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Taking a Relaxed Approach with Sayadaw U Tejaniya
by Mirka Knaster

In 2007, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a Burmese monk, made his second visit to Western Dharma centers in the U. S. I had the opportunity to hear his teachings in several places, to interview him and his excellent translator, Ma Thet, and to speak with teachers and yogis about their experience of his transformative approach to Dharma practice. Sayadaw’s particular way of teaching is now influencing a number of Western vipassana teachers. He emphasizes practicing in a relaxed but continuous manner rather than forcing one’s effort; opening the field of awareness to all experience rather than beginning with a primary object to establish concentration; walking at a regular rather than slow pace on retreat; not imposing a fixed retreat schedule; and focusing on one’s relationship to objects rather than on the objects themselves. The integration of these elements appears to strengthen the five spiritual faculties (*indriya*)—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom—and deepen practice in everyday life.

Practicing with Ease

“At this point in the Dharma’s unfolding in the West, there seems to be a ripeness for Sayadaw’s relaxed and open approach,” says Myoshin Kelley, teacher-in-residence at the Forest Refuge in Barre, Massachusetts. For people who have done many years of practice, like herself, subtle levels of striving, wanting or trying to create something get exposed. That exposure of yet another layer of holding or attachment allows a certain ease to occur as well.

“Natural awareness is recognizing everything that’s happening without using a lot of effort,” says Sayadaw U Tejaniya. “You need to watch all day long, but you can’t be concentrating all day long. Meditation is for all the time—now, always, everywhere—not just to enjoy a stay in the forest on retreat.” He compares vipassana to running a marathon, not a 100-meter dash. We need to keep at it relentlessly, but in a relaxed manner. Instead of excessive mental and physical energy, a sense of patience and perseverance will build up natural momentum and further our practice.

Natural is a word that comes up a lot with Sayadaw and those who have practiced with him. Alexis Santos, who practiced long-term at Shwe Oo Min Meditation Centre, employs it when referring to what he learned:

It’s natural—practice Dhamma, understanding who we are and what reality is—it’s a natural event and it’s always happening. So there is nothing really to control. There’s never an opportunity that is not open for reflection or engagement, for learning, for opening the heart and mind to what is arising, for listening deeply. There’s a total sense of allowing this life not to be broken up into agendas.

Santos describes an image from nature—the sunflower—that helped him to establish awareness with the right attitude: “It just rests there and faces the sun and, in this very open way, receives everything it needs to grow and flourish as a flower. It doesn’t require straining to get light into itself.”

“Don’t see something as a problem,” Sayadaw advises. “Just see it as it is.” Allan Price reflects on how he had always perceived his practice as a problem. That has changed through his work with Sayadaw’s approach on a retreat with senior vipassana teachers Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters:

I’ve tended to have striving in my personality, so if I was supposed to feel the breath, then come hell or high water, I’m going to feel the breath. It was very typical for me on a retreat

to go into one of my interviews and say, "I'm not getting it." I just found the new instructions so helpful because it was much easier to be with the experience. With this approach, I can really sit with anything that comes up because it doesn't matter what comes up. I don't feel like there are experiences that are more or less valid now.

Strengthening the Faculty of Wisdom

"If you only want peace, understanding won't come," Sayadaw says. "And the other danger is, if you only want peace, then you'll get angry more easily." He laughs as he remembers learning this himself as a young man. He tells a story about a time when he was so concentrated and blissed out all day that he decided to keep practicing and not sleep that night. His energy was great for hours and then, around two A.M., a bedbug bit him and broke the samadhi. Annoyed, he groaned, but he also thought he could get it back. Because he didn't see the mind's attitude—craving bliss—the harder he tried, the more irritation and tension he generated. After three days, he was worn out. "I give up," he said. "Never mind if it doesn't come back. I've got a headache. I'm not going to try anymore." Suddenly, there was samadhi again. By over-focusing, he had zoned out and couldn't use his intelligence; the faculty of wisdom had become weak.

In this way of practicing, the application of wisdom rather than intense effort is what yields peace, and with wisdom, that peace is always available. According to Sayadaw, it's also not because we do something slowly that understanding and peace come to the mind. He does not teach slow walking but relaxed and sustained awareness. With the right attitude and consistent awareness, the nonreactive mind develops samadhi without becoming tight or tired while walking at a normal pace, talking or looking around. Sayadaw says, "Instead of slowing down to babysit the mind and help it see the body, we should be exercising the mind so we can keep up with everything." Steve Armstrong admits, "Contrary to my earlier opinion, you *can* have great samadhi walking at a faster pace. That was really revelatory for me." It is not slow walking that leads to

insight but the absence of greed, hatred and delusion. When there is strong concentration, the wisdom faculty is weak, and Sayadaw considers it much more important to develop wisdom than meditative absorption.

In contrast to *samatha*, the goal of vipassana is insight. Attention is on the mind that's observing: we don't get absorbed in the object but continually check the observing mind and notice what's arising, without trying to achieve any result or get rid of anything. "For wisdom to grow, the mind needs to see the bigger picture," says Sayadaw. "It must learn how to relate to all objects and how to let go of them."

Investigation: Focusing on One's Relationship to Objects

"When we don't notice the state of mind, a big fire can grow and consume all our energy," says Sayadaw. In what is really his hallmark teaching, he urges students to make a habit of being aware not exclusively of objects but of how the mind is feeling while observing objects: is it chaotic, fatigued, relaxed or contracted? He teaches students to see through a wide-angle lens rather than peer through a microscope, and he advises them not to practice in any way that is tiring. Any suffering that occurs is not inherent in the object but in the mind's relationship to the object, such as the pain of aversion or greed or identifying it as I/me/mine. Seeing this is wisdom at work. "We need to recognize the energy, attitudes, etc. that the mind is working with," Sayadaw says, "We can't become skilful without knowing them."

After hearing Sayadaw accentuate the investigative side of wisdom, Joseph Goldstein, co-founder and guiding teacher of the Insight Meditation Society and the Forest Refuge, reminds himself and others with a catchy phrase: "Mindfulness is not enough." The mind also needs to be discerning. "Of course, we've been saying from the beginning that it's the relationship to the experience that's important, not the experience itself," he adds, "but the way Sayadaw emphasized

this brought that relationship more to the forefront rather than being a background. I found that very helpful. To remember to check the attitude often reveals what might have gone unnoticed.”

Steve Armstrong points out that for Sayadaw understanding our own experience is key:

I think a lot of teachers when they hear a yogi report, offer either instructions or a technique. You rarely hear Sayadaw offer techniques. More often, he tries to elicit the understanding that yogis have of their experience. There's no judgment of the experience. It's not a question of measuring yourself against some assumed or expected or imagined standard of what a good yogi should be doing. When you practice in this way and your confidence grows, then implicitly you get the message, "Whatever you experience is fine."

Practicing in this way also serves, ultimately, to bring out lovingkindness and compassion, but not because we specifically cultivate these qualities. Sayadaw doesn't teach lovingkindness directly. He says that it will arise naturally as the defilements diminish. Patricia Genoud-Feldman, cofounder and a guiding teacher at the Meditation Center Vimalakirti in Geneva, Switzerland, says, "If people watch their minds all the time and know what they're thinking and doing, clearly wisdom is going to take over greed, hatred and delusion. The kind heart or compassionate heart or virtuous being is naturally going to be more available."

Retreat Flexibility Fosters Investigating Experience

On retreat, there's no strict format. Instead of depending on a fixed schedule for discipline, yogis have to assume self-responsibility or self-regulation. This format fosters an atmosphere of investigation. Sayadaw's own infectious inquiry invites curiosity and experimentation as well: Why do I sit? Why do I get up now to walk? Why do I turn around at this point? Why do I choose to wear long sleeves or short sleeves? Why do I ask such questions? He says it's not sufficient only to do things; we also need to understand the *why* of doing them.

For Sayadaw, investigation of our experience is essential to practice. For those of us who have misunderstood that thinking and meditation are incompatible, permission for inquiry is a relief. However, Sayadaw is not advocating that we get into storytelling and lose ourselves in content. He warns against indulging in thinking about things that will make greed, aversion and delusion grow. He encourages us to cultivate thinking that will help awareness and wisdom to flourish: Why am I being aware? How shall I do this? How can I do it better? Is this necessary? Is it helpful?

Meals are at fixed hours for everyone on retreat, but Sayadaw does not ask yogis to follow a particular routine for sitting and walking. When presented with no schedule on a retreat at Cloud Mountain Retreat Center in southwest Washington, Linda Owen found this challenging. A punctual person who likes things to be on time, she immediately began to explore how to deal with this. Gradually, she noticed that in not having to be anywhere at a specific hour, she could be more attentive to whatever was arising during the transition periods and not hurry from lunch to a shower, but remain relaxed.

Labeling Your Practice “Good” and “Bad”

By staying interested in her attitude, Linda discovered the lack of schedule useful in yet another way: “It helps you loosen the grip of identifying as a ‘good’ yogi. You don’t have to be the last one still sitting in the meditation hall and then get up at three in the morning to be the first one back the next day. It doesn’t matter. People are coming and going all the time, so it drops that completely.”

“Why do we have good or bad meditation?” Sayadaw asks. “Our state of mind colors our practice. When we become skilful, there’s no bad meditation, though we might be having a difficult experience.”

Steve Armstrong witnessed this in a young European woman at the center where Sayadaw teaches in Burma:

She couldn't sit for ten minutes; it was too painful. She'd have to get up and walk. She slumped and flapped around. Then she'd sleep all afternoon. She just looked really disgusted and angry and fed up all the time. But, an interesting piece— she was enjoying her practice even though it was very difficult. She wasn't judging herself as "I can't do it" or "I'm no good" or anything else because she was learning about herself and about practice.

Surprised to see her—and even radiant—at the center a year and a half later, he inquired about her experience. She told him, “That was the best time. It was so important for me—it changed my life.”

Myoshin Kelley is also heartened by how joyful interest, even in the midst of much aversion, has affected her practice and that of yogis she works with:

Whenever I would see my mind squirming, wanting to pull away, wanting not to look, there was this renewed interest: What's happening here? What's the challenge here? It was very lighthearted and allowed me to look into corners that I have somehow managed to seal off as "don't go there." It helped me to have a greater sense of practicing throughout the day.

She is encouraging more of an open practice among her students—more relaxation and investigation—and watches how they go through the process of confronting experiences of deep wounding and immense suffering in their lives and come out beaming.

Relaxed Effort Benefits Retreat and Everyday Life

Practitioners have remarked that, in recognizing a greater sense of ease and spaciousness, confidence in the path and in their ability to walk it increases. The results are visible not only on retreat but also in everyday life because, as Rich Hill realized, practicing with general awareness and investigation “dissolves the divide between the cushion and lay life.” Patricia Genoud-Feldman

comments on added ease in relationships because there's less need for things to unfold in a certain way.

An American nun who has studied with Sayadaw identifies the importance of a relaxed mind: "It just became crystal clear that you cannot make insight happen; it arises by itself, and only if the mind is relaxed. I was really struck by how much unconscious effort I had been making." She also admits, "It's very embarrassing to say it, but it's as though I cared more about progress than I did about understanding." U Tejaniya's accent on knowing the attitude in the mind broke that logjam and made it possible to resume her primary practice in a much more balanced manner. "There is value to traditional form," she says. "We just need to hold it in a different way."

When individuals come to Sayadaw for help after problematic experiences at other practice centers, he does not tell them to give up the method they're trained in. He simply instructs them to become aware of their attitude toward how they're doing it. Once they get straightened out, they're able to continue rather than forsake their earlier training. Sayadaw says:

Yogis are often too tense because they are practicing with wrong attitudes, wrong views or wrong ideas. They are always striving to get places. The problem is that most of them are not skilful. They don't know their state of mind or their situation or what they're capable of. All they know is that they want to get it—and that's why they overexert themselves.

But is Sayadaw's approach skilful means for all yogis? Steve Armstrong notes, "Sayadaw's style of practice works really well for strongly self-motivated, really curious, high energy-minded people. But if somebody has a commitment or attachment to a particular theoretical Buddhist perspective, they may not be able to hear his teachings."

Joseph Goldstein adds:

I have a mandala-like view of it all. The Dharma is so vast and there are so many different qualities that all need to be developed. I see different teachers approaching the practice

emphasizing one or another of these qualities. So what order they're done in or what attracts people to start with will be different. Whether you start with concentration or you start with investigation, any approach is a doorway. If it's an authentic approach, it will lead to all the rest.

*Mirka Knaster is grateful to Sayadaw U Tejaniya and all the individuals who helped in the preparation of this article. Author of *Discovering the Body's Wisdom* (Bantam Books), she is currently working on *Living the Life Fully*, a book about the embodiment of spiritual qualities through the life of Anagarika Munindra, the Bengali meditation master who introduced many Western teachers to the Dharma.*