

the WISE investigator

SAYADAW U TEJANIYA explains how taking an interest in life as it is can lead to liberation.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya began his Buddhist training as a young teenager in Burma under the late Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw (1913–2002). After a career in business and life as a householder, he ordained as a monk some ten years ago. He teaches meditation at Shwe Oo Min Dhammasukha Tawya in Rangoon, Burma.

In June, I caught up with U Tejaniya at the Insight Meditation Society's Forest Refuge, in Barre, Massachusetts. His relaxed demeanor and easy sense of humor belie a commitment to awareness that he encourages his students to apply in every aspect of their lives, and his earlier life as a householder gives him a rare insight into the challenges faced by his lay students. U Tejaniya's delightfully illustrated book, *Don't Look Down on the Defilements, They Will Laugh at You*, aptly characterizes his teaching style—accessible and true to the traditional teachings of the Buddha.

—James Shaheen, Editor

Can you say something about the title of your book, *Don't Look Down on the Defilements, They Will Laugh at You*?

I never intended to write a book. One of my yogis had taken a lot of notes during interviews and wanted to make them available to others. Those notes were then edited and expanded by me and some other yogis. We picked the title because it is important not to underestimate the power of the defilements. When I teach meditation I emphasize the importance of watching the mind. While doing this you will see a lot of defilements. In their grosser manifestations, the defilements are anger, greed, and delusion. And they have plenty of friends and relatives, who often show up as the five hindrances: desire, aversion, torpor, restlessness, and doubt.

I advise yogis to get to know and investigate the defilements, because only through understanding them can we learn to handle them and eventually become free of them. If we ignore them, the joke's on us: they'll always get the better of us.

If they cause us so much grief, why do we ignore them?

People often become attached to what they're good at, to what they've achieved; they only want to see their good sides. Therefore they often don't acknowledge their weaknesses. They become proud and conceited because they don't see their negative sides. But if you cannot see both sides, the good and the bad, you can't say the picture is complete. If you do not observe the defilements wisdom cannot grow.

Is wisdom an absence of defilements? Yes, when there is right understanding there won't be any defilements. They are opposites; non-delusion is wisdom. Wisdom inclines toward the good but is not attached to it. It shies away from what is not good, but has no aversion to it. Wisdom recognizes the difference between skillful and unskillful, and it sees the undesirability of the unskillful.

You seem to emphasize practicing mindfulness in everyday life as opposed to sitting meditation. Can you say something about that? This is basically what the Buddha wanted, for people to practice all the time. I'm just advertising the Buddha's words. Sitting meditation can still be part of the practice. I emphasize mindfulness in daily life because people neglect that so much, and it's a very helpful, valid practice—especially when there's not that much time to sit.

What role, then, does sitting meditation play? I often say that it's not the posture that's meditating; it's the mind. That's how I understand meditation.

How do you define meditation? It's cultivating good qualities in the mind. It's making conditions right so good qualities can arise. If, while sitting, you're dreaming up things the mind can feel greedy about, I don't call that meditation. That's why I say that the mind working to do the meditation is more important than the posture.

But people associate the word "meditation" with "sitting." The two words have become synonymous, but this is a mistake. There are two kinds of meditation. In *samatha* [calm abiding], you need to sit and be still. My emphasis is Vipassana [insight meditation]. For Vipassana practice, sitting is not necessary. The purpose of practicing Vipassana is to cultivate wisdom.

To what end? We cultivate wisdom to understand, to see clearly, to know. You don't remove the defilements; wisdom does.

You had a very full life as a layperson. Why did you become a monk? What motivated you? I chose to because I can practice full-time as a monk.

As a layperson, we can't do this full-time? After all, you say we can practice in any situation. You can; it depends on the individual. It's a little different, and you have to give it a lot of time.

Is it easier as a monk to practice full-time? {Laughs.} Actually, I can't say being a monk makes it easier to meditate. Being able to meditate has nothing to do with being a monk or a layperson. I chose to ordain because I *wanted* to become a monk. Becoming a monk did not do anything to help my practice, nor was being a layperson detrimental to my practice.

What can you do as a monk that you couldn't do as a layperson? I get many opportunities to share my knowledge of dhamma and meditation. {Laughs.} I meet a lot more people!

You became a monk because you felt an obligation to teach? I had no intention to teach; I had no idea I would. But then my teacher told me to teach, so I did.

So you're a monk because you wanted to become a monk, no other reason. Yes. Exactly.

You've spoken often of the depression you experienced as a layperson, and how you got through it. Can you say something about that? I began practicing at age fourteen, so long before I experienced depression I'd already developed the ability to regard anything that came up in my mind and deal with it objectively, without getting involved or taking it personally when ugly stuff came up. When I became depressed I could apply all these skills.

I've been depressed three times. The first time I made a strong effort, just snapped myself out of it. And the second time, too. But each time the depression came back, and each time it came back stronger. The first two times I overcame depression, my recovery didn't last long. I know now that the first two times I'd used effort but no wisdom, no understanding. During the last



Sayadaw U Tejaniya "The desire to know something is wisdom at work."

depression, I had no energy left in me to make the effort. Depression followed me everywhere.

What did you do? The key for me in dealing with my depression was right attitude. I realized I'd have to use my wisdom to learn about it, understand it.

How? By just recognizing the depression and being present with it. I would just recognize that this was nature, that this was just a quality of mind; it was not personal. I watched it continually to learn about it. Does it go away? Increase? What is the mind thinking? How do the thoughts affect feelings? I became interested.

You often use the word “interest” to describe this attitude of investigation. Why? I saw that when I’d do the work with interest, my investigation would bring some relief. Before that I’d been at the depression’s mercy, but I learned I could actually *do* something. I was choosing to be proactive, to find out about depression, and then it lightened.

Was it acceptance that changed it? That was the main thing, complete acceptance. I saw I was helpless to do anything, so I just let it be there. But I could examine it, do something with myself. I couldn’t do anything *to* it, but I could investigate it and come to know it.

Why do you think “interest” was successful while “effort” ultimately failed? With interest and investigation there’s wisdom. Effort alone, without wisdom—the way people generally understand it—is associated with strained activity because it is usually motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion. Effort with wisdom is a healthy desire to know and understand whatever arises, without any preference for the outcome.

Are you using “interest” for right effort? Right effort is effort with wisdom. Because where there is wisdom, there is interest. The desire to know something is wisdom at work. Being mindful is not difficult. But it’s difficult to be *continuously* aware. For that you need right effort. But it does not require a great deal of energy. It’s relaxed perseverance in reminding yourself to be aware. When you are aware, wisdom unfolds naturally, and there is still more interest.

And what is wrong effort? You have to look for yourself; someone on the outside can’t tell you. You must recognize the mind that is using effort, and how it’s using effort, and whether it is wasting energy with forced effort. When you try too hard, you squander your energy. If you’re a serious practitioner, you cannot afford to do this. It’s a lifetime practice, a marathon, not a sprint.

You say that we can cultivate awareness in all our activities. Yet the challenge is great. Can you give a practice

that is particularly suited to lay life, one you found useful as a businessman? For laypeople, speech is a great opportunity to practice. The four precepts of right speech [the precepts cautioning against false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and useless speech] gave a real boost to my awareness as a layperson and businessman. Since awareness and wisdom had to come into the picture whenever I spoke, I had to apply them all day.

Saying things you shouldn’t say or speaking much more than is necessary brings a lot of agitation to the mind. The other extreme, complete silence, or not speaking up when it is useful or necessary, is also problematic. Applying right speech is difficult in the beginning; it takes practice. But if you practice every time you talk to someone, the mind will learn how to be aware, to understand what it should or should not say, and to know when it is necessary to talk. Of course you will make many mistakes. Every mistake is a learning opportunity that will teach you how to do better next time.

You point out again and again that silence and sitting aren’t the be-all and end-all of practice. Why? *{Laughs.}*

It’s when I began to really understand the nature of Vipassana that I began to say that. Very often we start with sitting, but we must remember what it’s used for. We sit to calm the mind, but once it’s calmer, we need to develop wisdom. To develop wisdom, we don’t have to be sitting. I don’t say people shouldn’t sit, I don’t want to eliminate sitting. But people begin to think, “I must sit.” You don’t have to.

You also discourage the common technique in Vipassana practice of “labeling” thoughts as a means of identifying them and letting them go. Why? Labels are to explain things to other people. Do you need to explain them to yourself?

The mind wanders—can’t labeling bring you back to yourself? You don’t have to use a conscious label. The mind knows what it’s thinking, the mind has already recognized its thinking by the time you label it. And there’s a risk. For example, if we label “pain, pain, pain,” it can get worse because the mind knows the meaning of the words it uses. It can reinforce pain. The point is not to change states, just to know them as they are.

I would also like to add that we say the mind “wanders,” but in fact it doesn’t go anywhere. Thoughts arise, that’s all. The only problem is that we think they shouldn’t!

You're sitting in the middle of a retreat center that is devoted to silent sitting meditation. It's a little ironic. *(Laughs.)* If they have nothing else to do, then fine. There is nothing wrong with sitting and walking as long as you do it in the right way.

But humor aside, different things work for different people. What would indicate we're practicing in the right way? When there is awareness, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom; when we feel light, alert, and awake. Over time, you find you're discovering that awareness becomes more firmly established and that the mind becomes steadier. You understand things you didn't before. If, however, you're getting tired, agitated, or depressed, you are practicing the wrong way. You always need to check the quality of mind; only if the quality is good are you practicing in the right way. This is how the quality of practice should be measured; not by posture or by the number of hours of sitting, walking, or standing meditation you do.



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Do you recommend intensive retreat? Yes, I do. It's like going to a training camp to prepare for a competition.

So often, awareness fades quickly after an intensive retreat. If we practice correctly while on retreat, we won't lose it so easily. Also, if we have enough understanding about the practice we can maintain it longer.

It does fade away for many of us. How do we maintain and deepen awareness after retreat? People have the wrong perspective with regard to objective. The objective of a retreat should be to learn how to use the mind in a way that we can continue to use it back at home and at the workplace. Retreat is like going to school. Can you be in school all your life?

You've been teaching for ten years. You teach a lot of people from Asia and a few from Europe, and now a lot of Americans. Any particular challenges working with Americans? It's more interesting.

Why? Because they think, and they are not believers. They have a natural curiosity. Westerners are taught to question.

And this questioning leads to greater wisdom? Yes, because wisdom is investigation, the desire to know. Once there is interest in investigating, the mind is no longer involved in what is happening and takes an objective view. As soon as we have any vested interest in the results of our investigation, we can no longer see things as they are. Wanting to understand is wisdom, wanting a result is greed.

But we need to have a goal. Is wanting to know motivation enough? Yes. And when wisdom grows, it leads you by the nose. You can't stop. That's why I like the atheists. There's hope for them. There is no need to believe anything. People become atheists because they think—they cannot believe, but they still want to know.

In the beginning, just start with wanting to know. Everyone has some curiosity, some basic need to

know. Just encourage that. A good education is motivating a person to want to know for himself. All the cramming and rote learning is never a good education. You won't get the best out of people that way. Their potential is stifled. Only people with an inner urge to learn will keep developing.

In your book, the illustrator depicts the defilements as little mice, and, of course, they're laughing at us. How does humor play into our practice? Wisdom sees the joke in everything. Wisdom is never upset. When you see the truth, it's easy to laugh. You can be going through something really difficult, but when you really understand, you can laugh. People don't want to be sad; they want to laugh.

Anything else? Stay interested. There is no reason for failure. If you don't practice at all, surely there's nothing to gain. But if you practice, you cannot fail. The moment you're doing it, you're already profiting. ▼