onwards (3) *vipassanā* practice starts by observing (scanning) sensations (touch sense) in the body, from head to toe, from toe to head, without leaving any part out. The foundation of the practice is to see the truth of impermanence (*anicca*), and from this understand *dukkha* and *anattā* will be naturally realized. The realization of *anicca* is undertaken by contemplating the change and formation of matter (*kalāpas*) through the body-feeling (sensation and feeling are terms used interchangeably), the touch sense. Feelings are generated by the awareness of the contact (*phalla*) of an object with the touch or any other five sense, and their arising and passing away must be thoroughly and equanimously observed. According to the *Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (2000), there are three types of feelings: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

There are at least two reasons for taking the body-feeling as the main object for *vipassanā* meditation, and not any of the other five sense doors. First, although *anicca* can be realized through all other five senses, the touch sense covers the biggest area for introspective meditation. Besides, “it is more tangible than other types of feelings and therefore a beginner in *vipassanā* meditation can come to the understanding of impermanence more easily through body-feeling” (U Ba Khin *apud* Kornfield 2007, 258). Second, it is said that everything that comes up to the mind flows into the body through *āsavas* (influx) and appear as sensations. Therefore, there is no need to give attention to the mind process, but just be equanimous (*upekkhā*) to the feelings in the body, in order to not generate craving (*taṇhā*). According to the Law of Dependent Origination: ‘Dependent on contact, sensation arises; dependent on

sensation, craving (greed – *lobha* – or aversion – *dosa*) arises'¹⁷. Once there is equanimity to the sensations, the chain is broken down and there is no more craving. By such process, the old *saṅkhāras* (formations) come up to the surface and get purified and no new ones are generated.

Seeing that, it can be noted that Goenka delivers a simple and structured method, with a short but relevant time and effort of *samatha* practice. He recommends the meditators to practice two hours per day, morning and evening, giving as much time as it is needed for *samatha* meditation to calm down the mind, though usually it is practiced for around ten minutes in each session. Starting to feel the sensations in the framework of the body takes some time, and, on the other hand, goes away quite fast; probably one of the reasons why two hours of practice per day is recommended, which is an intense schedule for the laity, and therefore seems to be hardly followed by most of the practitioners.

2.3 The Mogok's method

Mogok Sayādaw U Vimala (1899 – 1962) is a monk who has been trained in Mahāsī's and Ledi Sayādaw's methods but then developed his own well-structured way of practicing *vipassanā*. (Mogok 2018). His teachings stand out by presenting how the *yogi* can experience the process of the Law of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) in his own body.

The method can be divided in three steps, and the first one is to grasp the practice by means of intellectual understanding, which goes with the first of the Eightfold Path, Right View (*sammā-ditthi*), which preaches that one must understand the entire path before

¹⁷*Phassa-paccayā vedanā; Vedanā-paccayā taṇhā.*

engaging in the actual meditation practice. During the retreat there can be up to three¹⁸ *dhamma* talks in just one day, quite often explaining the Dependent Origination based on a well-known diagram developed by him and called “Mogok’s Dependent Origination diagram” (Mogok 2021, p.25).

The onset theoretical understanding is to clearly differ Ultimate Reality (also called Ultimate Dhammas) vs Conceptual Reality. The latter are ideas, concepts, notions or names of a situation, which he gives nine possibilities, whereas the former are aspects of our reality that can be directly experienced without concepts, and consists of the focus of the *vipassanā* contemplation. The Ultimate Reality is broken down in four categories: Consciousness (89 kinds which are narrowed down to 13), Mental Factors (52 narrowed down to 13), Material Aggregates (28 narrowed down to the 4 elements), and *Nibbāna*. Then it is taught (1) the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental factors and consciousness); (2) the six sense bases and the understanding on how consciousness arises depending on two causes, the sense organ and the object; (3) the four elements and their respective characteristics; and finally relate all these previous knowledges to (4) the Law of Dependent Origination (Kornfield 2007, 219).

To calm down the mind and prepare it to *vipassanā*, the second step of his practice starts by giving some time, 20 to 25 minutes¹⁹, to *samatha* meditation as a way of focusing on the incoming and outgoing air on the tip of the nostril. Although the initial theoretical teachings as well as the following ones given by Mogok are mostly concerned to *vipassanā* and very little to *samatha*. Mindfulness of breath on the tip of the nose is the main object of

¹⁸ Author’s own experience.

¹⁹ Author’s own experience.

meditation, which the practitioner, after being aware of whatever calls the attention to (6 sense doors), must always get back to (2007, 216).

Hence, the second step consists of contemplating either the feelings (*vedanānupassanā*) or the mind (*cittānupassanā*). Mogok explains that both will reach the goal, insight into the characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* of the body-mind phenomena, although he states that the meditation on the process of the mind is more straightforward and beneficial, in the view to eliminate the false idea of an 'I', which he stresses greatly as a way to develop Right View (Kornfield 2007, 226-228).

As meditation develops, the third and last step will come when the yogi perceives nothing else than the arising and vanishing of the phenomena, and not even the content of them. At this stage, the realizing of the three signs becomes clear, and the yogi becomes more disgusted with the impermanence of the aggregates, developing the desire for them to vanish. *Nibbāna* is within reach when the observation of impermanence has no intruding defilements or distraction, and the yogi can have the experience of cessation of cravings, breaking up with the Dependent Origination cycle (Kornfield 2007, 239-240).

As seen, Mogok formulated a practical and easy method to practice insight meditation but without missing its deepness and thoroughness. Although he does not neglect the traditional practice of *ānāpāna* (mindfulness of breath), he gives great emphasis on *vipassanā* meditation, having the breath as the main object. Regarding the practice of *vipassanā*, he is not extreme on focusing on just one *anupassanā*, based on the understanding that choosing one does not mean to not contemplate the others, though he does recommend *cittānupassanā*.²⁰

²⁰ Author's own understanding.

2.4 The Pa Auk's method

Pa Auk Sayādaw Bhaddanta Ācinna (1934 -) bases his method (Pa Auk 1998) on the *Vishuddhimagga* commentary and its Seven stages of Purifications, as well as on the Suttas and all categories enumerated in the *Abbhidhamma* to discern mentality and materiality. In general, his method can be divided in five steps: (1) morality; (2) the development of *samatha*; (3) the practice of *vipassanā* by discerning matter and mind based on the four elements; (4) seeing the cause and effect of the Dependent Origination cycle by seeing past lives; (5) and the development of *vipassanā* or insights meditation.

Morality (1) (*sīla*) is practiced by following the precepts that are based on right speech (*sammā-vācā*), right actions (*sammā-kammanta*) and right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*). Then, the process gets started by developing *samatha* (2) on mindfulness of breath. The key to the practice is to experience the *nimitta*, which are signs that appear and are used for deepening the concentration. There are three levels of *nimitta* (preparatory, taken-up and counterpart): the first sign is usually a smokey grey around the nostrils, the second is a white like cotton wool and the third is clear, bright, and radiant - like the morning star - though such signs change from person to person (Pa Auk 2003, 96). After experiencing the third *nimitta*, the yogi may reach Absorption Concentration and, based on the *nimitta*, he enters in the *jhāna* states up to the fourth, and from there the meditation on the four elements starts. The time needed to experience the *nimitta* varies greatly, from two weeks up to two years, and if the yogi never comes to experience it there is the alternative to start the meditation on the four elements with Access Concentration.

To see the Ultimate Reality or Truth (*paramattha-sacca*) is to be able to see the “individual types of materiality of individual *rūpa-kalāpas*” (2003, 12), and that requires a strong and powerful concentration. This is when the *vipassanā* practice (3) starts, and it is

based on the elements of materiality using the four elements (*catu-dhātu vavatthāna*). There are two reasons for teaching the contemplation of materiality before mentality: first because it does not change as fast as mentality and second because mentality depends on materiality. Initially, one sees the characteristics of the four elements, and then the *rūpa-kalāpas*. Just after seeing the Ultimate Reality of materiality and having the actual experience of *annica* (impermanence), the yogi proceeds to meditate on mentality, because Ultimate Mentality is far subtler than the Ultimate Materiality.

By seeing materiality-mentality as they are, now there must come the understanding of the Second and Third Noble Truths of the Origin of Suffering and of the Cessation, seen through the Dependent Origination cycle (4), and for that, the object of meditation now goes to the brightness of the heart (2003, 21). It is just when one sees the past (it is indicated to go back to 5 previous lives) and future lives (which can be viewed up to know but might change depending on the future actions) that the Second Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering is understood. Last, the *vipassanā* meditation (5) is practiced by seeing the Truth of Suffering, the Origin of it and the mentality-materiality as impermanent, which leads to the realization of *anattā* (void of self) and *dukkha*.

From all methods, Pa Auk's is the only that teaches how to achieve the four *jhānas* (Absorption Concentration), and just after a long practice of *samatha*, which develops powerful concentration, the yogi proceeds to *vipassanā*. He follows very strictly the Suttas, the Abhidhamma and the commentaries, and therefore delivers a complex and profound practice. *Samatha* meditation usually leads to the development of mental powers (*abhiññā*), like reading people's minds, wherefore it is common to hear unusual experiences among the meditators and their masters. Although there are short-term yogis, those who are willing to spend a long time in a meditation retreat, from fifteen days, which is the minimum

recommended, up to one or two years, are surely the ones who can take the best of it. Last, I should say that by this short description it is not possible even to scratch the complexity of Pa Auk's teachings, no wonder why a great number of serious monks from Myanmar and worldwide are now following his technique.

3 – Tracing Interfaces

“Many roads lead up to the same mountain.”

(Houtman 1990, 187)

The divergent issues chosen to trace some interfaces are: (1) the need and level of *samatha* practice to ‘cross over’ to *vipassanā*; (2) the primary object; (3) the contemplations (*ānupassanā*); (4) other aspects such as the teachings, the practice of morality (*sīla*) and the retreats.

As presented along this article, one of the major debates is concerned to the need and level of *samatha* practice, although an agreeable point is that *vipassanā* is methodologically dependent on a foundation in concentration. Before the rise of the Insight Movement (mid XIXth century), there didn't seem to be such distinction, in the monastic scene, between both practices, as they were taken as two complementary techniques. Taking the two main masters of the Insight Movement to understand such approaches, Ledi Sayādaw and his disciples (U Ba Khin, Goenka and others) emphasize the need for some practice of *samatha*, although not for so long, whereas Mingun Sayādaw and his pupils (Mahāsī Sayādaw and others), advocate a development of concentration in the context of *vipassanā* techniques. The master that clearly stands out from these two approaches is Pa Auk, for being the only one who emphasizes the imperativeness to achieve the Absorption Concentration, and the four

jhānas, in order to start investigating matter and mind. In general, the modern Insight Movement masters as well as the political leaders who support the movement do not seem to be so receptive to *samatha* meditation, as it is seen as a more mystical and longer practice than *vipassanā*, although this seems to be changing with the arise and growth of Pa Auk's method. Therefore, whereas Mahāsī and Pa Auk go for the two extremes, the former practicing pure *vipassanā* and the latter preaching the need to achieve the deepest level of concentration before crossing over to *vipassanā*, Mogok and Goenka give an equipoised time to the practice of *samatha*.

Regarding the choice of the primary meditation object, whereas Mogok, Goenka and Pa Auk have it on the tip of nose, Mahāsī, on the other hand, have it on the movement of the abdomen. The reasons for that seem to be clear, the first three aim at developing concentration, and the smaller the area the sharper is the concentration; and Mahāsī, unlike the others, by starting straight with the *vipassanā* practice demands an attentive mind since the beginning, in opposite to placing the mind into deep states of concentration (Absorption Concentration), and getting into these states is less common when there is a bigger area as a meditative object such as the abdomen.

Concerning the focus on different contemplations (*ānupassanā*), Mogok teaches both feelings and mind, but recommends the mind contemplation (*cittānupassanā*), for what comes up to the mind is easier to observe and is what will eliminate the false idea of an 'I'. On the other hand, Pa Auk strongly states that according to Vishuddhimagga, the body contemplation (*kāyānupassanā*), by way of the four elements, must be first undertaken, as mind is dependent on matter, and just then the mind must be contemplated. But before that, aiming at attaining the four *jhānas*, there is the focus on *dhammānupassanā*, by analyzing the five hindrances (*pañcanīvaranā*) and the 52 mental factors (*cetasikas*). As for Mahāsī, by

having the movement of the abdomen as the main object aiming at getting insight as the way of seeing and knowing the *vāyo* (air) element, there is also a strong base on *kāyānupassanā*. But it is not limited to it, as the noting of the states of the mind and the intention of the movements (walking meditation and daily activities) bring a certain attention to the mind, entailing thus the contemplation of the mind (*cittānupassanā*). Lastly, Goenka has a strong focus on *vedanānupassanā*, mostly leaving aside the other contemplations.

As for the teachings, Mogok emphasizes the importance of the theory (*pariyatti*), especially the doctrine of the Dependent Origination. Similarly, Pa Auk, for having such a complex method, also pays great attention to it, emphasizing different aspects of the Buddhist doctrine, specially the *paramathadhammas* (minimum element mind-matter), as presented in the Paṭṭhāna. Therefore, these two follow the theoretical based meditation practice. Goenka delivers a simple theory through daily and progressive evening *dhamma* talks. It is also the only method that has guided meditations, although it is usual for all of them to have recorded *dhamma* talks. As for Mahāsī, although there are deep teachings in his method, he argues that knowing all the Sixteen Insight Knowledges may confuse the meditator's experiences, who may take the intellectual knowledge by direct experience. Thus, we may conclude that the last two are mostly based on non-theoretical meditation practice. As for *sīla*, except for Goenka, who asks for the meditators to take and follow five precepts in the first retreat, all the other three methods follow since the beginning the eight precepts tradition. Furthermore, all retreats are free of charge and the activities are funded by the donations (*dāna*) of the meditators.

Based on the Insight Meditation Movement, it can be inferred that a tradition, composed not just by its scriptures – which are mainly static – but also by the occasional changes of the community (*saṅgha*), and the meditation methods adjusted by the masters. It

is not static but redesigns itself to the need of the present moment. If we take as an example the four²¹ masters' lineage of Goenka, and the four masters here presented, we see that, just as Buddha used to give different discourses to different publics, each one of them adapted the practice to fit to the needs of the time and space. Although some methods may be 'slower', 'more painful', or 'more suitable to monks' than others, they are all uniform in purpose, and lead up to the same intuitive realization of suffering, impermanence, and non-self, climbing the same ladder to cessation. (Houtman 1990, 187). Presently, more than two dozen different *vipassanā* methods are taught in Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka and world-wide, and the four masters presented here are just an example of such wide range of practices.

²¹ Ledi Sayādaw (1843 – 1896), Saya Thet Gyi (1873 -1945), Sayagyi U Bah Khin (1899 – 1971), S.N. Goenka (1924 – 2013).

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