

Women Meditation Instructors in Myanmar
(or)
The Role of Myanmar Nuns
in the Fields of Meditation

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Introduction

It is interesting to note that meditation gained its top-most popularity among the laity in Myanmar at the beginning of 20th century A.D. Precisely speaking, it was two decades ahead of the demise of Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) that lay people on a grand scale started to practice meditation. Before that period, some members of the Sangha Order individually undertook meditation in secluded areas and thus lay people thought that meditation was only for monks and it was nothing concerned with them. Nevertheless Ledi Sayadaw introduced meditation to the laity by establishing *Vipassanā* organizations all over the country and gave lucid guidance not only on insight (*vipassanā*) but also on tranquility meditation (*samatha*). After his passing away, one of his disciples, Mohnyin Sayadaw (1872-1964) followed in his steps and delivered scores of *dhamma* talks on *Vipassanā* and conducted several meditation retreats in a widespread level. Likewise, Mingun Sayadaw (1868-1954), Sunlun Sayadaw (1878-1953), Mogok Sayadaw (1899-1962), Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) and Pha Auk Sayadaw put great emphasis on meditation and tried their best for the benefit of many by conducting numerous meditation retreats all over the country. Owing to the great effort of the aforementioned Sayadaws, lay people gradually got absorbed in meditation and applied it in their daily routine.

It was also found that the number of women meditators exceeded that of men in every meditation retreat since the era of Mohnyn Sayadaw. It is one of the reasons that women meditation instructors came into existence in Myanmar. But without the instigation and encouragement of senior

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monks and broad-minded lay devotees, it is absolutely impossible for the appearance of women meditation instructors in the history of Buddhism in Myanmar. But, however much they instigated, women meditation instructors would not have appeared if the practitioners did not accept their instructions. Due to their virtuousness, diligence and capability, the practitioners of course did come to accept their instructions. Moreover, recently the government also began to acknowledge women meditation instructors, and even confers honorable titles on them for their tireless work on spiritual development.

In fact, the number of women meditation instructors is exceedingly little compared to that of women in Myanmar. Among them, Daw Sumana, Daw GunavĒ, Daw CĒrudassinĒ, Daw CandĒsrĒ, Daw DĒpa-karĒ, Daw CandĒtherĒ, Daw VimalacĒri and Daw VaratherĒ are the most well-known. The former four are the followers of Mahasi Tradition, the latter two are of Mogok, Daw DĒpa-karĒ is of Pha Auk and Daw CandĒtherĒ is of Mingun. In this paper, a brief biography of Daw VimalacĒri and her works will be presented due to limited time.

The main aim of this paper is to highlight how Myanmar nuns are performing the noble task for the promotion and propagation of Buddha dispensation. It also aims at sharing the significance of different meditation traditions in Myanmar.

Daw VimalacĒri

More than fifty percent of populations in Myanmar are women. Of them, Daw VimalacĒri is a significant and rare woman who comes out as a meditation instructor. She is a woman of sharp wisdom, great compassion and enormous loving-kindness.

Born into the family of pious Buddhists, she was acquainted with Buddhism since childhood. Though she did not get an opportunity to be ordained at a young age, she spent most of her leisure hours by reading religious books and magazines, by listening to the *Dhamma* talks and by joining meditation retreats. Moreover, she joined religious associations and participated in various activities for the wellbeing of many. After she had completed her education from the Yangon University, she learnt

Chinese Acupuncture and gave free treatment to patients irrespective of faith or class for three consecutive years. Despite her tight schedule in daily life, she studied Buddhist philosophy (*Abhidhamma*) and five *Nikāyas* from learned scholars and passed the respective examinations.

In her lay life, she married a medical doctor, and almost a couple decades after her marriage, with the kind permission of her husband, she was ordained under the guidance of a senior nun. Later, when the two children came of age, her husband also received higher ordination. Both of them have more or less equal faith in the Triple Gems and great interest in meditation. Even before they had been ordained, they practiced meditation intensively under learned and well-experienced meditation masters for several years.

Noticing her capability, she was urged by the master, U Kan Sein to deliver Dhamma talks on his behalf when he was fully occupied. At the encouragement of her master, she gradually became a Dhamma preacher and a meditation instructor. Her master also insisted that she ask for permission to be a formal meditation instructor from the Main Center of Mogok Tradition. After making sufficient investigations, the Board of Trustees cordially allowed her to be a meditation instructor in 1996.

Since she had a strong desire to share her Dhamma knowledge with others, she made her residence into a center for religious performances. In year 2001, she accepted the offer of a plot of land at the outskirts of Yangon and established a meditation center. Since then, ten-day meditation courses are conducted four times a year: before, during and after the Buddhist Lent and during Myanmar New Year festival which usually falls on the fourth month of the lunar calendar. Over five hundred practitioners join her every retreat.

Being a follower of the Mogok Tradition, she lays great emphasis on thorough understanding of the 'Law of Dependent Origination' (*Paticcasamuppada*) before the actual practice. In fact, the Law of Dependent Origination is indeed profound and is not easily understandable. But she explains it with the aid of a diagram – a circle, created by the most venerable Mogok Sayadaw. This diagram helps practitioners understanding clearly the profound teaching, the Law of Dependent Origination.

This profound teaching enables a practitioner to understand the ceaseless process of the five aggregates, the dissolution of old ones and substitution of the new. Moreover, it indicates the causal relationship between mind and matter. She clarifies that what we call a being, man or woman is nothing but just a combination of mind and matter. But uninstructed persons tend to cling to it with wrong view (*diññhi*) as 'I', 'he' or 'she'. Whenever they come across a sense object, they have a tendency to take it with wrong view. Even when they perform meritorious deed, they are likely to do it with wrong view like "This is 'I' who make charity; this is 'I' who observe precepts". She points out that it is because of wrong view people are encountering varieties of suffering in continuous cycle of rebirths and deaths. So she also puts stress on dispelling wrong view, first of all by learning the Law of Dependent Origination.

She explains that wrong view and doubt (*vicikicchā*) take place in one's mental stream one does not understand the Dependent Origination. She says that there are three types of Dependent Origination: past, present and future. She gives an explanation that because we had ignorance (*avijjā*) and craving (*tañhā*) in past life; we are born here as sentient beings in this life. The past is already over and we cannot do anything with the Dependent Origination which happened in the past. So too, the future has not come yet. So, a practitioner should not pay attention to the past and the future. Instead, one should closely observe the present Dependent Origination. She says that it is crucial not to allow ignorance and cravings arise in the present Dependent Origination. She guides the practitioners to contemplate on any object that occurs at the present moment of the present Dependent Origination.

For the purpose of clear comprehension, it will be better explained in an illustration. Mr. A goes for shopping at a super mart. On seeing a visible object, eye-consciousness arises in him. It is not the eye-consciousness that came with him from his residence. It is only the eye-consciousness that arises due to the impingement of eye-sensitivity and visible object. There is only the arising of eye-consciousness. There is no 'I', nor 'he' nor 'she' in the eye-consciousness. Similarly, there is no 'I' nor 'he' nor 'she' in the eye-sensitivity or in the visible object. Both of them: eye-sensitivity and visible object are matters (*rūpa*). Due to the impingement of two matters (*rūpa*), consciousness (*nāma*) automatically appears. So,

the impingement of two matters is the cause and the appearance of consciousness is the effect. There is only cause and effect. When he understands in this way, he dispels wrong view temporarily. She teaches the Dependent Origination before actual practice in order to dispel wrong view temporarily. And such kind of understanding is what the Venerable Mogok Sayadaw called *ÔĒta-pariÔĒ* : understanding of the known.

Then she let the meditators start the practice. In actual practice, concentration is to be established by being mindful of in-breath and out-breath (*ĒnĒpĒnasati*) for fifteen minutes in one meditation session. Then the contemplation is to be turned towards whatever arises, like feeling (*vedanĒ*) or mind (*citta*). Whatever arises in the mental stream, the arising and passing away of that is to be contemplated. At first, it's not easy to catch up with the arising and passing away of phenomena. But when concentration becomes stronger, the ardent practitioners will see the arising and passing away of phenomena and realize that there is no 'I', nor 'he' nor 'she'. So, wrong view is dispelled by means of developing at that moment is called *titana-pariÔĒ* : understanding as investigating.

As the practice is continued, they will come to realize the three general characteristics of physical and mental phenomena: impermanence, suffering and non-soul. The understanding which arises after overcoming the idea of permanence, etc. is known as *pahĒna-pariÔĒ* : understanding as overcoming. During the ten-day retreat, Daw VimalacĒrĒ usually gives guidance so this understanding is achieved. Most of the practitioners appreciate her guidance as they not merely gain peace but also their Dhamma vision is increased.

There still remain other nuns as meditation instructors in various meditation centers. But due to time factor, the presentation about only one such instructor is made here.

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