

The Clock of Vipassana Has Struck



*The Teachings and Writings of Sayagyi U Ba Khin
with Commentary by S.N. Goenka*

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Some Episodes from the Life of Sayagyi U Ba Khin

—narrated by S.N. Goenka

In Wartime, as in Peacetime, a Man of Integrity

During the month of February, 1942, the invading Japanese Imperial Army had occupied Yangon and was advancing toward Mandalay, a city in central Myanmar. The Japanese Air Force started an aerial bombardment of the city, in which the railway station was destroyed.

At this time Sayagyi was stationed in Mandalay as Accounts Officer of the railways, with responsibility for whatever funds were kept in cash. After the bombardment was over, he went to the ruined station, searched through the debris, and found still intact the iron safe in which the cash was kept. Having the key with him, he opened the safe and removed the cash contents—a substantial sum of money.

Now what to do with this money? U Ba Khin was at a loss. The British authorities had already fled in retreat from the fast-approaching Japanese. Mandalay at that moment was a “no man’s land” between the two armies—a city without any government. It would have been very easy for Sayagyi to take the money for himself, without anyone’s being the wiser. After all, what right did the defeated, fleeing British colonial government have to this money? It could be construed as a patriotic action to deprive them of it. Moreover, Sayagyi had great need of money at that time, since his young daughter was seriously ill, and his expenses were therefore unusually heavy, severely taxing his means. U Ba Khin, however, could not even conceive of misappropriating government funds for his

own use. It was his duty, he decided, to hand over the cash to his superior officers even though they were fleeing from the country.

From Mandalay the British had fled helter-skelter in every direction. The railway officers had retreated first to Maymyo, in hopes of making their way from there to Nationalist China and thence by plane to India. Sayagyi did not know whether he would be able to catch up with them in their flight. Nevertheless, he had to make the attempt. He hired a jeep taxi and made the three-hour journey to Maymyo. On his arrival, he found that the British were still in that city. He sought out his superior officer and handed over the cash to him, breathing a sigh of relief at having been able to discharge his duty.

Only then did Sayagyi ask, “And now, sir, may I receive my salary for this month, and my travelling expenses to here?” This was U Ba Khin, a man of perfect integrity, of incorruptible morality, of Dhamma.

Dhamma Transforms a Government Department

By introducing the practice of Vipassana meditation to the officers and staff of the Burmese Accountant General’s office, Sayagyi U Ba Khin had brought about remarkable improvements in that government department. The Prime Minister at that time, U Nu, was an honest man and wished the entire administration of the country to be similarly freed from corruption and inefficiency. One of the most important government offices, the State Agricultural Marketing Board, was in poor shape. This organization was responsible for purchasing paddy (a type of rice)—as well as other produce—from the farmers, and arranging for milling the rice and exporting the bulk of it.

In colonial times, the entire rice export business had been in the hands of British and Indian traders. After Myanmar’s independence, the Board had taken over this function. Most of its officers and staff had little prior experience. Although the margin of profit in the trade was huge, somehow the Board suffered a chronic deficit.

There was no proper system of accounting; inefficiency and corruption were rampant. The Board officials, in collusion with the rice millers and foreign buyers, were embezzling huge amounts of money from the state. Additionally, great losses occurred due to poor storage practices and inefficient loading and transport.

The Prime Minister set up a committee of inquiry headed by Sayagyi to thoroughly investigate the affairs of the Board. The report of this committee unflinchingly exposed the entire net of corruption and inefficiency. Determined to take strong action—even though it meant overriding the opposition of traders and some of the politicians of his own party who were involved in the corruption—the Prime Minister requested U Ba Khin to take the post of Deputy Chairman of the Board. Sayagyi, however, was hesitant to undertake the responsibility of reforming the Board unless he could have clear authority to undertake any necessary measures. Understanding the problem, the Prime Minister instead appointed Sayagyi to chairmanship of the Marketing Board, a cabinet-level position normally held by the Minister of Commerce. It was generally known that this position afforded great political leverage—and now it was being given to an honest civil servant!

When the intended appointment was announced, the officers of the department became nervous that the man who had exposed their malpractices and inefficiencies was now to become their superior. They declared that they would go on strike if the appointment was confirmed. The Prime Minister replied that he would not reconsider, since he knew that only U Ba Khin could undertake the job. In retaliation, the officers carried out their threat. So it was that Sayagyi took up his appointment in an office where the executive staff was striking while the clerical and blue collar workers continued to work as usual.

Sayagyi remained firm despite the unreasonable demands of the strikers. He continued the work of administration with just the clerical staff. After several weeks, the strikers, realizing that Sayagyi was not going to submit to their pressure, capitulated unconditionally and returned to their posts.

Having established his authority, Sayagyi now began, with great love and compassion, to change the entire atmosphere of the Board and its workings. Many of the officers actually joined courses of Vipassana under his guidance. In the two years that Sayagyi held the Chairmanship, the Board attained record levels in export and profit; efficiency in minimizing losses reached an all-time high.

It was common practice for the officers and even the Chairman of the Marketing Board to amass fortunes in various illegal ways during their terms of office. But U Ba Khin could never indulge in such practices. To forestall attempts to influence him, he refused to meet any traders or millers except on official business, and then only in his office and not his residence.

On one occasion, a certain merchant had submitted to the Board a bid to supply a huge quantity of burlap bags. According to the usual custom, this man was prepared to supplement his bid with a private “contribution” to an important Board member. Wanting to assure his success, he decided to approach the Chairman himself. He arrived at Sayagyi’s house, carrying with him a substantial sum of money as an offer. During the course of their conversation, when the first hint of bribery arose, Sayagyi was visibly shocked and did not hide his contempt for such proceedings. Caught in the act, the businessman hastened to emphasize that the money was not for Sayagyi himself but rather for his meditation center. Making it clear that the meditation center never accepted donations from non-meditators, Sayagyi ordered him out of the house, and told him he should be thankful that the police were not called into this.

As a matter of fact, unbeknownst to the merchant, his bid—the lowest one submitted—had already been accepted by the Board. Since all official requirements for this transaction had already been met, a bribe could be harmlessly accepted without interfering with the interests of the state. In such circumstances, it would be commonplace for an official to just accept the gratuity “in the flow of the tide” (as such a situation was popularly referred to). Sayagyi might have easily accrued these material benefits, but doing so would

have been totally against the moral integrity of such a Dhamma person.

In fact, to thoroughly discourage any attempt to influence him, Sayagyi let it be known that he would not accept even small personal gifts, despite the common practice of such exchanges. Once on his birthday, a subordinate left a gift at Sayagyi's house when he was not at home: a silk *longyi*, a wraparound sarong typically worn by both men and women. The next day Sayagyi brought the present to the office. At the end of the working day, he called a staff meeting. To the mortification of the staff member who had left it for him, Sayagyi berated him publicly for so blatantly disregarding his explicit orders. He then put the *longyi* up for auction and gave the proceeds to the staff welfare fund. On another occasion, he took similar action on being given a basket of fruit, so careful was he not to allow anyone to try to influence him by bribes whether large or small.

Such was U Ba Khin—a man of principles so strong that nothing could cause him to waver. His determination to establish an example of how an honest official works brought him up against many of the practices common at the time in the administration. Yet for him the perfection of morality and his commitment to Dhamma were surpassed by no other consideration.

Soft as a Rose Petal, Hard as a Diamond

A saintly person, who is full of love and compassion, has a heart that is soft, like the petal of a rose. But when it comes to his duty, he becomes hard like a diamond. Both of these qualities manifested in Sayagyi's life from time to time. A few of the many incidents illustrating this are included here.

When Myanmar attained independence from Britain in 1948, the newly-formed national government faced an immediate crisis. Throughout the country, followers of different ideologies were challenging the government: some were communists, some socialists, some provincial secessionist groups. The insurgents had no scarcity of arms and ammunition, because during the Second World

War both the Japanese and the Allies had freely distributed arms and ammunition to attract the Burmese youth to their fold. The rebels started fighting on so many fronts that it became impossible for the newly-formed national army to handle the crisis. Soon the insurgents gained the upper hand, but with their different causes and slogans, a chaotic situation prevailed throughout the country. Each different group with its own unique cause occupied and ruled a different territory.

A time came when the federal government of Myanmar was in fact only the government of the city of Yangon. Soon even this nucleus of control was imperiled when one group of rebels started knocking at the door of the city, occupying a village ten to twelve miles away. There was no rule of law anywhere in the country; the continued existence of the federal government was hanging in the balance. If the government of Yangon fell, the Union of Myanmar would disintegrate into competing factions. The government was distressed, the army was distressed—but what could be done? There seemed to be no way out.

Sayagyi was deeply devoted to his country, and wished peace, harmony and prosperity for Myanmar, but what could he do? His only strength was in the Dhamma. So at times he would go to the residence of the Prime Minister and practice *mettā* (meditation of goodwill and compassion for all). At other times in his own home, he would generate deep *mettā* for the security of his country. In a situation such as this, Sayagyi's heart was very soft, like the petal of a rose.

But it could also become hard as a diamond. It so happened that during the same crisis, the government appealed to a neighboring country for assistance. This friendly country agreed to come to Myanmar's aid, but whatever items were to be given had to be transported by air, and the government of Myanmar did not have adequate air transport. The airplanes required for the purpose would have to be procured outside the country. To succeed in this plan, the government made a hurried decision which did not fall within the framework of the country's laws.

At that time U Ba Khin was the Accountant General, and he declared the decision to be illegal. The government was now in a dilemma. The Prime Minister knew very well that Sayagyi would not compromise where principles were concerned. (Sayagyi always asserted: "I get my pay for one purpose only—to see that not a single penny of government funds should be used in a way which is contrary to the law. I am paid for this!") The Prime Minister had great respect for Sayagyi's integrity, his adherence to duty. But the situation was very delicate. He therefore called Sayagyi for a private discussion, and told him: "We have to bring these provisions, and we must make an expenditure for the air transportation. Now, tell us how to do this in a legal way." Sayagyi found a suitable solution, and the government followed his advice to save itself from using a wrong means for a right action.

The crisis continued until eventually the rebel groups, one after the other, were overpowered by the national army and defeated in most of the country, except for the remote mountainous areas. The government then started giving more importance to social programs for the improvement of the country. Thanks to the diligence of the community of monks, there was a high rate of basic literacy throughout most of Myanmar, except for some of the hill tribes; but higher education was lacking. The Prime Minister took it upon himself to address this situation. In a large public gathering, he announced a strategy to implement adult education throughout the country, and he authorized a large sum of money for this purpose to be given immediately to the ministry concerned.

Sayagyi was fully sympathetic to the virtues of the plan, but he determined that the amount specified did not fit into any portion of the national budget. He therefore objected. The Prime Minister was placed in a very embarrassing situation, but U Ba Khin's objection was valid: according to law, the announced amount could not be directed to its proposed purpose.

Sayagyi's judgment was accepted, but the program had already been announced, so something had to be done. The Prime Minister called the officers of the Rangoon Racing Club and requested

their cooperation in helping to implement the adult education program. He suggested that they sponsor a special horse race with high entry fees; whatever money earned would be given as a donation to the noble cause. Who could refuse the Prime Minister's request? The Racing Club agreed. All went according to plan, and they earned a huge amount on the special race.

Once again, a large public meeting was organized, and with great pomp and ceremony, a check for a large amount was presented to the Prime Minister by the officials of the Racing Club. The Prime Minister, in turn, handed the check over to the minister concerned.

After this event, however, the case came before Sayagyi, and again he raised objections. The Prime Minister was in a quandary. It was, after all, a question of his prestige. Why was Sayagyi now stopping the payment of the check? This was not the government's money; what right did he have to stop it? Sayagyi pointed out that the income from the race included tax for the government. If the government tax was taken out, the rest could go towards supporting the adult education program. The Prime Minister was speechless, but he smiled and accepted U Ba Khin's decision.

Just as Sayagyi was fearless in disposing his official responsibilities, so he was free from favoritism. The following incident is one amongst many incidents illustrating this trait.

In the Accountant General's department, one of the junior clerks was also one of Sayagyi's Vipassana students. This man was very humble, ever willing to lend a helping hand. He was always very happy to serve Sayagyi, and Sayagyi had great paternal love for him. Even paternal love, however, could not become an obstacle to Sayagyi in fulfilling his appointed duty.

It happened that at the end of the year it was time for staff promotions. At the top of the list prepared by the staff was the name of this junior assistant. Because he had the greatest seniority in the department, he was next in line for rightful promotion. If Sayagyi had wanted, he could easily have recommended this promotion, but he did not do so. For him, promotion should not depend only

on seniority. It should also take into consideration one's ability to work efficiently. The assistant, who had many other good qualities, was unfortunately lacking in this area. Sayagyi called him and lovingly explained that if he was able to pass a certain accountancy examination, he would get the promotion. The disciple accepted the advice of his teacher, and it took him two years to study and pass the examination. It was only then that Sayagyi granted the promotion.

There are very few people who are free from fear or favor, or who have a love which is paternal yet detached. Sayagyi had all these qualities. Soft as a rose petal, hard as a diamond. I feel fortunate to have learned Dhamma from such a teacher. I pay my respects, remembering these shining qualities of his.

Memories of U Ba Khin from Some of His Students

Modern Interpretation of the Teaching of the Buddha

—by U Ko Lay,
former Vice Chancellor of Mandalay University

Sayagyi's understanding of Dhamma, as taught by the Buddha, was profound and penetrating; his approach to it modern and scientific. His was not mere conventional acceptance of the teaching of the Buddha; his was a wholehearted embrace of Dhamma with firm conviction and faith as a result of personal realization through actual practice.

Sayagyi learned Vipassana meditation at the feet of the great meditation master Saya Thetgyi. When he reached a certain stage of proficiency, Saya Thetgyi felt certain that his student U Ba Khin was destined to play the role of the torchbearer after he had passed away. But it was only in 1941, after Sayagyi had met and paid homage to Webu Sayadaw, believed by many to be an *arahant* (a liberated being), that he finally decided to help people find the path laid down by the Buddha. In his technique, U Ba Khin did not make the slightest deviation from the Buddha's teaching but, after

ceaseless practical research and experimentation, he developed instructions of his own, more suited to the demands of modern times.

He felt the need of a course of instructions particularly for householders, rather than strictly for monks and recluses who had given up worldly life. A discipline for monks could not be ideally suitable for laymen. The Vipassana Research Association, initiated by Sayagyi while he was the Accountant General of Burma, undertook research and experiments in Vipassana meditation. Results and findings from these studies carried out in a special shrine room at the Accountant General's office enabled Sayagyi to present the Buddha's Dhamma to laymen in a systematic, scientific manner, thus appealing to the modern mind. His regimen of Vipassana exercises encompasses completely the three requisites laid down by the Buddha (namely *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*), but is so streamlined and disciplined that satisfactory results could be expected within a short period.

Foreign intellectuals and organizations first became acquainted with Sayagyi in 1952 when he gave a series of lectures to a religious study group composed of members of a special technical and economic mission from America. Rendered in booklet form, the lectures soon found their way to various Burmese embassies abroad and Buddhist organizations the world over. (see Chapter Six: "What Buddhism Is")

Sayagyi made a few more expositions of the life and teachings of the Buddha, but mere interpretation of the Dhamma had never been his main object. He applied himself solely to the task of helping sincere workers to experience a state of purity of mind and realize the truth of suffering, resulting in "the peace within" through practicing Vipassana meditation. He achieved astounding results with the presentation he developed to explain the technique. To his last breath Sayagyi remained a preceptor rather than a preacher of Vipassana meditation.

Human Qualities of the Teacher

—by Mrs. Vimala Goenka,
sister-in-law of S.N. Goenka

I once considered Sayagi U Ba Khin an old, dry and uninteresting person who taught something which was fit only for aged people who had little interest and activity in the things the outside world offered. I regarded him with awe and fear, for I had heard much about his outbursts of anger. I visited him at the center with the elders of my family very seldom, and only when I had to. All these feelings evaporated, one by one, when I stayed with him for ten days and learned meditation under his guidance.

I found Sayagi to be a very affectionate person. He was like a father to me. I could freely discuss with him any problem that faced me, and be sure not only of a sympathetic ear but also of good advice. All his anger which was talked about was only surface-deep; the core was filled with unbounded love. It was as though a hard crust had formed upon a liquid material. The hard crust was necessary—rather, very important for the work he was doing.

It was this hardness which enabled him to maintain strict discipline at the center. Sometimes people took undue advantage of his loving nature and neglected the purpose for which they were there. They would walk around the place and talk with other students, thus wasting not only their own time, but disturbing others as well. Sayagi's hard nature was required to set them on the right track. Even when he got angry, it was loving anger. He wanted his students to learn as much as possible in the short time available. He felt such negligent students were wasting a precious opportunity which might never come again, an opportunity of which every second was so precious.

Sayagi was very generous. He wanted to teach all he knew. He was so keen upon giving away his knowledge and experience that he made untiring efforts to teach a student. He gave freely. It was only the student's capacity to absorb his instructions which was the limiting factor.

Sayagyi was very patient in his teaching too. If a person found difficulty in understanding the process, he would explain thoroughly with examples and illustrations. But he never believed in too much talking. He loved practical work and was of the opinion that experience in the training itself will take care of all the theoretical doubts. Discussing only theories will not land us anywhere. The practical aspect was most important. How right he was! Not only in Dhamma but even in our day-to-day affairs, practical work gives better results than mere discussion.

Sayagyi himself had a great zeal for work. He held six or seven highly important executive posts in the government with grave responsibilities and also conducted the classes of meditation in his free time. In fact he had no free time at all! He was always busy. He had such a large capacity for work at an age when other people think of resting and leading a quiet life. He found peace and calmness in his work.

Even with so much work to do he devoted some time to gardening. It was his favorite hobby. He loved to grow flowers and plants. The center had such a pleasing, colorful look with all the greenery around. The beauty and peace Sayagyi created at the center will always linger in my heart. He taught a rare thing which is of great value to old and young alike. He was a great teacher and a very affectionate man indeed.

Qualities of the Man

*—by Dr. Om Prakash,
former consulting physician, United Nations Organization, Myanmar;
Vipassana teacher appointed by S.N. Goenka*

His was a fine personality: majestic, sober, noble and impressive. He always bore a faint smile and the look of a calm, satisfied mind. When with him, you felt as if he cared for you and loved you more than anybody else. His attention, love, *mettā* was the same for all, big or small, rich or poor; in return he did not want anything but sincerity of purpose and a truthful nature.

U Ba Khin tolerated all religions. He never criticized or ridiculed any faith or belief. But he preached Buddhism, as he understood it, and he understood it well above many others. He never asserted anything, never forced any idea on you. He followed what he preached or taught and left it to you to think over and accept his view, in part or in full as you wished.

He did not smoke or take alcohol or any narcotics. He took tea and coffee in moderation; liked milk, ovaltine, etc., especially towards the later part of his life. His love of “life” was extreme. He



Sayagyi sitting in the garden at the International Meditation Center

would not allow even mosquitoes to be killed at the center. Even the use of pesticides and insecticides was prohibited there.

He had a great aesthetic and artistic sense, loved flowers very much, and took special care about getting rare varieties. He had a beautiful collection of flowering plants, which were all over the garden around the pagoda. He knew all his plants well and would talk about them at length with the center’s visitors.

Sayagyi had a good sense of humor and was witty. He was fond of making little jokes, and laughing, laughing very loudly. Just as he would shout loudly, he would laugh loudly!

He kept himself well-informed about world politics and the modern advances in science and technology, and was a regular listener to radio and a reader of foreign periodicals. He was especially fond of *Life* and *Time* magazines.

U Ba Khin had a great desire (a desire which was never fulfilled) to go abroad, especially to the U.S.A. He wanted to teach his method of meditation which he believed—and very correctly so—to be the easiest and most logical way to practice meditation. He had the means to go, had many invitations from foreign disciples, but some technical formalities in obtaining passports and so on always stood in his way. Excepting this one desire, he had all his desires and wishes in the world fulfilled. He led a full life.

Sayagyi bore disease and illness bravely and well, and was a very intelligent and cooperative patient. He never took a pessimistic view of life; he was always optimistic and took a hopeful view. He took suffering and disease as a result of past karma and said it is the lot of one born into the world. Even his last illness which came and took him away from us suddenly, he treated very lightly.

Sayagyi was a very pious and great soul; pure of mind and body, and loveable to everyone.

An Academic Assessment

—by *Winston L. King, Prof. of Religion, Vanderbilt University*

The center [I.M.C.] is actually the projection of the personal life and faith of its founder, U Ba Khin, who is its director and Gurugyi also. He is now a vigorous man, just over sixty, who in addition to the center work—where he spends all of his out-of-office hours during the courses—holds two major government responsibilities.

By any standards, U Ba Khin is a remarkable man. A man of limited education and orphaned at an early age, yet he worked his

way up to the Accountant Generalship. He is the father of a family of eight. As a person, he is a fascinating combination of worldly wisdom and ingenuousness, inner quiet and outward good humor, efficiency and gentleness, relaxedness and full self-control. The sacred and the comic are not mutually exclusive in his version of Buddhism; and hearing him relate the canonical Buddha stories with contemporary asides and frequent salvoes of throaty “heh, heh, heh’s,” is a memorable experience.

...Because of his ability to achieve both detachment and one-pointed attention, he believes that his intuitional and productive powers are so increased that he functions far more effectively as a government servant than most men. Whether he is a kind of genius who makes his “system” work or whether he represents an important new type in Burmese Buddhism—the lay teacher who combines meditation and active work in a successful synthesis—is not yet clear in my mind.

—*excerpted from A Thousand Lives Away: Buddhism in Contemporary Burma, written ca. 1960*

Questions and Answers

Most of the questions and answers at the end of each chapter are taken from an exclusive interview with S.N. Goenka in 1991, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Sayagyi’s death. We have also drawn on articles and other sources to explain the technique and its benefits and to elucidate the personality and the teachings of U Ba Khin and the value of Vipassana meditation.—Ed.

Q: Did U Ba Khin call himself a Buddhist? How could he call the teaching universal without giving it a sectarian connotation?

S.N. Goenka: U Ba Khin was Buddhist by birth and felt quite proud and satisfied to say so, but it was very clear in his teaching that his intention was not to convert people from one organized religion to another organized religion. My own experience is an example: he never pressed me to become a Buddhist. Sayagyi’s way of teaching

always remained nonsectarian. The teaching of the Buddha is so universal that people from different sects and communities can follow it and experience its benefits.

For Sayagyi the essence of Buddhism was Dhamma, the universal law of nature, and a true Buddhist was one who practiced Dhamma, one who lived according to this universal law. He was interested in helping people to establish themselves in *sīla* (morality), in *samādhi* (concentration), and in *paññā* (wisdom); to show people how to convert themselves from misery to happiness. If someone who had undergone this conversion from impurity to purity then wished to call himself a Buddhist, Sayagyi was pleased; but the important point was the change which had come in the person's life, not merely the change in the name he called himself.

Sayagyi would even admonish enthusiasts who were eager to convert others to Buddhism, saying to them: "The only way to convert people is to become established oneself in Dhamma—in *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*—and to help others similarly to get established. When you yourselves are not established in *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, what is the sense in your trying to convert others? You may call yourselves Buddhists but unless you practice *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, to me you are not Buddhists. But if someone practices *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, then even though he may not call himself a Buddhist, nevertheless he is a true follower of the teachings of the Buddha, whatever he may label himself.

One incident illustrating this nonsectarian attitude occurred when a staunch Christian came to take a course under Sayagyi. While the opening formalities were being explained, this man became frightened that he was being asked to convert from Christianity to Buddhism; and out of this groundless fear, he refused to take refuge in Buddha. "I can take refuge in Jesus Christ but not in Buddha," he said. "Very well," replied Sayagyi smilingly, "Take refuge in Jesus Christ—but with the understanding that you are actually taking refuge in the qualities of Christ, in order to develop these very qualities in yourself." In this way the person began to work; and by

the end of the course he realized that his initial objection had been unnecessary, that his fears of conversion had been without cause.

Q: Why did U Ba Khin teach only a few very developed people, while you teach the same technique to all people no matter what their background?

SNG: Because Sayagyi was in an official position of responsibility at a time when the government of his country was inefficient and corrupt, the Prime Minister wanted him to make some improvements in the administration. That he could do by teaching Vipassana. But his dedication to government affairs continued until he was sixty-seven, so he didn't have time to give courses to the masses. He could teach only a few people. Because of that situation, he took a vow to teach only people with well-developed *pāramī* so that "I can give the seed of Dhamma to them and then they can later spread it around the world."

Q: Why do you call your teaching an "art of living"? And how can meditation be used as a tool for creating a better society?

SNG: The entire teaching of Buddha is an art of living. If one lives the life of *sīla*, of morality, this itself is an art of living. But living an ethical life while having many negative reactions in the mind also makes one unhappy. So controlling the mind and purifying the mind—*samādhi* and *paññā*—along with *sīla*, one lives a very peaceful and harmonious life. When one lives a life of negativity, one remains tense within and gives nothing but tension to others. When one is living a peaceful, harmonious life, one generates peace and harmony for others also. It is for this reason that Sayagyi used to call Buddha's teaching an art of living, as a way of life, a code of conduct.

In my own life before meeting Sayagyi, I found the tension was so horrible that I remained miserable, and I made others miserable. Coming onto the Path, I found that I was much relieved. I started living a better life, which was more beneficial for the members of my family, for my friends and for society. So if an individual remains

full of negativity, society suffers. If an individual changes for the better, it has a good effect on society.

Q: Many episodes in Sayagyi's life demonstrate his commitment to his work in the government. Can you describe his feelings for social involvement and his attitudes toward his work?

SNG: Well, as a householder one must live a life of responsibility. As a monk one doesn't have this social responsibility because all the time is dedicated to meditation. But as a householder, as a lay person, one must take on that responsibility. Since he was a government servant, Sayagyi wanted to see the people under him working with integrity, discipline, honesty and with efficiency in their work so that they would give good results. By giving a great deal of his time to improving the public administration of his country, Sayagyi was serving society.

Q: Meditation has always been considered a withdrawal from society. Why did U Ba Khin give so much importance to the social aspect of meditation? In particular, for householders, do you think that our involvement in society, rather than isolation, can truly help the progress of our meditation?

SNG: To gain purity of mind and to gain the Dhamma energy, you withdraw from others and take your attention inside. But then that energy has to be used in an extroverted way. It is like someone making a long jump. You have to step back a little, then run and make the jump. In the same way, you withdraw inside yourself, and you get the energy you need, then you make a long jump into society to serve it. These two cannot be separated. Buddha left his householder's life for six years to gain Buddhahood, but once attained, he was involved in society for the next forty-five years, the remainder of his life, day and night. In the same way, anyone who develops in Dhamma does not run away from the responsibilities of society.

Q: How did U Ba Khin use Vipassana meditation to confront corruption?

SNG: Sayagyi's colleagues and subordinates who were involved in corrupt practices did so with minds full of greed and craving. When one begins practicing Vipassana meditation, greed begins to diminish. So these people, having begun to meditate, developed the will to refrain from illegally taking other people's money. Teaching this technique of meditation to his colleagues, U Ba Khin went to the root of the problem—craving in the mind.

Not everyone was corrupt, but still, many were inefficient. Because their minds were clouded, they were not capable of making decisions rapidly and effectively. With Vipassana, eliminating every kind of impurity, the mind becomes clearer, sharper, able to get to the root of any problem and respond effectively. So in this way their efficiency increased. Vipassana meditation was truly used to eradicate corruption and increase the efficiency of the administration. An important aspect of Sayagyi's personality that supported him in this endeavor was his absolute faithfulness to the truth, unwavering in face of pressure or temptation of any kind.

Q: Why did U Ba Khin continue to work after he reached the age of retirement instead of devoting himself entirely to teaching?

SNG: As we have seen, as a householder, he faced his responsibilities. When Myanmar became independent, the efficiency of the Administration was very low and moral integrity was minimal in many government functionaries. His own example was a way to demonstrate how Vipassana meditation could help the administration. Just as it could help an individual, it could help the masses, the society, the government, the nation. So I think he made a very good decision, doing the best he could do, on the one hand teaching Vipassana and on the other demonstrating by his example its results on society.

Q: Can you describe any significant or important episodes from your first meeting with U Ba Khin?

SNG: A friend of mine, knowing that I suffered from strong and incurable migraine headaches, suggested that I participate in a meditation course taught by U Ba Khin. When I met him, the whole

atmosphere was so peaceful, and he was quite happy when I told him I was coming to take a course. He inspired me by saying: “You are a Hindu and a leader of the Hindu community, so don’t hesitate to come. I won’t convert you to any other religion. You will just get a good way of life, you will get peace of mind.”

But when I said that I was coming to relieve myself of migraines, Sayagyi—a very straightforward person—said: “No, then I won’t take you. You are devaluing Dhamma. Dhamma is not for this purpose. It is to take you out of the misery of lifetime after lifetime. For so many world cycles you have been suffering in misery, and you will continue to suffer unless you learn how to come out of it. To make use of Vipassana for this ordinary physical pain is devaluing it.” At the same time, very lovingly he said: “Your aim is to purify the mind. Then all the diseases which are psychosomatic will naturally get cured as a by-product. But the aim should not be to cure a particular disease. Otherwise you will get neither this nor that.” That had a very great impact on my mind.

Q: From the experience of U Ba Khin and from the personal experience of both of you[†] as householders, what suggestions would you give to all people who live in society to help them make the best use of their lives and to live happily?

SNG: Vipassana serves exactly that purpose. For those who leave the householder’s life to live as monks, there is nothing to do but meditate, day and night, and arrive at a stage where they can help others. But householders must meditate and also make use of this meditation in their daily life, to fulfill their responsibilities toward the members of their family, their community, their society and their country. In that way they help others. When householders take Vipassana meditation, they must do it not only for their own good but for the good of others also.

[†]S.N. Goenka and his wife of 57 years, Illaichidevi Goenka, who accompanies him when he teaches.