

# Fantastic!

## an interview with sayadaw u tejaniya

**Sayadaw U Tejaniya**, successor to the late Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw U Kosalla, was here last year and is here again for a retreat. **Ven Kumara Bhikkhu**, who is under his guidance for the second time, interviews him for the benefit of the readers.

**Kumara Bhikkhu:** Sayadaw, thank you very much for granting us this interview. Let us start with something light. You came last year for your retreat. What made you decide to come here again this year?

**U Tejaniya:** This centre is very similar to forest monasteries in Burma. I wish to spend time in a forest monastery. The last time I came, I actually did so without having planned to. When I was here I realised that I actually like this place a lot. I found that my meditation practice here was good. I realised that the setting here is truly a forest monastery setting, which was what I wanted.

**Sayadaw, we have definitely benefited from your presence here and your teaching. We are glad that, besides having your own retreat, you have been willing to share some of your time with us, to guide us in our practice of *satipatthàna*. I hope that through this interview, we can also allow other Malaysian yogis to benefit from your knowledge and experience.**

**Many Malaysian yogis are familiar with the Mahasi method, the Pa Auk method and the Goenka method. Can you briefly tell us the difference between what you are teaching and the typical Mahasi method?**

Actually, I do not give preference to any method or technique. I don't want to talk too much about this. I just want to share with the yogi or help the yogi to understand the right attitude on how to practice and my understanding about it, so that they can bear this in mind.

I've gone through the life of a yogi and have experienced much. I have realised that *cittànupassana* (awareness of mental states) is very important. If you have this information, this knowledge about the right attitude first, your meditation will be better.

I learnt a lot about this from the late Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, so that I could apply this attitude in meditation. It benefited my practice a lot. I did try to learn from other meditation teachers too, but they don't talk about this.

**Can you give an example of this knowledge?**

They talked about looking at this object or that object, but they don't emphasise how to do it: what state of mind, what attitude to have when you watch the object, why you are watching it...

**“Why”?**

Yes. Why you are watching this. Most people don't know the reason. For most people, they are just following orders.

**Okay. I see.**

They don't use their intelligence.

**I see what you mean.**

This is a problem. I want to share this first. Any instruction I give the yogi, I start by telling them this. Because you meditate with the mind, you need to understand some things about the mind. You must know.

**That should come first.**

Yes.

**And in terms of method...**

I'm not into methods. I only say that it is satipatthana. What the Buddha taught is satipatthana.

**I've heard some Malaysian yogis saying that in the Shwe Oo Min (SOM) centre, they practise watching the solar plexus. I personally, having practised under your guidance, find that to be a misrepresentation. It is not very accurate. Do you have any**

**comments about that?**

In the past, when I was learning, my teacher also taught me many ways. Among the things that I like is watching the solar plexus.

So earlier on when I started teaching meditation, what I advised the yogis to do was to watch the solar plexus. By paying attention to the solar plexus, you can know mental feelings more, and slowly you can begin to see mental activities. When I find that the yogi's mindfulness is somewhat strong, I try to guide him from the solar plexus to the feeling.

But slowly I realised that this is not for everybody. Some people try to target the place. They try to find where. I know that this is a weak point. This targeting is not good for the yogi. I began to realise this. So I changed to emphasise the mind. The mind is more important. The object is not important.

**So, when a person says that what you teach is watching the solar plexus, it is not very accurate; but for some of them, you do teach this way...**

Yes.

**... but for others not necessarily so. It could be more of mental states or something else.**

Yes. I observe the yogis and, gradually, I've become more and more open about my instructions. Before, I was a little bit...

**Narrow?**

Narrow. Now, I understand more. Having got more experience teaching yogis, having had many, many discussions with them, my understanding has become wider.

Year by year, my instructions change a little. I'm not rigid. When I see a weak point, I change the instruction, so that it becomes more helpful to the yogi.

**Can you give us an estimate of how many Malaysian yogis you have taught?**

I think somewhere around 50. Last year was when a lot started to come.

**So, having interviewed them, do you notice any general characteristics about these Malaysian yogis?**

Yes. Malaysian yogis are very good in faith, and their *viriyā* is also very strong. By *viriyā*, I mean forcing *viriyā*. [Laughter] Their forcing *viriyā* is very strong. Another weak point about Malaysian yogis is too much belief and thinking about ghosts and devas. I have seen that this is something that has caused the most problems among the Malaysian yogis.

One difficulty I face with Malaysian yogis is that... for a lot of Malaysian yogis, what they understand is to focus very hard on the object, with a lot of *viriyā*, a lot of effort. Heavy concentration creates problems. This is a weak point of most Malaysian yogis.

**On this weak point of trying to force their attention on the object, what do you suggest they do about it?**

I think the understanding, the information that they get is not enough. But they know this (i.e. pay close attention to the object), so they just try to do this. They don't have enough information. So now I want to try to share this right information through a book.

**So that they can get a more complete idea on how to pay attention to their meditation object?**

Yes. Also, they think that *cittanupassana* (awareness of mental states) is very 'high level'. But I think it's not very high lah! [Laughter] It's just because they have less experience.

What I advise is to start with *kayanupassana* (awareness of the body) but you can continue with any obvious mental states or *vedana* (mental feelings). So, you can start [by watching these] together. Not separately. In the beginning you don't have to watch just the mind only; you cannot.

**So, you don't really teach that way?**

Some people can easily know about the mental states sooner. In that case, he or she can start watching them sooner. Sometimes, there are some yogis who have practised for a long time and already have enough *samadhi*, so it's better to go immediately to the mental states.

**So, for some yogis, you start straight with mental states.**

Yes, because it depends on his level, his understanding.

Also, my idea is that I'm not teaching. My motivation is to help the yogi. I don't want to be some *sayadawgyi* (great venerable teacher). I don't want this. I want to help. I want to know the weak point of the yogi. I want to know what he needs and try to give him what he needs. This is more beneficial for the yogi.

**Sayadaw, you mentioned, some time after coming here, that your mind is more peaceful now. You said that you've been very busy teaching and that is not good. I understand that you're doing something about it. Can you share what you intend to do, so that perhaps yogis who intend to go there can know what to expect? Is there anything for us to know in advance so that perhaps we can help in some way?**

I started last year.

**What did you try to do?**

Now I've found my way, a balance between the outside situation and my mind. I've found the way myself now.

Before, there were fewer yogis. So, I could handle it. But gradually things went out of control: too many yogis. So I couldn't balance. So, I had to find my way.

**So, you're not changing how the centre is run, like limiting the number of yogis or how long the yogis can stay?**

This I cannot control. *[Laughter]* Because now with the Internet, the whole world knows. Like now there are many westerner yogis, Canadians, Europeans (Pause) many people and I've no way to tell them when to come.

**So, you're not limiting the length of stay, such as to three months as is the case for Burmese yogis?**

This is for local yogis only because there are too many of them. For foreign yogis, if you really want to practise, it depends on you. If you continue to practise, we don't ask you to go. If you are not practising, then go. It's better that way. Otherwise, it's a waste of time.

**I notice that, for myself and many other Malaysian yogis that I've observed, there seems to be a lack of joy in our practice.**

Yes, not satisfied.

**We are too serious.**

Yes, no *piti* (joy).

**(Pause) Which is actually an enlightenment factor?**

No *piti* and no *passaddhi* (calmness).

**I notice that when there's a lack of joy, the mind is simply not relaxed enough. I notice that you're more relaxed than I am, and you seem to be more mindful than I am. So, I'm beginning to try to change my way. Do you notice this of other yogis too?**

Like you? A lot!

**Should we 'enjoy' our meditation?**

People force because they are not satisfied and want something. By 'joy' I mean being happy, being contented – contented with yourself, believing in yourself, having faith in yourself. If you have right practice, then this happens.

If your practice is without enough understanding, or not complete in understanding, then it becomes like your case, not happy to practice<sup>1</sup>. You need to learn more about meditation. You must learn more about your mind. If you really, really watch, you can see what is happening in your mind, everything, then you can see your weak point.

**And then I can adjust...**

Adjust yourself. Actually, what you need is to have more understanding. Then you can do this. You're satisfied with yourself, you're satisfied with your practice, you enjoy your practice. 'Enjoy' means have faith, confidence.

A person who understands very well that this practice is beneficial will never lack interest. I'm always interested in watching myself. Fantastic! If you see that your mind is walking the Noble Eightfold Path, this is a meaningful life.

**Yes, I agree. *[Mild laughter]* It is a meaningful life.**

You would never get bored. Never. You know the present moment, the benefit of just being mindful. If you can see this clearly, you would never be bored with the practice. Why you are mindful and what you get from this – if you really understand that, you would never be bored. All the time, it would be fantastic, fantastic.

**So, there will always be this joy.**

Yes. I'm not enjoying, but joy comes automatically. You understand?

**Yes, I see what you mean. Thank you, Sayadaw. Bhante Aggacitta observed that many foreign monks who go to Myanmar or many foreign yogis who go to Myanmar and become monks, go only to meditation centres and learn how to meditate. But as monks, meditation is just one part of the Buddha's teachings. Normally these monks, after learning meditation, do not learn other essential parts of the Buddha's teachings. They seem to be satisfied with just that. Do you think that is a problem, and if you do, is the Shwe Oo Min centre doing anything about this for the sake of the Sasana?**

This is a weak point about SOM. What we can do is only emphasise how to meditate. As for other things, it's our weak point, but it's something they should do [i.e. learn other essential parts of the Buddha's teachings].

**What would you suggest to these monks when they are about to leave the centre, so that they would try to learn other aspects of the Buddha's teachings?**

I say *vinaya* is also very important. But you can be aware of yourself, watch yourself in whatever you do, and slowly you will understand what you should do. If you want to live your life as a monk, you must learn about a monk's life. If you don't do this, and only meditate, this is not enough. For lay people, this is not a problem.

**But if they are not from traditional Buddhist countries, when they go back, they have nowhere to go to learn. They can only try to read on their own. What do you think they should do?**

You must learn. Come to Myanmar or do whatever that is best. No matter what, you must learn. This is your choice [of life].

**Sayadaw, you're now working on your book, which contains what you want to share with yogis. What is your main motivation for writing this book? I'm asking this because earlier on, as I understand, you had no intention to give talks, you're not writing any books – there aren't any books from Shwe Oo Min at all. Then suddenly I heard that you're coming up with a book. What motivated you to do this now?**

It's because of what I've learnt from my experience with yogis. Even some yogis who have practised for a very long time still do not have enough understanding about the mental states, and how to watch their mind. They are not skilled enough. So I want to share this mental attitude. The sooner the yogi gets a better understanding of this, the more he can benefit.

This is not my choice. Some Malaysian yogis come for interview and then they want to know more. So when other people have their interview, they also sit in and take notes. Then they wanted to make it into a book for the sake of others and I agreed.

The only thing that I've done is a leaflet on "What is the Right Attitude for Meditation", the 27 points. Then, I noticed that it brought a lot of benefit for the yogis. When the yogis read it, they also become very interested in the practice. For old yogis too, they can change their attitude, they can know their mind. So, it's very beneficial to them.

So that's my motivation – to provide more information to yogis.

**Alright. I think that's enough for this interview. Thank you very much, Sayadaw, for sharing your time.**