

Vipassana Newsletter

In the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, as taught by S. N. Goenka

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Words of Dhamma

*Dhammārāmo dhammarato, dhammaṃ anuvicintayaṃ;
Dhammaṃ anussaraṃ bhikkhu, saddhammā na parihāyati.*

— Dhammapadapāḷi— 364, Bhikkhuvaggo

Living Dhamma, engrossed in Dhamma, thinking only of Dhamma and always mindful of Dhamma, a meditator bhikkhu never leaves the path of the truth-based Dhamma.

Saya Thetgyi

In this era, he became the first householder Vipassanā teacher. He fulfilled his responsibilities with such proficiency and righteousness that our revered Dhamma Grandfather became a powerful inspiration for us as an exemplary householder Vipassanā teacher.

Saya Thetgyi was born in the farming village of Pyawbwegyi, eight miles south of Rangoon, on the other side of the Rangoon River. He was born on 27 June 1873 and was given the name Maung Po Thet. He had two brothers and a sister, and his father died when he was about ten years old, leaving Maung Po Thet's mother to care for the four children.

His mother supported the family by selling vegetable fritters. The little boy was made to go around the village selling leftover fritters, but he often came home having sold none because he was too shy to advertise his wares by calling out. So, his mother dispatched two children: Maung Po Thet to carry the fritters on a tray on his head and his younger sister to call out.

Because he was needed to help support the family, his formal education was minimal, only about six years. His parents did not own any land or paddy (rice) fields and used to collect the stalks of the paddy that were left over after harvesting. One day on the way home from the paddy fields, Maung Po Thet found some little fish in a pond that was drying up. He caught them and brought them home so that he could release them into the village pond. When his mother saw the fish, she was about to beat her son for catching them, but when he explained his intentions to her, she instead exclaimed, "Sadhu, sadhu!" (well said, well done). She was a kind, good-hearted woman who never nagged or scolded but did not tolerate any akusala (immoral) deeds.

When he was fourteen years old, Maung Po Thet started working as a bullock driver of a cart carrying paddy. He gave his daily wages to his mother. He was so small at the time that he had to take along a special box; standing on it enabled him to get in and out of the cart.

The village of Pyawbwegyi is on a flat, cultivated plain, fed by many tributaries that flow into the Rangoon River. When the rice fields are flooded, navigation is a problem, and one of the common means of travel is by sampan (long, flat-

bottomed boats). Maung Po Thet's next job was as a sampan oarsman. The owner of a local rice mill observed the small boy, working so diligently, carrying loads of paddy, and hired him as a tallyman in the mill, at a wage of six rupees per month. At this time he lived by himself in the mill and ate very simple meals, such as a few split pea fritters and rice.

At first he bought rice from the Indian watchman and other laborers. They told him he could help himself to the sweepings of milled rice, which were kept for pig and chicken feed. Maung Po Thet refused, saying that he did not want to take the rice without the mill owner's knowledge. The mill owner found out about this and gave his permission. As it happened, Maung Po Thet did not have to eat the rice debris for long. The sampan and cart owners gave rice to him because he was such a helpful and willing worker. Maung Po Thet continued to collect the sweepings, however, giving them to poor villagers who could not afford to buy rice.

After one year, his salary was increased to ten rupees, and after two years, to fifteen. The mill owner offered him money to buy quality rice and allowed him free milling of one hundred baskets of paddy per month. His monthly salary increased to twenty-five rupees, which supported his mother quite well.

Maung Po Thet married Ma Hmyin when he was about sixteen years old, as was customary. His wife was the youngest of three daughters of a well-to-do landowner and paddy merchant. The couple had two children, a daughter and a son. Following the Burmese custom, they lived in a joint family with Ma Hmyin's parents and sisters. Ma Yin, the younger sister, remained single and managed a successful small business. She was later instrumental in supporting U Po Thet in practicing and teaching meditation.

Ma Hmyin's eldest sister, Ma Khin, married Ko Kaye and had a son, Maung Nyunt. Ko Kaye managed the family paddy fields and business. Maung Po Thet, now called U Po Thet or U Thet (Mr. Thet), also prospered in the buying and selling of paddy.

As a child, U Thet had not had the opportunity to become a novice monk. (Ordination as a novice is a common and important practice in Myanmar). It was only when his nephew Maung Nyunt became a novice at twelve years of age that U Thet became a novice himself and later, for a time,

an ordained Bhikkhu (monk).

When he was around twenty-three, he began to practice meditation with a lay teacher, Saya Nyunt, from whom he learned Anapana. He practiced Anapana for seven years. U Thet and his wife had many friends and relatives living close by in the village. So, with many uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins, and in-laws, they led an idyllic life of contentment in the warmth and harmony of family and friends.

Search for the “Deathless”

This rustic peace and happiness was shattered when a cholera epidemic struck the village in 1903. Many villagers died, some within a few days. They included U Thet’s son and young teenage daughter (who, it is said, died in his arms). His brother-in-law Ko Kaye and his wife also perished from the disease, as well as U Thet’s niece (who was his daughter’s playmate).

This calamity affected U Thet deeply, and he could not find refuge anywhere. He desperately wanted to find a way out of this misery. He asked permission from his wife and sister-in-law Ma Yin and other relatives to leave the village in search of “the deathless.”

U Thet wandered all over Myanmar in his fervent search, visiting mountain retreats and forest monasteries, studying with different teachers, both monks and laymen. Finally, he followed the suggestion of his first teacher, Saya Nyunt, to go north to Monywa to practice with Ven. Ledi Sayadaw. U Thet was accompanied in his wanderings by a devoted companion and follower, U Nyo.

During these years of his spiritual searching, U Thet’s wife and sister-in-law remained in Pyawbwegyi and managed the rice fields. In the first few years, he returned a few times to see that all was well. But when he found that the family was prospering, he began to meditate more continuously. U Thet stayed with Ledi Sayadaw for seven years in all, during which time his wife and sister-in-law supported him by sending money each year from the harvest of the family farmland.

After seven years, accompanied by U Nyo, he returned to his village, but he did not return to his former householder’s life. Ledi Sayadaw had advised him at the time of his departure to work diligently to develop his samādhi (concentration) and paññā (purifying wisdom) so that eventually he could begin to teach.

Accordingly, when U Thet and U Nyo reached Pyawbwegyi, they went straight to the sala (rest-house) at the edge of the family farm, which they used as a Dhamma hall. Here they began to meditate continuously. They arranged for a woman who lived near the Dhamma hall to cook two meals a day while they continued their retreat.

U Thet continued in this way for one year. He made rapid progress in his meditation, and at the end of the period he felt the need for advice from his teacher. He could not speak to Ledi Sayadaw himself, but he knew that his teacher’s books were in a cupboard at his home. So he went there to consult the manuals.

His wife and her sister had become quite angry with him for not returning to the house after such a long absence. His wife had even decided to divorce him. When the sisters saw U Po Thet approaching the house, they agreed neither to greet nor welcome him. But, as soon as he came in the door, they found themselves welcoming him profusely. They talked for

a while, and U Thet asked for their forgiveness, which they freely granted.

They invited him for tea and a meal. He procured the books and explained to his wife that he was now living on eight precepts and would not be returning to the usual householder’s life. From now on they would be like brother and sister. His wife and sister-in-law invited him to come to the house each day for his morning meal and happily agreed to continue supporting him. He was extremely grateful for their generosity and told them that the only way he could repay them was to give them the Dhamma.

Other relatives, including his wife’s cousin, U Ba Soe, came to see and talk with him. After about two weeks, U Thet said that he was spending too much time coming and going for lunch, so Ma Hmyin and Ma Yin offered to send the noon meal to the sala. At first the people in the village were reluctant to come to him for instruction. They misinterpreted U Thet’s zeal, thinking that perhaps after the grief of his losses and his absence from the village, he had lost his senses. But slowly they realised from his speech and actions that he was indeed a transformed person, one who was living in accordance with the Dhamma.

Teaching Vipassana

Some of U Thet’s relatives and friends requested that he teach them meditation. U Ba Soe offered to take charge of the fields and household responsibilities. U Thet’s sister and a niece took responsibility for preparing the meals. U Thet started teaching Anapana to a group of about fifteen people in 1914, when he was forty-one years old. The students all stayed at the sala, some of them going home from time to time. He gave discourses to his meditation students, as well as to interested people who were not practicing meditation. His listeners found the talks so learned that they refused to believe that U Thet had very little theoretical knowledge of the Dhamma. Due to his wife and sister-in-law’s generous financial support and the help of other family members, all the food and other necessities were provided for the meditators who came to U Thet’s Dhamma hall—even to the extent, on one occasion, of compensating workers for wages lost while they took a Vipassanā course.

After teaching for a year, in about 1915, U Thet took his wife and her sister and a few other family members to Monywa to pay respects to Ledi Sayadaw, who was about seventy years old at that time. When U Thet told his teacher about his meditation experiences and the courses he had been offering, Ledi Sayadaw was very pleased. It was during this visit that Ledi Sayadaw gave his staff to U Thet, saying, “Here, my great pupil, take my staff and go. Keep it well. I do not give this to you to make you live long, but as a reward, so that there will be no mishaps in your life. You have been successful. From today onwards, you must teach the Dhamma of Nāma and Rūpa (mind and matter) to six thousand people. The Dhamma known by you is inexhaustible, so propagate the Sāsana (era of the Buddha’s teaching). Pay homage to the Sāsana in my stead.”

The next day, Ledi Sayadaw summoned all the Bhikkhus (monks) of his monastery. He requested U Thet to stay on for ten or fifteen days to instruct them. The Sayadaw told the gathering of Bhikkhus, “Take note, all of you. This layperson is my great pupil U Po Thet from Lower Myanmar. He is capable of teaching meditation like me. Those of you who

wish to practice meditation, follow him. Learn the technique from him and practice. You, Dayaka Thet (lay supporter of a monk who undertakes to supply his needs such as food, robes, medicine, etc.), hoist the victory banner of Dhamma in place of me, starting at my monastery.”

Torchbearer of Dhamma

U Thet then taught Vipassanā meditation to about twenty-five monks learned in the scriptures. It was at this point that he became known as Saya Thetgyi (“Saya” means teacher, and “gyi” is a suffix denoting respect).

Ledi Sayadaw encouraged Saya Thetgyi to teach the Dhamma on his behalf, but his student was somewhat hesitant because of his lack of theoretical knowledge. Saya Thetgyi knew many of Ledi Sayadaw’s prolific writings by heart and was able to expound on the Dhamma with references to the scriptures in a way that most learned Sayadaws (monk teachers) could not find fault with. Nevertheless, Ledi Sayadaw’s exhortation to him to teach Vipassanā in his stead was a solemn responsibility, and Saya Thetgyi was apprehensive. Bowing to his teacher in deep respect, he said, “Among your pupils, I am the least learned in the scriptures. To dispense the Sāsana by teaching Vipassanā as decreed by you is a highly subtle yet heavy duty to perform, Sir. That is why I request that, if at any time I need to ask for clarification, you give me your help and guidance. Please be my support, and please admonish me whenever necessary.”

Ledi Sayadaw reassured him by replying, “I will not forsake you, even at the time of my passing away.” Saya Thetgyi and his relatives returned to their village in southern Myanmar. They discussed with other family members the plans for carrying out the tall order from Ledi Sayadaw. Saya Thetgyi considered traveling around Myanmar, thinking that he would have more contact with people that way. But his sister-in-law said, “You have a Dhamma hall here, and we can support you in your work by preparing food for the students. Why not stay here and give courses? There are many who will come here to learn Vipassanā.” He agreed and began holding regular courses at his sala in Pyawbwegyi.

As his sister-in-law had predicted, many did start coming, and Saya Thetgyi’s reputation as a meditation teacher spread. He taught simple farmers and labourers as well as those who were well-versed in the Pāli texts. The village was not far from Rangoon, which was the capital of Myanmar under the British, so government employees and urbanites, like U Ba Khin, also came. As more and more meditators came to learn meditation, Saya Thetgyi appointed as assistant teachers some of the older, experienced meditators. The centre progressed year by year, and there were up to two hundred students, including monks and nuns, in the courses. There was not enough room in the sala, so the more experienced students practiced meditation in their homes and came to the sala only for the discourses.

For thirty years he taught meditation to all who came to him, guided by his own experience and using Ledi Sayadaw’s manuals as a reference. By 1945, when he was seventy-two, he had fulfilled his mission of teaching thousands. His wife had died; his sister-in-law had become paralysed; and his own health was failing. So he distributed all his property to his nieces and nephews, setting aside fifty acres of rice paddy for the maintenance of his Dhamma hall.

He had twenty water buffaloes that had tilled his fields for

years. He distributed them to people who he knew would treat them kindly and sent them off with the invocation, “You have been my benefactors. Thanks to you, the rice has been grown. Now you are free from your work. May you be released from this kind of life for a better existence.” Saya Thetgyi moved to Rangoon both for treatment and to see his students there. He told some of his pupils that he would die in Rangoon and that his body would be cremated in a place where no cremation had taken place before. He also said that his ashes should not be kept in holy places because he was not entirely free from defilements; that is, he was not an arahant (fully enlightened being).

One of his students had established a meditation centre at Arzanigone, on the northern slope of the Shwedagon Pagoda. Nearby was a bomb shelter that had been built during the Second World War. Saya Thetgyi used this shelter as his meditation cave. At night he stayed with one of his assistant teachers. His students from Rangoon (including the Accountant General, U Ba Khin, and the Commissioner of Income Tax, U San Thein) came to see him as much as time permitted. He instructed all who came to see him to be diligent in their practice, to treat the monks and nuns who came to practice meditation with respect, to be well-disciplined in body, speech, and mind, and to pay respects to the Buddha in everything they did.

Saya Thetgyi was accustomed to visiting the Shwedagon Pagoda every evening, but after about a week he caught a cold and fever. After some time, his condition deteriorated, and he passed away peacefully.

His body was cremated on the northern slope of Shwedagon Pagoda, and Sayagyi U Ba Khin and his disciples later built a small pagoda on the spot. But perhaps the most fitting and enduring memorial to this singular teacher is the fact that the task given to him by Ledi Sayadaw of spreading the Dhamma in all strata of society is continuing.

(To be continued)

Dhammic Death

1. Shri Harilal Sahu, 87 years old, left his body on 27th Oct 2024 at Dhamma Utkal Vipassana Centre, Orissa, peacefully. He was the Centre Teacher there and regularly served as an AT in many centres since 1999, including in Sri Lanka, earning immense merits. The Dhamma family wishes for his speedy progress on the path of Dhamma, attaining nibbāna.

2. Prof. Dr. Ganga Prasad Pathak left his body peacefully on October 25, 2024 in Delhi at the age of 91. He started Vipassana meditation in 1988. As soon as he retired from Delhi University in 1999, he dedicated himself to serve Dhamma and soon he was appointed an Assistant Teacher. Besides serving in the courses, he also played a very good role in editing Hindi books of VRI (Vipassana Research Institute). Later with advancing age he slowed down but remained mentally alert and connected to dhamma activities. Dhamma family wishes him speedy progress on the path of Dhamma till he reaches liberation.

A new centre: “Dhamma Taposagara”.

A new long course centre is coming up near the Dhamma Nagajjuna centre in Nalgonda. For more details please follow the **Link:** <https://nagajjuna.dhamma.org/tapo-saagara.html>

Online Pāli-English Certificate Course-2025

Admission-From 28th December 2024 to 28th January 2025.

Application form will be available on the link (given below) & different WhatsApp groups from 28th December 2024.

Details of the Course - <https://palilearning.vridhamma.org/>



Additional Responsibility

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Shree Vinay Dahat To serve as Co-ordinator Area Teacher of Vidarbha Region | 2. Mr. Mayilmurugan Sellappan, Mayiladuthurai, TN. |
| 2. Shree Bishnu Bhandari, To assist the Centre Teacher in serving Dhamma Suriyo, Nepal | 3. Mr. Shiva Bongu, Michigan, U.S.A. |
| | 4. Mr. Myung Ho shin, Korea |
| | 5. Ms. Sunae Park, Korea |
| | 6. Ms. Yi Sun Yung, Korea |
| | 7. Mi Gyeong min, Korea |

New Appointments Assistant Teachers

1. Mr. Mofidur Rahman, Guwahati

One-Day Mega Courses at Global Vipassana Pagoda, Gorai, Mumbai

One-day Mega course on Sunday:

1. 19-1-2025 Sayagi U Ba Khin's Demise-day (19-1-1971) and Mataji's Demise-day (5-1-2016)

2). In addition there are Daily One-Day Courses being held in the Pagoda for Vipassana Students. Please follow the link to join and take advantage of the immense benefit of meditating in a large group. Contact: 022 50427500 (Board Lines) Mob. +91 8291894644 (from 11 am to 5 pm).

Online registration: <http://oneday.globalpagoda.org/register>

Dhammalaya Stay during Mega Courses:— Meditators can stay at Dhammalaya during mega courses and avail maximum benefit. Please contact: 022 50427599 or Email- info.dhammalaya@globalpagoda.org

For any other information for One day or Mega courses you may contact: info@globalpagoda.org or pr@globalpagoda.org, Tel :- 022-50427500 / +91 82918 94644.

DHAMMA DOHAS

*Dhanya paḍosī deś ke, santa aur arahanta;
Rakshita rakha saddharma ko, maṅgala kiyā ananta.*

The saints and arahants of the neighbouring country are blessed; By preserving the true Dhamma, they have brought innumerable benefits.

*Kaisi sukhada suhāvanī, mān baramā kī goda;
Is godī men hī milā, bodhi dharma kā moda.*

How soothing is the lap of mother Myanmar; In this very lap I found the joy of Bodhi Dhamma.

*Anukampā ho santa kī, muktī dvāra de khola;
Dekh anitya asaṅga ho, pāye nitya amola.*

The door to liberation has been opened by the Saintly One's compassion; It is through seeing anicca and becoming detached that the precious Eternal is discovered.

*Antara men dīpaka jalā, dekha liyā patha gūḍa;
Bāhara jaga Bhatakata firā, pantha na pāyā mūḍa.*

The inner light has been lit, and I have seen the profound path; I wandered outside in the world like a fool but did not find the way.

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