

# Transformations of insight

I don't trust my inner feelings  
Inner feelings come and go.

Leonard Cohen<sup>i</sup>

We know where we are only when we understand how we got here. As a teacher and student within the contemporary insight movement, my understanding of this movement, and of my own place within it, emerges from a history. I begin this paper with the story of my lineage, that of Mahāsī Sayādaw, and of the modern insight movement of Myanmar, here referred to by its former name, Burma. Then I look at the similarities and differences between the modern insight movement here and in Burma, and through this analysis locate my own role as a teacher within the insight movement.

The modern insight movement began in the mid nineteenth century in the royal court of Mandalay, stimulated by the twin traumas of military defeat and colonial occupation. In 1911, Mingun Sayādaw (1869-1954) opened the first meditation centre devoted to the teaching and practice of *vipassanā* ("insight") meditation for laity as well as monks and nuns.<sup>ii</sup> This was where Venerable U Sobhana, later known as Mahāsī Sayādaw (1904-1982), went for meditation training in 1932.<sup>iii</sup> In 1947 Mahāsī Sayādaw was appointed the head monk (*ovādācariya sayādaw*) of a new meditation centre in Rangoon designed to promote the practice of *vipassanā* meditation. This was called the Mahasi Thatana Yeiktha (MTY).

The Burmese insight movement represented a movement from tradition to modernity, through its empowerment of the laity and its reorganisation of meditation practice. It can be seen as an attempt to democratise enlightenment itself.

The role of the laity was enhanced by a new kind of lay Buddhist organisation, called *kopaka apwe* ("guardian associations"),<sup>iv</sup> that founded and operated the new meditation centres. These centres are predominantly lay and urban, in marked contrast to the traditional forest monasteries controlled by monastics.<sup>iv</sup> Through them, the laity have become regulators of the *saṅgha* (community of ordained monastics), a role that in traditional Burma was reserved for the king. Buddhism was being democratised. Further, the insight movement was never meant to be confined to Burma alone, but to be internationalised by the promotion of *vipassanā* meditation around the world.<sup>v</sup>

In the case of the MTY, the *kopaka apwe* which owns and operates it is the Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Apwe (BSNA).<sup>vi</sup> Mahāsī Sayādaw was able to function as the head of the centre named after him only because he had been appointed by, and retained the confidence of, the BSNA. One of his successors, Paṇḍitārāma Sayādaw, left the MTY after difficulties with the BSNA, and went on to establish his own centres.<sup>vii</sup>

Mahāsī Sayādaw was an innovative teacher who brought meditation practice to a mass following by systematising both its practice and its teaching. Any person with normal physical and mental health can expect to succeed in this previously esoteric activity by following a standardised technique. The teaching of meditation was also systematised, to the extent that ordinary individuals who can not demonstrate any unusual powers or charisma, but who have been appropriately trained, can transmit *vipassanā* practice.<sup>viii</sup> Meditation practice has become democratised, in that it is now

available to the laity to a degree unknown in traditional Buddhism, and internationalised, in that the same method can be applied across cultures.

Houtman<sup>ix</sup> lists a number of oppositions which express the ways in which practitioners in the modern Burmese *vipassanā* movement understand Buddhism. These oppositions also characterise the insight movement in contemporary Australia, illustrating the internationalisation of the movement, and how our history has shaped our current attitudes and practices. Here I list these oppositions and compare them with the insight movement in Australia.

- Burmese *vipassanā* practitioners distinguish between an inherited customary Buddhism and an authentic Buddhism reconstructed from authoritative texts and experienced individually through meditation. This corresponds to the distinction made in the Australian insight movement between an Asian Buddhism of ethnic custom and a Western Buddhism found in meditation practices assisted by modern psychology and a return to the original teachings of the Buddha.
- Burmese *vipassanā* practitioners value “practice” (*paṭipatti*) and its result, “penetration” (*paṭivedha*), over “scriptural learning” (*pariyatti*). This corresponds to the emphasis among Australian insight practitioners on the importance of practice over mere “theory.”
- Burmese *vipassanā* practitioners claim membership, through their practice, of the “*saṅgha* of ultimate truth” (*paramatṭha saṅgha*) as distinct from the “*saṅgha* of conventional truth” (*sammuti saṅgha*), limited to formally ordained monastics. In the Australian insight movement lay practitioners have appropriated the term “*saṅgha*” for themselves and may dismiss the ordained *saṅgha* as irrelevant, or even suggest that traditional monasticism is morally inferior to modern Western forms of lay association.<sup>x</sup>
- Burmese *vipassanā* practitioners emphasise “meditation” (*bhāvanā*) over other forms of Buddhist action such as “charity” (*dāna*) and “morality” (*sīla*). This corresponds to the centrality of meditation practice in the Australian insight movement, where the central appeal is to the efficacy of meditation practice for improving one’s quality of life, rather than the cultivation of traditional Buddhist virtues.
- Finally, Burmese *vipassanā* practitioners emphasise “insight” (*vipassanā*) meditation as the ideal type of meditative technique, as opposed to mere “concentration” (*samatha*) meditation, and regard only the former as unique to Buddhism. Similarly, members of the Australian insight movement regard “insight” as their central value, and find it located within a specific approach to meditation practice, even if this is supplemented by other practices, such as the sublime states (*brahma vihāras*) or psychotherapy.

While the Australian insight movement shares the same concerns as its Burmese counterpart, we also find noticeable differences, arising from the differences between the two cultures. Speaking generally, in Burma the depth and ubiquity of Theravāda Buddhism creates a context within which the more specialised insight movement can find its specific place, while in Australia the absence of any indigenous Buddhist tradition has meant that the insight movement has largely drawn away from its Theravāda origins and sees itself as constituting its own “insight tradition.”<sup>xi</sup>

These cultural differences are reflected in the very idea of “insight.” In the Burmese *vipassanā* movement, “insight, or “insight knowledge” translates the Pāli word “*ñāṇa*,” based on the root *ñā*, “to know” or “to understand.” For the Buddha and the modern Theravāda, *ñāṇa* refers to an understanding of the three universal characteristics of *anicca* (“impermanence,” or “change”), *dukkha* (“suffering,” or “unsatisfactoriness”) and *anattā* (“not-self”). Consequently, within the Theravāda tradition these three words – *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* – are loaded with meaning.

The word “impermanence,” for example, indicates the discovery of a world in which clinging becomes pointless, as anything we cling to, no matter how loved or hated, vanishes. When nothing can be relied upon to remain, Leonard Cohen’s suspicion of his “inner feelings,” and his sense of inhabiting a world no longer defined by them, make a great deal of sense. The world becomes mysteriously open, no longer restricted to the narrow confines of the self and its habitual obsessions, a place where anything can happen. Here we find a new sense of reality joined to an appreciation of the beauty and poignancy revealed by the inherent fragility of things. Contemporary Australians who live outside the world defined by the classical Buddhist tradition find little meaning in the word “impermanence,” and certainly not enough to move them to a new understanding of the world.

In the Australian insight movement, the word “insight” tends to be under-defined. A glance at some websites of insight groups and networks on the Australian east coast,<sup>xii</sup> for example, shows that none attempt a precise definition of insight. My experience is that Australian practitioners use the word “insight” to refer to any experience that sheds meaning on one’s life, and in particular any understanding of one’s own psychological processes. The very vagueness of the concept may add to its appeal for a wide audience.

In Australia, what is important for the idea of insight is the *meaning* of any given experience, and so its felt potential for influencing one’s way of life. Whether or not an experience fits within a classical Buddhist context is, for the most part, unknown to, and irrelevant for, the practitioner. This is a pragmatic, secular view of insight, and makes the withdrawal from the Theravāda tradition, with its religious and cosmological concerns, seem entirely natural.

How insight is understood affects how insight meditation is taught. In the Theravāda, the three characteristics are subdivided into 16 *ñāṇas*, or “insight knowledges,” first analysed in the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of purification*), a 5<sup>th</sup> century AD teachers’ manual written for the monks of the Mahāvihāra of Anuradhapura, then capital of Sri Lanka.<sup>xiii</sup> Mahāsī Sayādaw designed his method of insight meditation to guide the practitioner through these 16 *ñāṇas*, which culminate in *magga-phala ñāṇa*, *nibbāna* as directly encountered.<sup>xiv</sup> This experience turns the practitioner from an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) to a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*), one who, having entered the stream of dharma, will never again be born in any of the lower realms and will attain final awakening within seven lifetimes.<sup>xv</sup>

Mahāsī Sayādaw and his disciples mapped the “progress of insight”<sup>xvi</sup> by making precise records of the experiences of their students and correlating these to the literary descriptions of the *ñāṇas*. The recorded experiences of many thousands of practitioners created a phenomenological database that allows even an inexperienced teacher to listen to a practitioner’s report and, taking into account other factors such as the personality of the practitioner and her level of concentration (*samādhi*), locate her precisely within a specific *ñāṇa*. This, in turn, influences the instructions given to that particular person at that particular time.<sup>xvii</sup>

The emphasis here is *not* on what the meditation experience means to the practitioner. What is important is not the meaning a practitioner extracts from any given experience, but the quality of their awareness of it.<sup>xviii</sup> This approach assumes a great deal of faith on the part of practitioners, that they will be willing to work extremely hard to go through a process that they do not understand, as well as a great deal of faith on the part of the teachers that the experiences themselves will reveal their meaning in the appropriate way over time.

In Australia, most people begin their insight practice with no cultural background to locate what they are doing, and no prior commitment to Buddhism. In these circumstances meaning becomes paramount, especially as the encounter with meditation practice is often part of a broader search for meaning in an apparently meaningless world. Practitioners need to understand what they are doing, and why. Teachers have to be able to provide that meaning, as they cannot assume it already exists. They have to introduce the cultural background to the method – in other words, basic Buddhism – as well as explain the three characteristics and their implications for the way we live.

This brings me to where I stand within the contemporary insight movement. Trained in Burma by Burmese teachers, I know that it is neither possible nor desirable to attempt to transplant Burmese Buddhism. Yet I also know that the strangeness of the dharma creates the temptation to domesticate it, by translating it into some familiar aspect of our own culture – for example, as a form of psychotherapy<sup>xix</sup> or secular humanism.<sup>xx</sup> How, then, can I teach insight in contemporary Australia in a way that is relevant to us but which allows students entry into the alien culture of Buddhism?

I seek a balance between the Burmese approach of insight as phenomenology and our intuitive sense of insight as meaning. Emphasising the centrality of investigation as defining the nature of *vipassanā* meditation, I seek to convey its practice as an open enquiry into the human condition guided by the themes of the Buddha's teaching. How much of this teaching is relevant to our culture is something that will only be revealed over time – and I am speaking of centuries rather than of years.

I begin with the Buddha. My own commitment is to understand and communicate the Buddha's teaching, the "root" (*mūla*) of the Theravāda – and every other – Buddhist tradition. I do this by conveying a meditation technique that makes clear the fact of change. This is the Mahāsī method of *vipassanā* meditation, based on the practice of following the movement of awareness from primary to secondary object, and back again.<sup>xxi</sup> This cultivates what the Buddha calls the "perception of impermanence" (*anicca-saññā*), the open door through which insight enters. This perception creates a space within which we can pull back from our habitual stickiness of personal involvement long enough to recognise and learn to inhabit a world no longer defined by our normal, taken-for-granted self-reference.

But it is clear to me that it is not enough just to teach and practice a meditation technique. As we learn new ways of perceiving ourselves and our world we need a new language with which to conceptualise them. We need the language of the Buddha, which he carefully developed throughout the 45 years of his teaching career. At present, this language is foreign to us. We need to make it part of our being, so that we can enter into the world the Buddha inhabited, discover the details of its geography, and eventually make it our own. This is the second aspect of my project of teaching insight – to make the Buddha's language my own and communicate it effectively to others, so that it can enter our own culture and become as natural to us as our own reflection in a mirror.

<sup>i</sup> "That don't make it junk," from *Ten new songs*.

<sup>ii</sup> Gustaaf Houtman. *Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics*. ILCAA Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa Monograph Series No. 33, 1999: 7-8.

<sup>iii</sup> Silānandābhivumsa. *The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw biography. Abridged edition – Part 1*. Rangoon: Buddhasāsanā Nuggaha Organizaton, 1982: 35-41.

<sup>iv</sup> Ingrid Jordt. *Burma's mass lay meditation movement. Buddhism and the cultural construction of power*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007: 17.

<sup>v</sup> Houtman. *Mental culture*. 8.

<sup>vi</sup> Jordt. 26-27.

<sup>vii</sup> Jordt. 226, note 43. During the *vassa* (rains retreat) of 1987 I was a bhikkhu under U Paṇḍita at MTY, and witnessed his attempt to change the way in which food was offered to the bhikkhus in the Yeiktha's dining hall. The BSNA ignored his advice, and it became clear to all his monastic students that a conflict had broken out.

<sup>viii</sup> Jordt. 31-32.

<sup>ix</sup> Houtman. *Traditions*. 15-16.

<sup>x</sup> David Bubna-Litic & Winton Higgins, "The Emergence of Secular Insight Practice in Australia," *Journal of global Buddhism*, Volume 8, 2007, viewed 4 July 2008. <<http://www.globalbuddhism.org/toc.html>>

<sup>xi</sup> Bubna-Litic & Higgins: 157-58.

<sup>xii</sup> Websites consulted were those of: An Australian Insight Meditation Network, <<http://www.dharma.org.au/>>; The Bluegum Sangha, <<http://bluegumsangha.org/>>; Insight Meditation Australia, <<http://www.insightmeditationaustralia.org/>>; and Sydney Insight Meditators, <<http://www.siminc.org.au/>>. Viewed 18 April 2009.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (trans.) *The path of purification (Visuddhimagga) by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975, pp. ix-xxviii, for an introduction to and location of this text.

<sup>xiv</sup> While the concept of *nibbāna* is used in various ways, it is sometimes spoken of in the early tradition as a real existent that can be known by the mind. For a discussion, see Steven Collins, Steven Collins. *Niroana and other Buddhist felicities. Utopias of the Pali imaginaire*. Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions 12. Edited by John Clayton et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 163-177.

<sup>xv</sup> Bodhi. *In the Buddha's words. An anthology of discourses from the Pāli canon*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005: 373-75.

<sup>xvi</sup> The title of a book in which Mahāsī Sayādaw gives a summary of the 16 insight knowledges. See Mahasi Sayadaw, *The progress of insight. A treatise on Buddhist satipaṭṭhāna meditation*. Translated by Nyanaponika Thera. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985.

<sup>xvii</sup> See Jordt, 66-69.

<sup>xviii</sup> Jordt, 73.

<sup>xix</sup> See, for example, Mark Epstein, *Thoughts without a thinker. Psychotherapy from a Buddhist perspective*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

<sup>xx</sup> See, for example, Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without beliefs. A contemporary guide to awakening*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1997.

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<sup>xxi</sup> See Mahasi Sayadaw. *Practical insight meditation. Basic and progressive stages*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971.