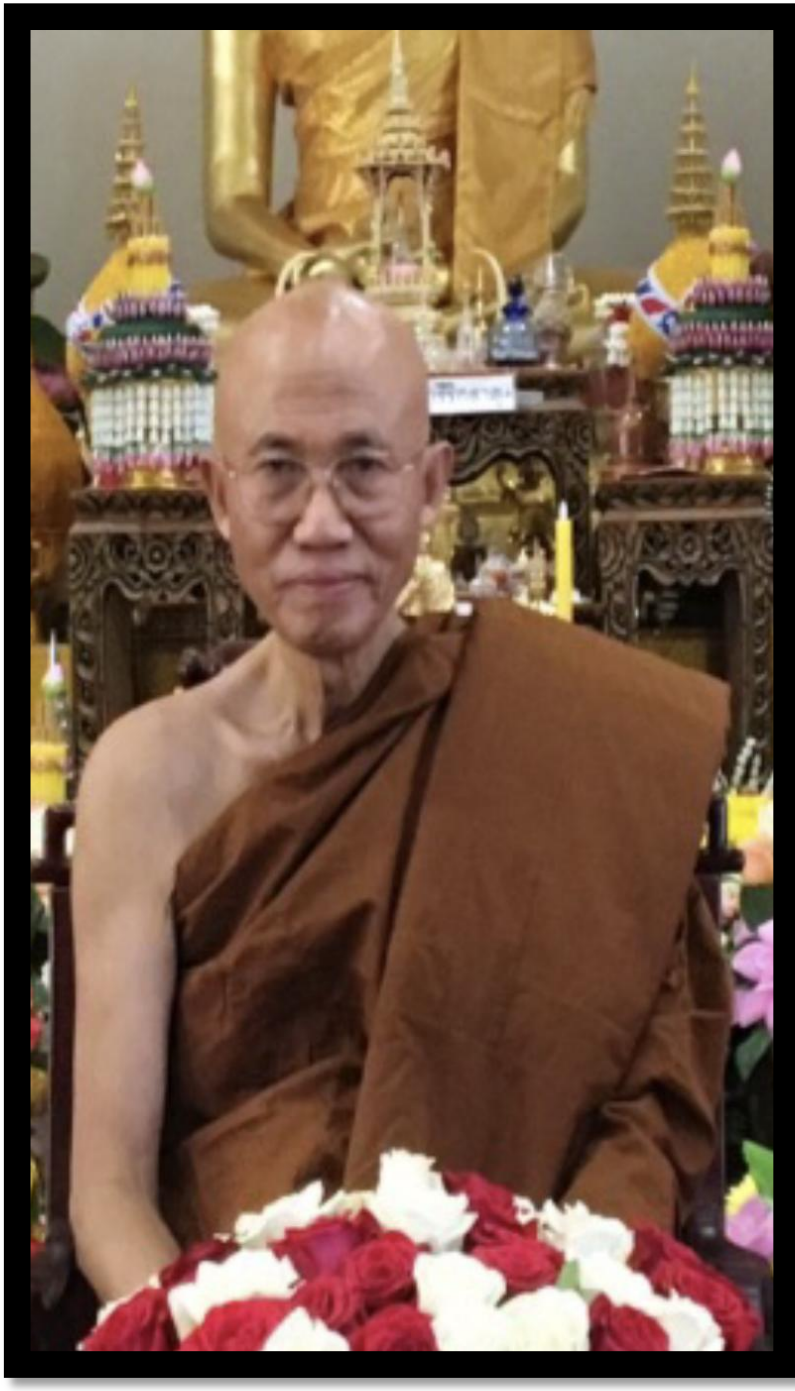

Las Vegas Sayādaw

The Story of Sayādaw U Zeyathuta & Chaiya Meditation Monastery

Published for free distribution

Las Vegas Sayādaw:
The Story of Sayādaw U Zeyathuta
& Chaiya Meditation Monastery

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Cover photo: Las Vegas Sayādaw's school ID photo—
the first photo ever taken of him.
(circa June 1967)

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Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa
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Foreword

I came into this life of Dhamma first as a student of refined and delicate, beautiful Japanese Zen before eventually and satisfyingly settling into the austere and simple confines of the Thai Forest Tradition. It was through my immersion in the latter tradition that my life in time opened to the teachings and tradition of Sayādaw U Zeyathuta. Yet Burmese Buddhism—including its emphasis on *Abhidhammā*—was entirely mysterious to me. But over time I slowly began to understand it.

What was missing was context.

I knew almost nothing of the monk who became my teacher. I knew Sayādaw was from Burma, of course. And I had a vague understanding that he'd been a disciple of the legendary Mahāsi Sayādaw. But that was about it.

And so one day I plucked up the courage (and forwardness) to offer to write Sayādaw's biography. He trusted me enough to accept.

I thus embarked on the journey of learning the details of my teacher's life, and of the history of the monastery that bears his name.

What followed was months of weekly interviews, research through peripheral parties and other sources, and near-daily correspondence with Sayādaw about various aspects of this endeavor.

To now offer this book to you is a great honor for me.

I have made mistakes and I have misunderstood. Much of the quoted material has been substantially edited or paraphrased for easier reading or narrative flow. I ask you to forgive any inaccuracies, misrepresentations, or bad writing you come across in the pages that follow. Despite these inevitable shortcomings, the book before you is offered with my very best intentions.

To the extent possible for an American still largely unfamiliar with the complex and glorious history and cultures of Myanmar, and acknowledging how one's interpretation of the life of another will inevitably (and necessarily) miss the mark, I have done my best to create an accurate, living and breathing account of the life of my master—Sayādaw U Zeyathuta.

Upāsaka Chaan
Santa Barbara, November 2021

Chapter 1: Shan State (1947-1966)

Sayādaw U Zeyathuta was born on Tuesday, March 25, 1947 in the devoted Buddhist family of U Myat and Daw Moon. He was the second son of five children, the other three siblings being younger sisters. He came from a low ridgetop village not far from Hsipaw Township, Shan State in Myanmar, which was then known as Burma.

A strange thing happened when Sayādaw was born. It would become a part of Kunhawt village lore.

> I was born in our family home. As my mother was preparing to give birth to me, a nurse was called to the home to assist. When the nurse happened to step out of the room for a few minutes, I was born. As soon as I was born, I rolled across the room all by myself!
>
> When the nurse came back in, my mother told her that I'd been born. But the nurse didn't see me. She thought I'd disappeared, so she asked where the newborn baby was. She then saw me on the other side of the room. My mother told her that I'd rolled across the room all by myself.
>
> Years later, when I was a little boy, people would ask me about that. Everybody used to talk about it like some kind of miracle had happened in our village.

Sayādaw would later describe his home village as having a pleasant climate and nice scenery—"It looked like Switzerland"—with three mountains above it.

> I came from a big village called Kunhawt. We had about 200 families living there. There were actually two villages—a south village, which is where I came from, and a north village. The villages were very close to each other. It took about 90 minutes to walk from one to the other.
>
> Back then, the two villages shared the same school and the same temple. The temple was called Kunhawt Temple. The only monk living there was the abbot—U Muninda—who happened to be my uncle.

Hsipaw is the name of the nearby city, but I didn't live there. In those days, my village was part of Namhsan, which in the Shan language means "water shaking." It was mountainous there, and could be very cold. In winter, we'd almost have ice.

Eventually, the government changed things and our village became a part of Hsipaw. It's no longer considered a part of Namhsan. Kunhawt is 18 miles northwest of the city of Hsipaw and 22 miles southeast of the city of Namhsan. It's between the two.

There was no road leading into Kunhawt, so we had to walk whenever we wanted to go somewhere. Since Hsipaw was almost twenty miles away, it would take a whole day to walk there.

While Hsipaw was mostly Shan people, Namhsan was mostly people from my ethnic group. I'm not Burmese—I'm Palaung.

The Palaung people are a small ethnic group found in Shan State, Yunnan Province of China, and in northern Thailand.

Almost everyone in our village worked as tea farmers, including my family. Fortunately, my family was wealthy, mainly because one of my paternal great-grandfathers was wealthy. He had a large tea farm which covered many acres. He had maybe fifty or sixty employees too.

Eventually, my ancestors inherited my great-grandfather's farm. And when my grandpa died, his sons—my dad and his many brothers—inherited the business and the wealth that came with it. So they were all able to send their sons away to be educated in Mandalay, which is what happened with me too.

So our family, we're Palaung.

We have 135 ethnic groups in Burma. Another village might have a completely different culture, way of dressing, and their accents might be different—but the religion was always the same. Thirty years ago, about 50,000 Palaung people lived in Shan State. Today, there are maybe 100,000 in the whole country.

Sayādaw grew up speaking his native tongue, which is also called Palaung. He also spoke the Shan language—called Tai Yai—which he would later describe as having the same accent as the principle language of neighboring Thailand, though the two languages were otherwise incompatible.

The Palaung people of Shan State weren't limited to just those two languages. Some of them were also fluent in Burmese and Chinese, whereas "regular" Burmese people grew up speaking only Burmese.

Sayādaw recalled how as a child he'd learned Chinese from his Chinese neighbor and classmate. Sometimes when the boys were at school and didn't want the teacher to understand what they were talking about, they'd start conversing in Chinese.

The south village of Kunhawt, Shan State, Burma, circa 1960.

Life in Kunhawt was not always idyllic.

Armed rebellion against the Burmese government had been occurring since 1948, when Burma gained independence from Britain. The rebellions had largely occurred between ethnic-based groups and the Burmese army.

In Shan State, the Shan people had been given the option in 1958 to split from Burma if they were not satisfied with the central government. Some of the Shan people accused government authorities of mistreatment, torture, robbery, rape, and murder.

When their request to split was not honored, on May 21, 1958 an armed resistance movement began. It has continued for more than seven

decades. The conflict has been characterized as "the world's longest ongoing civil war."

The young Sayādaw witnessed some of the horrors of civil war while growing up in Kunhawt. But it would be many decades before he spoke openly about some of the atrocities that took place.

> In those days, the Shan State Army (SSA) was fighting with the government. This went on for many years. I experienced people getting killed by soldiers on both sides of the conflict.
>
> Sometimes, they'd announce that every man had to come to the temple. Whoever didn't come, they'd burn their house down. So everyone had to go. They had to stay there all day without food or water. Then they'd call people forward and beat them with big sticks.

Sayādaw's father had become the leader of south Kunhawt village when Sayādaw was ten years old.

> He was a good choice to be the leader because he was well known and he could speak well. He was very smart and everyone liked him. Everyone in the village voted for him to be the leader.
>
> When he was young, my father had studied the Burmese language in Mandalay. Most of the village elders couldn't speak Burmese, so the people relied on him to communicate when outsiders arrived. We had a lot of Chinese people in our village too, so my dad spoke Shan, Burmese, and Chinese fluently. The Chinese people also relied on my dad for communication with the outside world.

In the midst of the chaos and uncertainty of Kunhawt life in those days, Sayādaw's father was an asset to everyone.

> In the early days, both side of the conflict (the Shan people and the Burmese government) liked my dad. Back then it was just the SSA and the government fighting with each other. It hadn't become so complex yet. Eventually, it was the communists fighting with the government too. So when the Burmese army came to our village, he was able to converse with them.

An Unusual Child

Ever since Sayādaw was a little boy he had been different from others, with a distinct leaning toward things religious.

He'd later reflect that his earliest memory—from when he was only four or five years old—was that he'd had a gut feeling that he wasn't supposed to have been reborn in Kunhawt village.

> I was very strange when I was young. Very strange. Ever since I was young, I was interested in religion. My mom used to pray every night for one or two hours. When I was a little boy, I used to sit next to her and listen to her chant. I memorized "*Itipi so bhagavā*" and so on when I was young because my mom said I should listen to her chant every day. I was very interested in this.

"*Itipi so bhagavā*" is a frequently chanted reflection on the qualities of the Triple Gem. It is a foundational reflection that has widespread use throughout *Theravāda* Buddhism.

> Later, I liked to recite the 11 *Paritta* chants, which I'd started memorizing when I was very young. There was *Ratana Sutta*, *Maṅgala Sutta*, *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta*, and so on. I memorized all of them. Then, on every Buddhist holy day I went to the temple and stayed the night.
>
> I read about Buddhism too, but no one taught me about *vipassanā*. My mom just counted her rosary—"*anicca*, *anicca*, *dukkha*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, *anattā*"—many, many times. I knew only to say those three words.
>
> So I did that every day too. I had a rosary around my neck and also in my hand. I'd carry them around with me. It made me happy to do that, to count my recitations.

Sayādaw also had a strong desire for education, deeply motivated to learn.

> We had just primary school in our village—no high school or even middle school in those days. I went to school and learned. And I eventually finished school, which was 6th grade. I was still young—

> around 11 years old—but I had no chance to go to the city to continue my education.
>
> My school teacher knew that I'd memorized all the books—about history, about Burma. And the teacher said to me, "I will take you to my home in the city and let you continue your education."
>
> My dad agreed to this but my mom said, "Oh, I can't live without you." My mom was attached to me. I was attached to my mom too. I didn't want her to be sad.
>
> So I didn't have a chance to go to school in the city.

It wasn't long before the good graces that Sayādaw's father found himself in as the village leader amongst the conflict between the SSA and the central government took a turn for the worse.

> Around 1960 or 1961, when I was 13 or 14 years old, everything changed. Now our people were also being threatened by these opposing groups.
>
> My dad ended up fleeing from the SSA after things got really serious with them. The leader of the north Kunhawt village had already been killed, so they were coming for my dad next.
>
> He fled to Mandalay and hid out as a monk for two years in a temple that people in our ethnic group had built. The temple was only a 10-minute walk from the temple where I'd eventually live as a novice (*sāmanera*).
>
> My dad was safe there because the SSA didn't come to Mandalay. It was a big city even then, and it was some 200 miles from Kunhawt.

About two years after Sayādaw's father fled to Mandalay, the Palaung people managed to form a large militia of thousands of people to defend themselves and the SSA moved on. The militia was also prepared to deal with any issues with the central government.

> With the SSA gone, my dad could finally return to Kunhawt.

An Unusual Teenager

As a young boy, Sayādaw hadn't been interested in many of the things that usually capture a child's attention. Instead, he'd been drawn solely to religion and education.

These interests followed him into his teen years, when he also eschewed interest in girls, experimentation with smoking or drinking, or "being cool."

> Most teenagers had girlfriends or boyfriends, or they wanted to try drinking alcohol or smoking—but I never did that. I don't know why. My feelings didn't let me do it. I never smoked or drank.
>
> And from the time I was born until now, I've never, ever said a single bad word—not even as a teenager. When someone did something that made me mad, I'd just cry. But I didn't say anything bad. I don't know why, but I never did.
>
> I became a vegetarian when I was a teenager too. This was very unusual for someone in my village. But it just didn't feel right to me that animals should die so that we could eat them.

On Buddhist holy days, Sayādaw would go to the temple and observe the eight precepts.

> Everyone there would be 70, 80 or 90 years old—maybe 50 men and about 90 women, a lot of people—and I was the youngest one there.
>
> Around 4-5 pm, we would take the 20-minute walk from the temple in the middle of the village to the 200-year-old pagoda at the other end of the village. I would be the last person in the line because I was the youngest.

As Sayādaw would later explain it, "Ever since I was young, I used to read the Dhamma books, count the rosary, do the chanting—it's been my life."

> My grandfather taught me how to read Buddhist scripture in Tai Yai, which is a language spoken in Shan State. I studied one hour a

night for seven nights, and then I was able to read the Tai Yai scripture.

But then, tragedy struck Sayādaw and his family when his mother died suddenly of a vague illness.

Decades later, he wouldn't have much to say about the loss of his dear mother.

In those days, there were no doctors or clinics, so even a minor illness could be fatal.

Sayādaw's two grandmothers were still living in Kunhawt. His maternal grandfather had passed away when his mother was young.

But Sayādaw spent his teen years under the male mentorship of his father's father, with whom he'd grown quite close.

His grandpa soon started to teach him how to tell people's fortunes and read horoscopes.

Sayādaw was fascinated.

In time, he began to study books about fortune telling and eventually learned a wide variety of methods, including palm reading, Cairo, Hindu and Burmese techniques, and forecasting fortunes based on the stars and planets.

For the Ignorance of People

Sayādaw was once talking to a student about the Buddha's great compassion for the ignorance of people.

There's a story about the Buddha-to-be appearing in the world as the rich nobleman-turned-hermit Sumedha during the lifetime of Dīpaṅkara Buddha—a Buddha who lived on Earth some 100,000 world systems ago.

Sumedha knew that because of the *pāramī* that he had already developed over his countless lifetimes, if he listened to a single sentence of Dhamma from Dīpaṅkara he would gain *arahant* and never again be reborn.

Sumedha pondered this.

Why should he overcome suffering just for himself when there were so many others that he could help?

So he chose not to listen to Dīpaṅkara's Dhamma.

Over the next four aeons and 100,000 worlds, the former Sumedha was reborn as animals and in other realms of existence. He endured a lot of suffering over many, many lifetimes.

But over time, the *bodhisatta* developed his meditation and continued to develop and perfect his *pāramī* until he eventually gained supreme enlightenment and became our Buddha.

The Buddha then spent the rest of his life teaching others how to overcome their suffering.

Why? Because of his great compassion.

"Should we do that too?" asked the student.

> It's a personal choice. But I don't want to be a Buddha. If possible, I will overcome all kinds of suffering soon.

Sayādaw explained to the student that *Mahāyāna* and *Therāvada* Buddhism differ in that with the former everyone wants to become a Buddha in order to help others.

> *Mahāyāna* consists of two words: *mahā*, which means great, and *yāna*, which means vehicle, or going.
>
> So '*Mahāyāna*' is considered the 'great vehicle' because you enter *nibbāna* as a Buddha, rather than as an *arahant*. It's a bit like wanting to be a doctor, instead of a business man.

The student pondered the master's simile.

> Sounds good. But it's impossible for *everyone* to become a Buddha.

After a moment, the student responded with another question.

"What would happen if someone attained *sotāpanna* but was reborn during a time that the *buddhasāsana* no longer existed?"

> The teachings are in your heart. If there's no *buddhasāsana* in the human world, you could go to another one of the 31 realms of existence—maybe to a celestial or *Brahmā* realm—and attain *arahant* there.

> It would be easier and faster in one of those realms because you wouldn't have to worry about paying bills, taking showers, or going to the toilet—you'd have more time to *practice*."

Vanity & Threats

Although Sayādaw had been drawn to his family's Buddhist religion since he was a young child, an unexpected bit of teen vanity prevented him from entering monastic life at first.

> It was very difficult for me because ever since I was young I didn't talk much. If I did talk to a woman, I didn't make eye contact. I felt it didn't look good for me to do that, because we should have eye contact when we talk to people. But I'd just look down.
>
> I didn't like to be around a lot of people—I was very strange.
>
> The abbot of the temple in my village—U Muninda—knew how I was. When I was about 14 or 15 years old, he'd said to me, "You're not like others. You should become a novice monk."
>
> He knew I didn't want to go to parties or big gatherings—I just stayed home. I liked to sing and play the violin at home sometimes. I also liked to play mandolin and banjo, which I'd learned how to play while in the music program at my school.

Sayādaw thought a lot about what his uncle had said.

> I wasn't really attached to anything else, but I'd think about shaving my head—*what would I look like?* I was a teenager, of course. And I thought it would look funny.
>
> I thought about this for three or four years. Then, when I was 18 years old U Muninda again encouraged me to become a novice. I finally realized that my appearance didn't matter, and so I decided to become one.

Simply making the decision to become a novice wasn't enough. He still needed to get his father's permission.

So at 18 years old I told my aunt that I wanted to become a novice that year.

She said, "No, no, no. Your father will not allow you to do that."

It was unusual for children or young people in the village to become novice monks because they were needed on the family farms.

But I'd already planned to do it. I had already learned a lot, and I had all the *Paritta* memorized, so I felt that I simply had to become a novice that year. My mind was made up.

Sure enough, Sayādaw's father didn't want him to do it.

So I said to myself, "Okay, if my father won't allow me to do it, I will go on strike—I will not eat for seven days."

My father knew I'd do it too. My family knew me well.

I told my aunt my plan and she said to me, "If you do that, your father will beat you."

In those days, the Palaung people of Shan State kept weapons to protect themselves against the lingering conflict with the central government. The high-ranking local officials had told the people to have pistols, showed them how to use the weapons, and cautioned them to be ready when the government came.

The villagers would even sleep with pistols under their pillows.

And so as I reflected on my aunt's words, I thought, "If my father won't allow me to become a novice, I will take the gun, put it in my mouth, and kill myself."

I intended to do this.

But then my aunt talked with my father. She told him, "If you don't allow him to become a novice, he'll kill himself."

My father was quiet. My aunt wasn't sure what he was thinking or what would happen next.

With his father's reaction to the threat still unclear, Sayādaw began to prepare for the day he would formally ask him for permission.

> When the time came—a week before *vassa*—I went to the garden, picked three flowers, and requested my father's permission to be a novice.

But he strategized it first.

> I figured that the best time to ask for his permission was as soon as he got up in the morning—about 6 am—because he drank a lot. And I invited about twenty adults to protect me.
>
> So my father got up, came out, and sat down. He'd already heard what I planned to do. And when I asked for his permission to become a novice, he simply said, "Okay." That was it.

Sayādaw was delighted with the unexpected ease of the situation.

> Then my father added, "If you're going to be a monk, do it for at least ten years."
>
> I said, "Ten years? I want to do it for the rest of my life."
>
> And so he said, "If I don't allow you to do this, you'll kill yourself. I don't want that to happen, so I allow you to be a novice."

Having received his father's permission to ordain as a novice, Sayādaw began putting together his next plan.

> We had three very high mountains above Kunhawt village. On the top of one of the mountains was a 200-year-old pagoda. One of my paternal great-grandfathers had been a donor for that pagoda. It took about two hours of hiking from the village to get up there.
>
> My plan for after I became a novice was to go to the top of the mountain, stay there, and practice meditation by the pagoda. At the time, I thought meditation was just counting the rosary—I didn't know about *vipassanā* meditation.

So I planned to stay up there and practice *samatha* meditation for a year. That was my plan.

What is Enlightenment?

In the *Theravāda* Buddhist sense, the word *enlightenment* refers to *nibbānic* attainment. It comes in four stages:

1) *sotāpanna*, or stream-enterer;
2) *sakadāgāmi*, or once-returner;
3) *anāgāmi*, or non-returner; and
4) *arahant*.

A *sotāpanna* is one who has attained the first stage of enlightenment by abandoning the first three mental fetters: the illusion of self, doubt in the efficacy of meditation practice, and belief that any rite or ritual can bring about liberation. The stream-enterer has thus entered the 'stream' flowing inexorably to *nibbāna*.

A *sotāpanna* is no longer subject to rebirth in a lower realm and will realize the fourth and final stage of enlightenment within seven lifetimes at most.

A *sakadāgāmi* is one who has attained the second stage of enlightenment. Because of weakened sensual desire and anger—the next two of the ten mental fetters—a once-returner will be reborn in only one more plane of existence.

An *anāgāmi* is one who has attained the third stage of enlightenment. He or she has uprooted the defilements of sensual desire and anger, but may still experience defilements such as restlessness, conceit, desire for rebirth in material or immaterial realms, and ignorance.

A non-returner will experience rebirth in one of five *Brahmā* realms, where he or she will attain final enlightenment.

An *arahant* (literally, a 'worthy one') is one who has uprooted all the defilements and experiences no more mental suffering through penetration of the Four Noble Truths and the abandonment of all mental fetters.

Having attained the fourth and highest level of enlightenment—the culmination of the Buddha's training—he or she will not be reborn again in any form, passing entirely into the unconditioned state upon death.

The 200-year-old mountaintop pagoda above Kunhawt where Las Vegas Sayādaw planned to spend a year practicing meditation as an 18-year-old novice. Construction of the pagoda had been sponsored by one of Sayādaw's wealthy paternal great-grandfathers. Unfortunately, Sayādaw's plan never materialized.

Going Forth

Around early July 1965, just before the start of *vassa*, 18-year-old Sayādaw finally entered the monastic life as a novice.

He was ordained by his uncle—U Muninda, the abbot of Kunhawt Temple—and given the Buddhist name Zeya, which is the Burmese equivalent of the *Pāli* word *jeya* (or *jaya*, meaning 'victory').

> But when I became a novice, all my friends—17 people—became novices too. They followed me. I couldn't leave them, so I had to stay with them for one year.
>
> So for that first year my plan to meditate on the mountain fell through.
>
> U Muninda didn't know much about meditation anyway—he'd become the abbot after only two *vassas* in robes because the previous abbot had died—so he was in no position to teach me.
>
> I'd eventually spend my first 15 months as a novice just thinking about what I should be doing.

Kunhawt, circa 1970. In the upper-left is Kunhawt Temple, where Las Vegas Sayādaw spent 15 months as a novice during 1965-1966. The temple burned down around 1971 and a new temple was eventually constructed in its place. The protruding building right-of-center is the family home where Las Vegas Sayādaw was born.

Sayādaw's time as a novice in Kunhawt was not without benefit. He chanted from memory for an hour each day then continued counting his rosary.

But with no one really qualified to teach him, he was forced to try to learn on his own.

It's Better to Believe

Sayādaw was talking to a student one time about certain beings being reborn as mindless beings with lifespans of 500 *mahā-kappa*, or great-aeons—each great-aeon being equal to 311.04 trillion years.

> You might wonder how they became mindless beings. It's because they practiced meditation in their previous life but didn't know about *vipassanā*.
>
> They'd thought, "We have to suffer a lot because we have a mind that wants to see, to hear, to taste, to touch, et cetera. So we think, we worry, and we suffer because we have a mind. But if there's no mind, we won't want to see or hear, taste or touch."

They believed that if they gained 5th *jhāna* and could be reborn without a mind, then that would be best.

So they practiced that way, and they had the desire to be reborn as mindless beings. As they gained 5th *jhāna* and had that desire in their hearts, when they died they were reborn as mindless beings.

When these mindless beings eventually die, they will be reborn in the human or celestial worlds.

The student asked whether they could gain enlightenment as mindless beings.

They cannot gain enlightenment because they can't see or hear the Dhamma. If the Buddha himself gave a sermon, they wouldn't be able to hear it. When he went to heaven to teach *Abhidhammā*, mindless beings had no mind to receive it.

"What about people who don't believe in anything?" the student asked. "They just think that when you die, there's nothing else. Is that what happens to them—*nothing*?"

Annihilation is wrong view.

Whether they believe in anything or not, rebirth depends on their *kamma*. If they don't believe that anything happens but still do good things, they will be reborn in line with their *kamma*. They will be reborn as human beings, even if they don't want to.

It doesn't depend on their beliefs; it depends on their *actions*.

The student asked, "Can they go to heaven too?"

Sure, if they do good things and *want* to be reborn there. In the case of the heavenly realms, it also depends on their desire. If they don't want to be reborn there, they will be reborn as a human being.

But most people who don't believe in the next life do bad things, say bad things, and think bad things.

The student was curious about their rebirth.

> After they die, they mostly go down to the lower realms, even if they don't believe in a realm like hell. It depends on their *kamma*.

Sayādaw shared a short story about a man he'd met after he settled in Las Vegas:

> He was an educated person, and rich—but he didn't believe in any of this.
>
> When his son once came to the temple to ordain as a *sāmanera*, the man came to the ceremony and said to me, "I don't believe in *anything*. I just go to work and do my job. And on Saturday and Sunday, I'm free for two days. Saturday, I go to the bar and drink a lot. And then on Sunday, I can sleep the whole day."
>
> See that? *No religion*. Every Saturday, he drank a lot, ate a lot, and got drunk. And then on Sunday, he couldn't wake up—he just slept all day.
>
> Think about this.

Sayādaw paused for a few moments.

> There are those who believe in heaven and hell, and those who do not. How different are they?
>
> Those who believe in hell will try to avoid doing bad things. And those who believe that heaven is better than the human world will try to do good things.
>
> If you don't believe in a future life, and just think, "I'll just enjoy my life and do whatever I want to do," then what follows is *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha*—without any self-control.
>
> It doesn't really matter whether we *believe* in a future life—what ultimately matters is our *kamma*. But it's better if we believe—and then, we know to stay away from fire. It's common sense, right?

Sayādaw continued.

> I hear a lot of people who say they don't believe in heaven or hell because they can't prove it. These people tend to have very little wisdom.
>
> Most people who believe in a future life—in heaven or hell—will do good things.
>
> But as for those who don't believe—perhaps think of someone whose job (or hobby) is to kill animals every day—they're not concerned about bad *kamma*. Before they die, all these bad deeds will appear to them in a vision and they will be reborn in a plane corresponding to that *kamma*.

Chapter 2: Mandalay (1966-1967)

It eventually occurred to Sayādaw that he needed to leave his village and travel elsewhere if he wanted to broaden his education.

At the end of his second *vassa* as a novice in October 1966, he decided to move to Mandalay.

> U Muninda didn't want me to go.
>
> So I told my grandpa, "Please let him know that if he doesn't allow me to go to Mandalay, I will disrobe."
>
> My uncle knew I'd do it too.
>
> But before my grandpa talked with him, I went to U Muninda myself and asked for his permission.
>
> He didn't say anything. Instead, he prepared his robes then went to my grandpa and told him about my request.
>
> My grandfather told him, "You'd better let him go, or he'll disrobe."
>
> So U Muninda came back to me and said, "Okay."

Sayādaw's grandfather was very wealthy and had sent Sayādaw's father to stay at a temple in Mandalay called Teik Tit Kyaung (Payargee Teik) when he was young to study there as a lay person.

And so Sayādaw was soon accompanied by his father and U Muninda to Teik Tit Kyaung (Payargee Teik), where his father's 80-year-old teacher—Sayādaw U Padumma—was still living.

Sayādaw was soon ready to begin the next phase of his education.

He was assigned a 60-year-old monk named Sayādaw U Issariya to be his teacher of *Abhidhammā*. Sayādaw was the only student and that was his only class, but the intensity of this informal educational opportunity would benefit him years down the line.

Among the many things besides *Abhidhammā* that Sayādaw learned as a novice living in Mandalay was that going on alms round each day was very difficult.

Going for alms was the means by which mendicant monks (and novices) received food for their daily meal. Walking through inhabited areas with their eyes downcast, monks and novices accepted offerings from any donors along their path. They were forbidden from begging for food.

There were some 20,000 monastics living in Mandalay at the time, and when Sayādaw was living there the population of the city was about 350,000 people, so the monks and novices had to walk quickly—and for many miles in the quickly warming day—in order to collect enough alms for their meal.

Having walked so far from their temples, they'd then have to take buses back.

Burmese Orders

Sayādaw was talking once with a student about the different monastic orders found in *Theravāda* Buddhist countries.

In Thailand, there are two primary monastic orders:

1) the *Mahā nikāya*, which could be characterized as the "mainstream" order; and
2) the *Dhammayut nikāya*, which was established in 1833 as a reform of the *Mahā nikāya*, as it was felt by many that the practice of *Vinaya* within the mainstream order was lackadaisical.

Mahā nikāya monks outnumber *Dhammayut nikāya* monks by perhaps 10-to-1.

The student asked Sayādaw if similarly differing orders exist in Myanmar.

Burma has nine official orders, but there are only two main orders: the *Shwegyin nikāya* and the *Sudhammā nikāya*.

The *Sudhammā* (or *Thudhamma*) order is the largest monastic order in Myanmar. Established in the late 1700s, today the order has nearly 470,000 members. This represents some 87% of all monks in the country. More than one-third of those monastics live in Mandalay or Shan State.

Sayādaw shared some history about the formation of the order.

It was originally named for the building in Mandalay where the monks would go to teach the king in those days. His name was King Bodawpaya, and the Burmese called the building "*Thudhamma Zayats*."

> On every Buddhist holy day, the whole royal family would go to *Thudhamma Zayats*—which had a big hall with columns—and they'd learn the Dhamma from the monks.
>
> Since the monks had to teach the royal family on the holy days, they didn't have time to study the Dhamma at their monastery.
>
> There were 500 learned monks who lived in that temple. And to this day, the monks in that order still take the holy days as their day off from studying.

The *Shwegyin nikāya*, on the other hand, was named for the village of Shwegyin in Upper Burma. Shwegyin means "gold," so the village was known as the "gold village."

The order was established in the mid-1800s.

> There was a very famous monk from that village—he was the chief abbot monk—and he practiced meditation and followed the *Vinaya* very strictly. He didn't handle money, for instance.
>
> His disciples came to be *Shwegyin* monks because he was the *sayādaw* of the village of Shwegyin.

The *Shwegyin nikāya* is the second largest monastic order in Myanmar. It is more orthodox in its adherence to the *Vinaya* than the *Sudhammā nikāya*.

Sayādaw would later speak about the great detail in which young novices in Burma learned *Abhidhammā*—the Buddhist analysis of consciousness—as well as the Commentaries and Sub-commentaries.

The Commentaries were traditional interpretations given of the *Pāli Canon*. They were largely compiled since the fourth century CE; however, they were based on earlies ones—now lost—which were written down at the same time as the *Canon* itself in the last century BCE.

The Sub-commentaries, on the other hand, were commentaries

upon the Commentaries written in Sri Lanka during the 12th century.

Sayādaw explained that it was very difficult to pass the examinations on this material required in formal school settings because they were based on memorization.

Sayādaw reflected on some of these challenges he faced as a 19-year-old novice in Mandalay.

> I didn't have friends I could learn from. I studied, but I didn't know specific techniques. So I learned by memorizing everything.
>
> One page of text might have been in *Pāli*, and I was expected to translate it into Burmese. But I had to memorize it without taking notes—word by word. It was a very hard six months.

He'd also have to massage Sayādaw U Issariya for two hours every night. This started at 7 pm while about ten of the resident monks would pepper him with questions testing his knowledge of *Abhidhammā*.

This intensive way of deepening his understanding was a good learning experience for him though, as his solid memorization of the teachings would prove useful as his education progressed.

Sayādaw also struggled with the climate of Mandalay.

> In my hometown in summer—around April, before the Buddhist New Year—it's about 60 degrees Fahrenheit in the mountains. My hometown is very beautiful, with all the mountains.
>
> But in Mandalay it was 117 degrees Fahrenheit. Mandalay is only about 200 miles away from my hometown, but it's a different place—very hot in summertime.
>
> I couldn't handle the heat very well, so a few months before *vassa* that year one of the monks told me that Burma's capitol city at the time—Rangoon (which came to be called Yangon in 1989)—wasn't like Mandalay. He said it was much cooler—maybe 65 degrees Fahrenheit, which is very nice.

And so in mid-April 1967—six months after his arrival—Sayādaw departed Mandalay en route to Rangoon.

The 31 Planes of Existence

Sayādaw was talking to a student one time about different aspects of the beings inhabiting the various planes of existence.

The 31 planes include:

-the four miserable realms (animal, hungry ghost, demon, and hell);
-the human realm;
-the six celestial, or *deva*, realms (*Cātumahārājikā*, *Tāvatiṁsā*, *Yāmā*, *Tusitā*, *Nimmānarati*, and *Paranimmita-vasavattī*); and
-the 20 *Brahmā* realms (16 in the fine-material realm, or *rūpaloka*; and four in the immaterial realm, or *arūpaloka*).

Sayādaw talked a bit about the realm of hungry ghosts (*petas*).

We can't usually see these beings, but we can sometimes sense them in other ways, such as when they knock on a door or create an unpleasant smell.

Scientists haven't figured out how to prove their existence yet, but some meditators can see them with their mind or through divine eye.

The master then took some time to talk about the lifespans of beings in the six celestial realms.

Of celestial beings, 99.99% have a lifespan of at least 9,000,000 years.

But there are two exceptions: they will die if they get distracted by sensual pleasures and forget to eat; and they will die if they get angry.

Sayādaw explained that 50 years in the life of a human being is just a single day in the life of a *deva* inhabiting the *Cātumahārājikā* realm, whereas a 100-year human life is a single day for a *deva* in *Tāvatiṁsā*.

The lifespans continue to double.

As such, a day in the life of a *deva* in the *Yāmā* realm is 200 human years, for a *Tusitā deva* it is 400 human years, for a *Nimmānarati deva* it is 800 human years, and for a *deva* of the *Paranimmita-vasavattī* realm it is 1,600 human years.

Beings are born into the six celestial realms based on two things:

1) their good *kamma*; and
2) their desire.

"Where do you want to be reborn?" Sayādaw asked hypothetically. "If your answer is the top level—*Paranimmita-vasavattī*—whether you are actually reborn there will depend on those two things."

He compared it to someone wanting to be the head of a company:

To be the head of a company, you need to have the ability (*kamma*) but if you don't *want* the position (i.e., you have no desire), you won't be the boss. Similarly, if you want the job but aren't qualified, you won't get it.

But, if you are qualified and want the job, you can get it.

Most meditators want to be reborn in *Tusitā*, because that was where our Buddha lived before he took his final birth in the human world.

And the next Buddha-to-be—Metteyya—is there now.

The master explained that very good beings live in *Tusitā*. Most beings who gain the first stage of enlightenment are reborn there. The Buddha's mother, who was reborn as a male, resides there now as well.

"What if a being is reborn in the two highest *deva* realms—*Nimmānarati* or *Paranimmita-vasavattī*?" the student asked. "Can they go down to *Tusitā* if they want?"

"Yes," replied the master. "When the Buddha ascended to *Tāvatiṁsā* to teach *Abhidhammā* seven years after his enlightenment, many *devas* came from their realms to hear him, including his former mother."

"What about the lowest celestial realm—*Cātumahārājikā*?" the student asked. "Can they ascend to *Tusitā*?"

"Yes," said the master before continuing.

"Both *devas* and human beings can gain enlightenment. When the Buddha gave his first sermon—*Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta*—a lot of *devas* gained enlightenment."

Sayādaw took a moment to revisit the topic of hungry ghosts.

> There are many kinds of *petas*. If you study the *suttas*, you'll see that there are two places where it mentions a *peta* gaining enlightenment.

According to one of the *suttas*, a *peta* came to the Buddha's temple looking for food. At the time, the Buddha was giving a Dhamma talk.

The *peta* was curious to hear what the Buddha was teaching, but her son was there too, crying. The *peta* tried to comfort her son, who eventually stopped crying. As the *peta* listened to the Buddha give the Dhamma, she gained enlightenment.

> Maybe this *peta's* rebirth consciousness was 'just right'. But this is a very rare exception to the norm—maybe one in a trillion.

The student—still curious about *Tusitā*—asked, "How can we be reborn in *Tusitā*?"

> Just do good things, and observe your *sīla*.
>
> Like Visākhā—a contemporary of the Buddha and his leading female disciple—for example, who built the magnificent Pubbarama temple and donated it to the *Saṅgha*. Now she's a *deva* in *Nimmānarati*.

The master next explained that by the time of our Buddha, three previous Buddhas had already appeared in this present world system (*kappa*). Their names were Kakusandha Buddha, Konāgamana Buddha and Kassapa Buddha.

During Kakusandha's time, human beings on average lived for 40,000 years. During Konāgamana's life, they lived for 30,000 years. During Kassapa's life, they lived for 20,000 years. And during the life of the fourth Buddha of this *kappa*—our Buddha, whose name was Gotama—people lived for 100 years.

Sayādaw explained that about every 100 years the average human lifespan reduces by one year.

> Now that our Buddha has been gone 2,600 years, human beings live about 74 years, right?

The student was intrigued.

> Over the next 100 years, average lifespans will drop to 73 years, et cetera, until it eventually gets down to ten years. Human beings may only get five or six years to gain merit by that time.
>
> But then it will start to increase again until human lifespan grows up to *asaṁkheyya* years (an uncountable amount, or 1 plus 140 zeros). And then it'll fall to 80,000 years. Then, the fifth and final Buddha of this *kappa*—Metteyya Buddha—will appear.

The next Buddha has already completed his virtue perfections (*pāramī*) but is waiting out his time in *Tusitā* until his final rebirth. He will attain enlightenment and become the next Buddha in the distant future, during a time when the Dhamma has been lost to the world.

Sayādaw expressed that we should understand these lifespans, and how long it'll take before Metteyya appears in the human world. Otherwise, we might expect for a new Buddha to arrive perhaps next year or in a decade.

"Why did it take Gotama Buddha so long to perfect his *pāramī*?" asked the student.

> The Buddha-to-be did unwholesome things too. He was an animal for 113 lives. He was a dog, an elephant, and other animals too.
>
> How can an animal perfect its *pāramī*? So it took our Buddha a long time.

Sayādaw then began to explain the lifespans of beings in the *Brahmā* realms, where age is measured in terms of *kappas*. Lifespans increase as beings inhabit the higher and higher realms.

It can be helpful if we have an understanding of the various kinds of *kappas* (aeons, or world cycles). They have been described as being of three types:

1) interim-aeon: the amount of time it takes for a human being's lifespan to rise from ten years to its maximum (*asaṁkheyya* years), and then fall back to ten years;
2) incalculable-aeon: an amount of time 64 times that of an interim-aeon; and
3) great-aeon (*mahā-kappa*): an amount of time four times that of an incalculable-aeon.

The Commentaries describe a *mahā-kappa* as being like a massive stone some 13 miles long and seven miles high.

Imagine if every 100 years a person took a piece of cotton, rubbed the stone with it one time, and then threw it away. By the time the stone was finally worn away to nothing, the *mahā-kappa* would still not be finished.

Sayādaw explained that the Buddha's first teacher, Ālāra Kālāma, had been reborn in one of the high *Brahmā* realms because of the strength of his *jhāna*. His lifespan was 60,000 *mahā-kappa*.

Similarly, because of his *jhāna* the Buddha's second teacher, Uddaka Rāmaputta—who may have been a Jain—had been reborn in the highest *Brahmā* realm and had a lifespan of 84,000 *mahā-kappa*.

After the Buddha attained supreme enlightenment, he'd contemplated who might understand his teaching. At first, he reflected: "Oh, Ālāra and Uddaka would understand."

But then he learned that both meditation masters had recently died and been reborn in realms where beings did not have bodies (and having no eyes or ears, could not receive the Dhamma).

Even a long lifespan in the *Brahmā* realms has its share of drawbacks.

Despite the unfathomably long lifespans of beings inhabiting the highest *Brahmā* realms, even those beings must eventually die and be reborn elsewhere (unless the beings attained *arahant* while in those realms). Rebirth would occur in the human or celestial worlds. And from either of those realms, if unenlightened beings create enough bad *kamma* they can later be reborn in the hell realm.

The Buddha was once reflecting upon this reality, and a smile came upon his face. His attendant, Venerable Ānanda, asked the Buddha why he was smiling.

In reply, the Buddha shared that he'd been a *brahma* in a previous life, but then he'd died and been reborn as a human. But as a human he'd done something bad and was then reborn as an animal.

Sayādaw then shifted gears a bit.

Other religions, like Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, believe in their gods. But they don't know where their gods live.

Visitors to the temple over the years had asked him from time to time whether he believed in God.

In Buddhism, there isn't just one god—there are different kinds of gods (*devas*). And even gods existing on the same plane differ because of their *kamma*.

He elaborated with an analogy:

Las Vegas, for example, is one city. But it has different parts. And the quality of its parts differs. Prices differ too.

In certain parts of Las Vegas, a 3-bedroom house may cost $100,000. But most people wouldn't want to live there because it's not an attractive part of the city.

How about the neighborhood around the temple? A house might cost $300,000. What about nearby Summerlin? The same house may be $400,000.

It's the same with the *Brahmā* world. A being may gain first *jhāna* and be reborn on the same level as another being who has gained first *jhāna*, but their lifespans may differ because of each being's *kamma*.

"Where does Sakka live?" the student inquired. He was asking about one of the kings of the celestial realms.

Tāvatiṁsā. But he also has power on *Cātumahārājikā*. Even though they have their own kings in the four directions, they are still under the power of King Sakka, who is the chief.

Sayādaw likened it to an ambassador who takes care of both the United States and Mexico.

He can't rule *Yāmā* or *Tusitā*, though, because he has limits. They have their own kings. Every celestial world has its leader.

"Can the leader of a realm lead its inhabitants to enlightenment?" the student asked.

Maybe. The discourses don't talk about that. But when the Buddha gave his first discourse, a lot of *devas* gained enlightenment. The leaders must have as well, if their followers did.

Considering that the next Buddha currently resides in *Tusitā*, the student asked Sayādaw if Metteyya was the ruler of that realm.

Yes, Metteyya-to-be—his current name is Santassita—is the king of *Tusitā* realm.

Chapter 3: Rangoon (1967-1988)

Sayādaw didn't know anyone in Rangoon when he arrived in early summer of 1967. Fortunately, the same monk who'd suggested the comparatively pleasant climate of the city as an alternative to the oppressive heat of Mandalay had also suggested a place for Sayādaw to live.

> The monk from Mandalay had once stayed a few nights at a temple called Kyun Galay Kyaung, which was part of the Lanmadaw Thayet-taw Kyaung Taik monastery complex. The name of the temple means "small island."
>
> The monk gave me the address. And since we didn't have telephones in those days, I just showed up and asked to stay there. They welcomed me.

Although Kyun Galay Kyaung was a temple comprised of monks from Burma's Karen ethnic group, Sayādaw was able to communicate with the residents of his new community because they shared fluency in the Burmese language.

Higher Ordination

Summertime in Rangoon saw a lot of temporary ordinations, as it was part of Burmese tradition.

> After students have final examinations in April (just after the Buddhist New Year) and begin their summer vacation—which usually lasts about three months until school starts again in July—they usually become novices or monks every year.
>
> Every temple does this, and some might have 1,000 temporary novices or monks each summer. Even university students become monks every year and practice meditation during the summer. It's good.

Toward the end of April 1967, just a week or so after Sayādaw had arrived in Rangoon, the abbot of Kyun Galay Kyaung approached him with a question.

He said to me, "Do you want to be a monk? You're over 20 now, so you can be one. We have ordinations coming up."

I'd just recently had my 20th birthday.

"It's up to you, Sayādaw," I said. All I really cared about was having an opportunity to learn. If I had that, I was happy. Higher ordination didn't really matter to me.

The abbot, whom we called Kyun Galay Sayādaw, thought I should ordain. He asked me if I wanted to invite my parents and my teacher from my hometown—U Muninda.

"No, it's not necessary," I said. "I don't want to bother them." My mother had already died but I didn't want to trouble the rest of my family to come.

Sayādaw's ordination required sponsorship, something typically provided by an ordainee's family.

Hearing this, one of the temple supporters—a very rich person—spoke up and said he would sponsor my ordination. But then just a few days before the ordination, the sponsor changed his mind. I didn't know why at the time, though I would find out later.

"It's okay," I said. I didn't mind—again, I was happy just having an opportunity to learn.

But there was an elderly gentleman living at the temple who overheard what happened with Sayādaw's sponsor.

U Sanmya was about 80 years old. He was very poor and lived at the temple because he had nowhere else to live. He helped to take care of things around the temple, and he cooked for the monks.

He said to me, "You poor young man, your sponsor canceled on you. I have some money. I've saved 260 *kyat* from donors who came to observe the eight precepts. They give me a *kyat* here, a *kyat* there. Maybe I can buy some robes for you."

> He added, "I don't have enough money to support you forever—just this one time."

Sayādaw was touched by the generosity of the old layman. It was something he would remember and appreciate for the rest of his life.

> "Okay," I said. "No problem. I appreciate it."
>
> And then Kyun Galay Sayādaw said to me, "Okay, he wants to sponsor you. No worries—if you need more robes, I can get you some."

Thanks to the generosity of U Sanmya and the pledged support of Kyun Galay Sayādaw, Sayādaw became a fully ordained *bhikkhu* of the *Sudhammā* order on May 1, 1967.

He was ordained along with forty or fifty other young men at Thayet-taw Teik Theindawgee—another temple within Rangoon's large Thayet-taw monastery complex. A senior monk named Sayādaw U Kaveinda was his preceptor.

Sayādaw would later learn that his original sponsor had backed out for two reasons:

1) Sayādaw hadn't yet passed any of his higher education examinations; and
2) He didn't feel Sayādaw was handsome enough.

Given that a sponsor would have normally invited many guests to an ordination of a young monk, the donor apparently felt that Sayādaw wouldn't look good enough or have enough educational credentials to impress his guests.

Decades later Sayādaw would share with a student that he eventually became U Sanmya's teacher. And when he did, as Sayādaw would receive monetary donations from his own supporters, he would give the money to his generous sponsor. He'd wanted to return the kindness that the elderly temple attendant had shown to him.

U Sanmya would spend the rest of his life living with Sayādaw at Kyun Galay Kyaung.

A Change of Name

A student once asked Sayādaw why he is sometimes referred to as U Zeyathuta.

> When I became a novice, I was given the religious name Zeya. But later, just a few weeks after I went to live in Rangoon from Mandalay, I went to have my eyes checked. The place where they were offering free check-ups opened at 8 am. Although I got there an hour early, I saw 100 people already waiting.
>
> We were told to write our name and address on a piece of paper and then to put it in the appropriate box—one for monks and one for lay people. Then, we were to wait for our name to be called.

Sayādaw wrote down his name then put the paper in the box for the monks.

> As I waited for my name to be called, I noticed that a lot of people were going ahead of me.
>
> Nine, ten, then eleven o'clock came. It was lunchtime, so I went off to have some noodles. I returned about noon and asked why I hadn't been called. I told them I'd been waiting since 7 am.
>
> They went and checked the monk box but came back and told me that all the papers had already been processed. Mine wasn't in there!

Sayādaw asked them to check again. But they still couldn't find it.

> A nurse spoke up and said, "You know, U Zeya could be a monk's name or a lay person's name."
>
> Zeya was actually a common name for a lay person. And even a lay person could be called U Zeya.

There was even a famous actor in Burma at the time called U Zeya.

Sure enough, it turned out that the person processing the papers had thought that a lay person named U Zeya had accidentally put their slip in the monk box. So they'd skipped him.

After I returned to my temple, I asked my preceptor if I could have a different name—something a lay person wouldn't be called. After all, the people at the eye clinic had been confused by my common name.

So Sayādaw U Kaveinda changed my name to Zeyathuta. 'Zeya' means victory or success. 'Thuta', which is the Burmese pronunciation of *sutta*, means knowledge. So Zeyathuta basically means success-knowledge.

Twenty-year-old Sayādaw began his first year of secondary school in July 1967 with plenty of special challenges.

In Burma, boys usually become novices around ten years old. They start memorizing everything then. And when they study, they kneel on their knees on the floor—several rows of students.

The teacher would come around and quiz everyone—one by one—on whichever of the five subjects they were working on. There were the eight chapters of *Pāli* grammar, for example, and the teacher would come around and they'd have to answer his questions.

If the student couldn't answer the questions, he had to stand up until it was his turn again, then kneel back down and try again.

Sayādaw had gotten a much later start on his monastic education than most of the other students.

I didn't even become a novice until I was 18 years old, so the other students in my classes at school had an 8-year head-start on me. They had learned for many years already.

I was bigger than them and older than them, but I was still a beginner. So I made a determination: "After lunch, the monastery

> is really quiet and the other students take a one-hour nap. Instead, I will stay awake and study."
>
> I even posted a note for myself and put it in my room—"Unless sick, no naps!" It was my rule.
>
> So while the others slept every day, I studied.

To this day, Sayādaw still doesn't take naps.

> I studied hard. I'd wake at 4 am and start studying. I'd go to sleep at midnight. I just studied, and never went anywhere. If I needed soap or anything else, I'd ask a friend to get some for me. I focused on nothing but studying.

There was no time for formal monastic training, as the young students were kept fully engaged in their scholastic endeavors. With some 40 students per class, between class periods the students would scurry to their next class elsewhere in the sprawling monastery complex.

Thayet-taw Monastery Complex

Lanmadaw Thayet-taw Kyaung Taik is situated in central Yangon, immediately north of Chinatown.

What became the Thayet-taw ("mango grove") monastery complex was originally established on a mango grove during the pre-colonial period, probably between 1752 and 1846. During the colonial period, the city was demolished and redesigned, leaving many monasteries around the city evicted. In the late-1800s, though, Thayet-taw became the designated site for all of those displaced monasteries and the complex was born.

During the time Sayādaw was living at Lanmadaw Thayet-taw Kyaung Taik, some 700 monks lived on-site, though they were spread out over the 64 separate temples within the monastery complex.

As an aside, while that's a considerable number of monks living in a monastery, one of Sayādaw's monks at Chaiya Meditation Monastery—Ashin Uttara—once lived in a monastery with 1,400 monks. It was one of the relatively few temples in Myanmar that had *anagārikas*.

An *anagārika* is a white-robed, eight precept lay postulate who lives in a Buddhist monastery. *Anagārikas* have renounced most of their worldly possessions in order to dedicate their lives to full-time practice of the Dhamma.

The *anagārikas* at Ashin Uttara's monastery took care of the handling of money and other donations for the large body of monks living there.

Although relatively rare in Myanmar, *anagārikas* are not uncommon in Thai monastic settings.

Sayādaw finished his first year of secondary school in April 1968.

The challenging first level of study traditionally consists of five subjects:

1) Three chapters of *Abhidhammā*;
2) Studying and memorizing the 227 rules of the *Pāṭimokkha* in *Pāli* and Burmese;
3) *Aṅguttara Nikāya*—the fourth of the five collections in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, it consists of several thousand discourses attributed to the Buddha and his chief disciples;
4) Speaking and writing *Pāli*, including eight chapters that were dedicated solely to grammar; and
5) Learning the Burmese language.

Fortunately, because of the quality of the *Abhidhammā* instruction he'd received from Sayādaw U Issariya in Mandalay, Sayādaw had not been required to take *Abhidhammā* classes that first year.

He had, however, been required to take the examinations.

Monastic examinations in Burma began in 1648. They are held annually in Mandalay, Yangon, and the southeastern Burmese port city of Moulmein. The examination system is divided into six grades based on their level of difficulty.

Examination content is based upon all three baskets of the *Pāli Canon*, or *Tipiṭaka* (which literally means 'three baskets'):

1) *Vinaya Piṭaka*, which deals with the monastic discipline;
2) *Sutta Piṭaka*, which contains the teachings in narrative and verse; and

3) *Abhidhammā Piṭaka*, which could be characterized as a systematization of the teachings.

It is this threefold corpus upon which *Theravāda* Buddhism is based.

Students are required to recite from memory specific passages, analyze the content, and to have correct understanding of *Pāli* grammar. Upon successfully passing an examination, the student is eligible to take the next-highest-level examination.

> I passed the final examination, which had been set by the government. It was the happiest day of my life. And the next day, they wrote about it in the newspaper. I remember going somewhere to look at the newspaper, and there was my name. I was very happy.

Sayādaw reflected on having his photo taken in order to take the exam.

> I'd never liked the idea of having my picture taken, but I'd gotten it taken at the beginning of the school year in order to have an identification photo when I took my exams. That was the first time I'd ever had my picture taken.
>
> My sister Win Win came to visit me after I passed my exams and I got my picture taken again.

Summer Retreats

With the school year complete, a big ceremony was planned to hand out certificates to everyone who passed their examinations.

> It was at a place called Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā Meditation Center. I'd received a letter with the date and the time I needed to come for my certificate. The ceremony started at 1 pm. But I was so excited that I could hardly eat—I ate a bit at 10 am and then went early to the meditation center.
>
> When I got there, I saw lots of people sitting in meditation—300 monks and 400 other meditators. I'd never seen a meditation center before.

I thought, "Oh, this is what I want to do!"

Sayādaw enthusiastically made his way to the office to find out how he could participate.

And so starting in that very April of 1968, Sayādaw began spending his summer breaks from school at meditation centers.

> Let's say I finished my final examination today. Tomorrow, I'd head off for a silent retreat at a meditation center. I never said a single unauthorized word while I was there either.
>
> I did that for around three months each summer for eight years. It was good for me.

During those summers, intensive meditation became a driving force in Sayādaw's life.

> I never had a chance to go back to visit my hometown. I didn't want to travel anyway.
>
> Most of the other monks would head off with friends, visit their hometowns, travel, or go on pilgrimage during their time off from school—but I didn't want to do that.
>
> I just went to the meditation center, practiced meditation for the summer then returned to my temple before school started again before *vassa*. It was very good for me.

Sayādaw had the great fortune to spend those summers under the tutelage of prominent and highly venerated *sayādaws* from Rangoon, Mandalay, and elsewhere.

His first three summers were spent at Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā Meditation Center, where he'd received his certificate. While Mahāsi Sayādaw was the founder and leader of the tradition practiced at the center in which he'd become the spiritual director in November 1949, much of the meditation instruction was offered by three of his senior students—Sayādaw U Sujāta, Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā, and the latter's junior, Sayādaw U Janaka.

Sayādaw U Janaka had begun training under Mahāsi Sayādaw during 1953-1954 but had only recently—in 1967—been appointed by the

master as a meditation teacher at Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā Meditation Center. He'd hold the position until 1972 and eventually come to be called Chanmyay Sayādaw.

Las Vegas Sayādaw spent that first summer retreat training directly under Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā, while the second and third summers were under Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā's senior and Mahāsi Sayādaw's first chief disciple—Sayādaw U Sujāta.

In July 1955, Mahāsi Sayādaw had sent Sayādaw U Sujāta to Sri Lanka after the island country's government formally requested instruction on *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation. Mahāsi Sayādaw himself was unable to attend as he was engaged with the Sixth Buddhist Council in Burma. The year that Sayādaw U Sujāta subsequently spent in Sri Lanka was a huge success, prompting the Sri Lankan government to build a *vipassanā* meditation center in the Mahāsi tradition.

Decades later, Las Vegas Sayādaw would briefly reflect on his two summers training under Sayādaw U Sujāta:

> He had great *mettā*. He was very nice.

Although Sayādaw U Sujāta was Mahāsi Sayādaw's first chief disciple, it was his *second* chief disciple—Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā—who would become the great master's successor after his death in 1982.

> Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā was very strict. There were a lot of monks in those days, and we practiced and practiced, so he didn't have an opportunity to give us detailed teachings.
>
> Mainly, we just reported our meditation experiences to him and he'd correct us. There would be many monks sitting ready to report to him. He'd spend five minutes with each one then it would be the next monk's turn to report his experiences.
>
> We did this every day. He didn't give Dhamma talks. We just interviewed with him then he'd correct and encourage us.

Mahāsi Sayādaw was already a legend by the time Las Vegas Sayādaw first arrived at his center in April 1968. He taught a controversial—but highly effective—method of focusing one's attention on the rising and falling of the abdomen as the primary object of meditation.

Mahāsi Sayādaw had gained widespread international renown for his role in the Sixth Buddhist Council, an assembly of 2,500 monks from Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, India, Nepal and Pakistan that convened in Rangoon from the full moon day of May 17, 1954 to the full moon day of May 24, 1956—the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's death.

During the council, the *Pāli Canon* was recited in its entirety by the assembly. As in the preceding five councils, the purpose of this council was to affirm and preserve the genuine Dhamma and *Vinaya*.

It was Mahāsi Sayādaw who'd been appointed to ask the appropriate questions about the Dhamma and *Vinaya* to Mingun Sayādaw, who'd been appointed to answer them as the "chief respondent."

Mingun Sayādaw was a noteworthy monk in his own right. The Burmese monk was famous for his extraordinary memory. In May 1954, he'd recited from memory without error 16,000 pages from the *Pāli Canon*. During the Council, he was reportedly able to recall the exact book, page and line of every term in the Canon.

In time, Mahāsi Sayādaw would have a significant impact on the teaching of *vipassanā* meditation not just throughout Asia, but in the Western world as well.

> On every Buddhist holy day, Mahāsi Sayādaw himself would give a 2-hour Dhamma talk in the main hall and we'd go to hear him. All the monks would go, and the talk was always about meditation practice. We wouldn't interview with Mahāsi Sayādaw, just listen to his Dhamma talks every week.

It has been suggested by some that Mahāsi Sayādaw had attained the stage of *anāgāmi* by the time he died some 14 years after Las Vegas Sayādaw first encountered him. But many more followers believe that he was an *arahant*.

One of Las Vegas Sayādaw's lay students would one day ask him what he thought about this.

> I personally believe he was an *arahant*. I saw him almost every day. I watched his behavior, listened to the way he spoke. I have very high respect for him.

Sayādaw spent his fourth summer at a Moulmein meditation center in the Sunlun Sayādaw tradition, which offered a different meditation technique than what he'd learned at Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā Meditation Center in Rangoon.

Sunlun Sayādaw, who lived from 1878 to 1952, was the founder of a *vipassanā* meditation tradition that emphasizes vigorous breathing, focusing on *vedāna*—particularly pain—and not moving for two or three hours at a time.

Sayādaw recalled the method he was taught at the center:

> Their way of practice is to focus on the breath. They breathe quickly and shallowly for thirty minutes then try to focus on sensation.

Sunlun Sayādaw was widely believed to have gained the fourth and final stage of enlightenment.

> He was very famous. Everyone believed he was an *arahant*. He couldn't even write his name, and before he was a monk he had to work in an office where he earned only eight *kyat*. He used his thumb to sign his name.
>
> But then one day he became a monk and continued to practice meditation. He eventually gained full enlightenment. After that, he knew everything—he could answer *any* question.
>
> One day Prime Minister U Nu went to pay respects to Sunlun Sayādaw. The prime minister was an educated man—he was a writer and a preacher too. He asked Sunlun Sayādaw about some high-level Dhamma, which the master could explain even in *Pāli*. This was amazing because he couldn't even read or write.
>
> When he died, they didn't cremate his body—they just put it under the pagoda at his temple.

Sayādaw's fifth summer—1972—was spent in meditation at a center in the Thae Inn Gu Sayādaw tradition. It was just a year before the great master died at the age of 60.

Thae Inn Gu Sayādaw had led a particularly interesting life. He had ordained later in life after having been married three times and at one

point being injured while he was burglarizing a home. He later attained *arahant* only 21 months after becoming serious in his practice of meditation.

The Thae Inn Gu method was characterized by sitting in meditation without moving for extended periods of time—starting with no less than two hours.

> Thae Inn Gu Sayādaw was still alive when I was there. I used to see him when he'd offer us Dhamma talks. And when we practiced meditation, his secretary would walk around and coach us. They taught us to put our entire focus on hard, fast breathing. We'd have to sit there without moving for two hours while we did this.

The sixth summer was spent practicing in the Mogok Sayādaw tradition.

The Mogok method emphasized specifically focusing one's attention on the mind.

> I practiced for three months at the Mogok Sayādaw center in Rangoon. They specifically used focusing one's attention on *citta* during meditation. They taught from a chart that depicted the law of dependent origination, and they'd explain the Dhamma and *vipassanā* meditation using that chart.

The methods offered by those two *arahants* during his fifth and sixth summer retreats helped Sayādaw broaden his experience with different *vipassanā* meditation techniques to an even greater degree.

For the seventh summer, Sayādaw practiced at a Rangoon center in the tradition of Mingun Jetawun Sayādaw.

Mingun Jetawun Sayādaw (not to be confused with Mingun Sayādaw) was the teacher who introduced Mahāsi Sayādaw to *vipassanā* meditation in the 1930s. Unlike the method later developed by Mahāsi Sayādaw, though, Mingun Jetawun Sayādaw taught using breathing-in and breathing-out as one's primary object of meditation.

> He was Mahāsi Sayādaw's teacher. Instead of teaching 'rising' and 'falling', his tradition teaches mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out. Otherwise, the teachings are the same—only the primary object is different.

> The two masters are of the same lineage but there were just a few hundred meditators at this center, whereas there were over 1,000 meditators when I was at the Mahāsi center.

Mingun Jetawun Sayādaw, who was also known as U Nārada, lived from 1868 to 1955.

Near the beginning of the 20th century, he'd eagerly begun to search for the way to enlightenment. He eventually met an enlightened monk in the Sagaing Hills near Mandalay. The monk had reminded him that the Buddha had taught that enlightenment was found only through practicing within the four foundations of mindfulness.

And so Mingun Jetawun Sayādaw began his effort in earnest. In just three years' time, he attained enlightenment at the age of 40.

Mingun Jetawun Sayādaw would become a key figure in the revival of *vipassanā* meditation, teaching his controversial method of 'noting' phenomena of mind and matter as they arise.

During an eighth summer, Sayādaw joined his *Abhidhammā* teacher from Mandalay—Sayādaw U Issariya—for a retreat in the jungles of central Burma.

They traveled together to a deep forest called Phyot Khwe Tawra (Pyinmanar), where Sayādaw slept in a tent and his teacher took up residence in a small structure nearby. The two monks would leave the forest to go on alms round in a nearby village each morning but otherwise spent their time in deep meditation in the forest.

> It was just me and my teacher. We had a small building we could use. But in that place they had a lot of big trees—it was the jungle. And the trees had tree guardians that weren't nice living in them.
>
> When we first started staying there, some of the local villagers told my teacher, "You have to be careful. This isn't a normal forest. A lot of angels and evil beings live there."
>
> One day my teacher allowed someone to cut down a small tree. When they did, the tree fell and landed on my teacher. He was taken to a hospital, and although he was eventually discharged, about ten years later he died from complications related to that incident.

> It was very peculiar the way it happened. Those tree deities killed my teacher. I *know* this.

After the incident with Sayādaw U Issariya, the villagers repeated their warnings to Las Vegas Sayādaw.

> The locals reminded me about the tree deities living in the forest. So I had to practice loving kindness a lot. And I did some protection chanting too. I had to be careful.

Even after he returned to student life as school resumed near the end of July each year, Sayādaw made a point to set aside the weekly Buddhist holy days for daylong practice of the meditation techniques he'd learned during his retreats.

Practicing in a variety of centers, environments, and traditions during those eight summers had given him a useful perspective on some of the different methods of *vipassanā* meditation, though he found himself being particularly drawn to the Mahāsi Sayādaw method.

> I think the Mahāsi method is the best. I've studied scripture a lot, and practiced a lot of meditation too. When I compare scripture to practice, I like the Mahāsi tradition because it's about always being mindful. From the time you wake up, start practicing. Be mindful with every step you take.
>
> Other traditions don't necessarily teach that. Some have you sit in meditation while they give you a Dhamma talk. When you're finished, you just go off and start socializing or doing whatever suits you.
>
> In the Mahāsi tradition, there's no talking—just practice. Every step, be mindful.
>
> Fortunately, I learned early. So ever since I started practicing in the Mahāsi tradition I've tried my best to be mindful of every step I take.

At some point during those eight summers, Sayādaw had what would later be characterized in a short written biography of him in the English language as "the deepest spiritual experience of his life."

Had the master attained one of the four stages of enlightenment?

Decades later, a student approached Sayādaw about that cryptically-worded phrase.

"Can you tell me what that means?" the student asked.

The master simply responded, "That's just how the translator worded what I'd written in Thai about that period of my life."

Whether he'd penetrated the Dhamma to some degree during those eight summers Sayādaw won't say.

On Doubt

A student had been putting forth much effort in his meditation. He'd tried hard to closely follow Sayādaw's instructions and guidance. But as he'd not yet experienced any profound realizations or deep states of concentration, he was plagued by doubt as to whether he was practicing correctly.

The student brought the concern to Sayādaw.

The master replied simply, "If you have mindfulness of the present moment, then you are practicing correctly."

***

A student had noticed that although he'd learned a great deal from reading books about the Dhamma, his growing intellectual understanding of the teachings had actually given rise to doubt. He'd since found himself constantly comparing and contrasting methods, analyzing and rationalizing different aspects of the teachings, and often comparing his own experiences in practice to what he'd read about in all the Dhamma books.

The confusion, hesitancy and uncertainty that had surfaced in the student's mind had created a roadblock in his practice.

The student went to the monastery to speak to Sayādaw about this.

The master's reply was practical and memorable:

Acquiring knowledge is good. It must be balanced with practice and effort, though.

Don't read too much. Instead, *practice* too much.

A Vegetarian

Sayādaw had needed time to adjust to the rich support of the monkhood by the Burmese laity of Rangoon.

> The people would invite us to their homes for house blessings or birthdays almost every day. They would offer us envelopes of money—*dāna*, which is a good practice.
>
> They take good care of the monks in Burma. There was no air conditioning, for instance, but they'd put fans next to us to keep us cool.
>
> One time I was invited to a house and they mostly had chicken, pork, egg, and fish for us to eat—a lot of good things to offer to the monks.
>
> But I was a vegetarian. I'd been one since I was a teenager.
>
> The people would always ask me, "What do you need?"
>
> "I don't need anything," I'd say. I didn't want to tell them I was a vegetarian.
>
> But they found out later on. Then they all rushed to prepare vegetarian food for me. I felt bad about it.
>
> After that happened, I told Kyun Galay Sayādaw, "If they need a monk, I will go. But I don't want to go if there are enough monks to go."
>
> It was easy enough for me to get by with what was available. I could just have rice with sugar, or maybe salt and oil. Or maybe I could eat some biscuits or a little bit of beans. I'd been frugal with my eating since I was young, so I didn't care about food.

An Exemplary Student

In the meantime, Sayādaw continued to work hard in his studies.

In April 1973, he completed the 6th level of studies, effectively graduating from high school, and prepared to enter the monastic university in July after he returned from his annual meditation retreat.

That summer, Sayādaw left Kyun Galay Kyaung, where he'd been for six years, and moved to another temple within the Lanmadaw Thayet-taw Kyaung Taik complex called Thathanawdaya Pariyatti in preparation for the upcoming school year.

The 26-year-old monk started monastic university near the end of July 1973. In those days, there wasn't a central monastic university campus in Burma. Although the annual examinations and ceremonies were generally held in Rangoon or Mandalay, the university classrooms were at individual temples scattered across the country where the monks were actually living. Some of the teachers would erect small signs on the exteriors of their classrooms saying "Saṅgha University."

Given his drive to learn since he was a youth in Kunhawt, it's not surprising that Sayādaw thrived at university, where he was eventually honored as an outstanding student.

In 1976, a year before he would graduate, Sayādaw started to teach the other monks when both of his university teachers left for India to pursue their doctoral degrees. They'd asked Sayādaw to teach the monks in their absence, and because of the great admiration he had for his teachers, he'd agreed.

> I eventually finished my higher education because of all the hard work and support of both of my teachers. I learned a lot from them and felt a sense of closeness to both of them. So when they went to India, I took care of all their classes.
>
> One of my teachers left Burma to pursue his PhD—which he eventually completed—at Nalanda University in Bodh Gaya. My other teacher went to New Delhi, where he too eventually completed his PhD.

Sayādaw now found himself serving as a resident, teacher, and lecturer to the resident monks at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti.

It would be a position he'd formally hold for the next 14 years.

Unfortunately, the new arrangement meant that Sayādaw would no longer be able to undertake his summer meditation retreats as he'd need to prepare for the coming school year—both as a teacher, and for now, as a student.

In addition, the abbot of Thathanawdaya Pariyatti—Sayādaw U Pandissa—soon assigned Sayādaw to spend a couple of months each summer teaching programs at a variety of locations around the community.

> Between preparing for and teaching classes during the day during the school year and offering these special programs on Buddhist culture to hundreds of people in the evenings during summer, I never had a chance to visit my hometown or go on retreat again.

Learning the ABC's

As a younger person, Sayādaw never had an opportunity to learn English. By the time he became a monk, opportunities were still hard to come by.

Although lay people in Burma were allowed to study English, it was different for monks in those days. Monks were prohibited from learning the language because the different temples competed with each other to see who could have the most monks pass the rigorous *Pāli* exams. For that reason, monks were only formally allowed to learn *Pāli* and Burmese.

As a work-around to this roadblock, while a fledgling teacher the 30-year old Sayādaw instructed the monks on *Abhidhammā* from 7-8:30 each evening, then he'd go outside to practice walking meditation. When he was sure no one was around, he'd slip off and secretly take a bus or taxi to learn English from a very nice lay man who taught the language to 40 or 50 people each evening.

The teacher happened to be from Hsipaw—near where Sayādaw had grown up—and although Sayādaw had to pay for transportation to get there, the teacher offered him a one-on-one education free of charge after his other students had gone home for the evening.

Sayādaw would study and do homework each night, learning the ABC's and grammar, then return to Thathanawdaya Pariyatti around midnight.

Only a few people knew what he was doing, as he didn't want people to know. One of those in the know was a student of his at the monastery, a young monk whom he'd told to keep quiet.

Upon his return each night, Sayādaw would carefully climb the monastery fence in his robes—not easily done—and then the young monk would unlock and open the temple door for him.

Sayādaw U Pandissa also knew what he was up to. He was supportive, telling Sayādaw, "Go and learn." The abbot didn't let on to others that he knew what Sayādaw was doing, but he supported his efforts because he did his job, teaching the monks four times a day.

For six months, Sayādaw quietly snuck about learning English. By the time he finished studying under his English teacher Sayādaw had acquired a high school level of mastery and could even write essays.

Having not quite completed his degree yet, Sayādaw was also still busy juggling his university studies.

> In April 1977 I finished school but still needed to pass the final examination before I could graduate. My father and the rest of my family—and even my old teacher—wanted me to come back home.
>
> I told them, "If I don't pass my final examination, I will not return to Kunhawt."

Fortunately, Sayādaw passed the rigorous final examinations. He graduated from monastic university and received his *dhammacariyā* ("Teacher of the Dhamma") degree.

> All that meditation I'd done those eight summers had helped me a lot with my studies. In Burma, most of our learning was done by heart.
>
> And while it took most students at least 15 years to finish all the way through university education, it took me only ten years. I was done. I'd earned my B.A. degree, which was the highest education there was in Burma at the time. We'd learned *Pāli*, the Commentaries, the Sub-commentaries, and other things.
>
> So after that, I went back to my hometown for a visit. They were very happy to see me. The old monastery there had recently burned down but a new one had been built and I had an opportunity to visit it.

Sayādaw also stopped in Mandalay to pay respect to Sayādaw U Padumma.

He said, “Hey, Zeya, what have you been doing in Rangoon? Did you study?”

I replied, “Yes, sir. I already finished my education.”

“Really?” he said. He was surprised, because it had taken me only ten years.

I was still only 30 years old. There were five million people living in Shan State in those days. I was the very first one to complete a *dhammacariyā* degree.

Las Vegas Sayādaw, circa May 1977, receiving his dhammacariyā degree certificate from the director of the university’s Religious Studies Department.

After his visit to Mandalay and Kunhawt, Sayādaw returned to his life teaching in Rangoon.

When I was living at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti, the monks were very busy studying. And as a teacher, that kept me very busy as well.

We’d wake at 4 am then do morning chanting and practice loving kindness meditation. Then we did a bit of chanting and loving kindness meditation again in the evening until 7 pm. We meditated just twice a day—and not for long.

The monks spent the rest of the day studying.

Later reflecting on the 17 years that he spent at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti (and the nearly 23 years that he was based in Rangoon), Sayādaw would comment about how different the alms round experience had been there in the big city compared to his early novice days in Mandalay.

In Rangoon, it was easy.

The monks would study from 7-9 am each day, shower, then leave for alms round at 9:30 am. They'd be back to the monastery by 10 am then have lunch.

Instead of hurrying about trying to find someone to offer alms, the monks would comfortably walk to maybe ten homes, where they'd usually be invited inside for the offering.

It had all been so easy and community-like.

For the Kids

It wasn't long after Sayādaw returned from his visit home that his father and four siblings followed him to Rangoon.

Another revolt against the government had flared-up in Shan State as the decades-long civil war continued to manifest in violent outbreaks. The army had recently come in again, war was ensuing, and the school serving Kunhawt was closed.

The situation in Shan State had been getting worse and worse in recent years. Whenever the army came around Kunhawt, there was fighting. It wasn't safe for anyone.

When I was there for my visit, I'd invited my whole family to live in Rangoon. Soon, they decided it was the best thing to do. That's when my dad stepped down as the leader of our village and they came to the city.

With his family now in Rangoon, Sayādaw would not have occasion or even good reason to return to Kunhawt again. He'd reflect almost 45

years later that he probably knew no more than five people in his home village anymore, as "generations have gone by" since he lived there.

Las Vegas Sayādaw's parents U Myat and Daw Moon. The photo of his father was taken around the mid-1970s, shortly before him and his four children left Kunhawt to resettle in Rangoon. The photo of Sayādaw's mother was probably taken around the late 1950s. She passed away in the early 1960s.

Sayādaw began to reflect on the limited educational opportunities he'd had when he lived in Kunhawt, and on the educational plight of those still in the region during the continuing struggle and unrest.

> I thought, "Oh no, now the kids don't have a chance to get an education."
>
> I decided to start sponsoring some of the kids from Kunhawt to go to Rangoon or other cities for education. Some of the kids were very smart but they had poor parents, or maybe one of their parents had died. So I'd help them find a place to stay in the city—either at a temple or at a friend's family's house—so that they could go to school.

Sayādaw eventually sponsored 29 children—many of them coming to Rangoon.

> I wanted to help as much as I could.

> When their schools were closed during the weekends, all of the students would come to see me at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti. They'd tell me how they needed shoes, tuition, pencils, books, or maybe they needed to go to a doctor for something.

Sayādaw was happy to provide for their needs.

> I couldn't say no—they were far from home, so I took care of them.
>
> As a teacher, I'd go out and people would offer me a lot of donations. I saved the money for the kids, not for myself.
>
> And in the summer—before *vassa*—people would offer robes. Every monk had two sets of robes, but those of us who were teachers might have three or four sets, because people would give us extras. So I would sell my extra robes to help fund the kids' education. I did that for many years.

Sometimes the students would have problems at school or at the temples where they were staying.

> I'd have to go solve the problem. I had to take care of these 29 kids.
>
> I'm happy about what I've done. I wanted to do it, but I didn't have my own temple then. I let four or five kids live with me at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti, then I might arrange for some of the others to stay at another temple where I knew people—maybe even in another city.
>
> Or they might stay with a family and help the family. But I'd request one thing in exchange for the kids helping the family: let them go to school.

Fortune Tellers

During his years living in Rangoon, Sayādaw had begun to rekindle his childhood interest in fortune telling. It had been a fascination of his since his grandfather exposed him to it around the time his mother had died.

One day Sayādaw called a famous fortune teller and asked him to come to the temple to teach him. Sayādaw had always loved to acquire knowledge, but he had no interest in actually telling people their fortunes. He knew that doing so would be a violation of the Buddhist monastic code but he saw practical value in understanding the principles behind it.

People would sometimes come to the temple and relate to him what fortune tellers had told them about their horoscope. In those cases, for example, with greater knowledge of fortune telling he might then be more able to steer their understanding in the direction of the Buddha's teachings on *kamma*.

Sayādaw would elaborate to a young monk decades later:

> After all, a horoscope and *kamma* are operating under the same principles. What matters are the choices one makes in life. We should always try to do good things.

Sayādaw recalled how a woman supporter of the monastery showed up one day after an absence of seven years. He asked the lady where she'd been.

She said, "Remember how the last time I came to the temple, I offered lunch to the monks? Well, afterward someone broke a window in my home and stole something. I came to the temple and did something good, but this happened, so I got mad at the monks and the temple."

Sayādaw had taken the opportunity to remind the woman that her property being stolen didn't happen by chance—it was because of her *kamma* from a previous life. And the people who stole her belongings created new *kamma* for themselves.

He'd suggested to the woman that if in the future someone takes her stuff, she should just consider it charity. Then replace it.

> If we understand the law of nature, we can let it go. We don't have to worry about it. We just buy a new one.

As Sayādaw was recounting this story to the young monk, the monk asked him if he'd teach him about fortune telling.

> No, because it doesn't help us gain liberation.

The other monks at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti had asked him the same.

"But," Sayādaw told the young monk, "it's a waste of your time—stay away from it."

He added that for an old monk or meditator, simply learning how to tell fortunes is fine. But if, for example, you're a young monk and you're asked to read the palm of a young girl, the mere fantasy of touching the girl's hands could easily lead to sexual desire—and this is a big problem.

Sayādaw took the opportunity to explain to the young monk that there are different types of fortune tellers:

-some can actually tell people's fortunes;
-some are guessing; and
-some are simply lying.

Mostly, though, fortune tellers have a connection to spirits.

Sayādaw elaborated by saying that some earth-born spirits under the name of *Cātumahārājikā* actually live here amongst people. We sometimes call these beings 'tree guardians' or 'mountain guardians'. They are not qualified to reside in *Cātumahārājikā*.

Many fortune tellers pay respect to these spirits, who in turn will tell them things about people's families and private lives.

None of this is the fortune teller's ability. Rather, the spirits are telling them.

Sometimes, too, the spirits will possess the fortune teller's mouth or hands. The teller will suddenly find their body moving about involuntarily.

To add to the busyness of his schedule, beginning in April 1980 (and continuing through 1987) Sayādaw was assigned to grade student examinations during the summers. Exams from across the country were sent to Rangoon, and he was amongst a group of about ten monks who were responsible for grading them.

During this time, a young *samanera* of the Mon ethnic group came to live at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti. The novice had ordained near his family's home at the age of 10 before eventually moving to Rangoon. The young man's name was Zawtika.

The future U Zawtika trained under Sayādaw until he turned 20 years of age and took *bhikkhu* ordination with one of the senior monks at the temple acting as his preceptor. He would continue training as a student under Sayādaw until 1988, when the master eventually departed for Thailand.

Preceptors

In Thailand, a monk authorized to ordain other monks—called a preceptor, or *upajjhāya*—must first be appointed as such.

It's not the same in Myanmar.

Sayādaw explained the difference between preceptors in the two countries:

> According to the *Vinaya*, to be qualified as a preceptor a monk must have at least ten *vassa*, must know the procedure, and should be able to teach the student. So if a monk meets those criteria, in Burma he can be a preceptor.
>
> It's quite different from the way it's done in Thailand.
>
> According to Thai tradition, if you want to be a monk but there's no one available who is an authorized preceptor, you would have to travel somewhere else to find one. Or the preceptor would have to travel to you.
>
> This is their tradition, but it's not based on the *Vinaya*. They can't be a preceptor without first being appointed.

China

Around 1986, Sayādaw was contacted by a Palaung friend who'd become the abbot of a Buddhist temple in Yunnan, a southwestern province of China bordering Burma. He asked Sayādaw if he'd like to come there for a ceremony inaugurating a large Buddha statue being brought in from Mandalay. Sayādaw accepted.

> Yunnan State had 85 Buddhist villages. After the Communists took over, though, there were no monks or nuns at all anymore. When

the country reopened, that eventually changed. The old temples were already there, but there weren't even Buddha statues because the Communist government had destroyed them.

The local people wanted to have a Buddhist monk living in their midst again, so they invited my friend to be the abbot of one of the temples. The temple had no Buddha statue, so the monk bought a big, six-foot-tall statue from Mandalay and made arrangements for its delivery.

My friend planned to have a big ceremony for the occasion, so he invited me to come. He had only been in robes for a few years and didn't know much about Buddhism yet, so he asked me to support him in offering the Dhamma to temple-goers.

As Sayādaw prepared to leave Burma and travel to Yunnan State, the situation was bad in both countries.

Burma had Communists too. They were fighting with the government.

Just before I left, the government officials told me, "We can't take responsibility for you. If you go, it's at your own risk."

Meanwhile, a date had been set for the big ceremony in Yunnan.

Lots of people were expecting me and the people I was traveling with to arrive with the new Buddha statue that my friend asked us to bring from Burma. There were no cell phones in those days, so I had no way to tell my friend in Yunnan State about the government officials' concerns about the safety of the journey.

Sayādaw decided to take a chance and go for it.

Although it was a very dangerous situation, me and two other monks rented a car, which we shared with three women, and made the journey overland from Rangoon to Mandalay, then on to Yunnan State. We eventually crossed the Burmese border with the large Buddha statue and entered China.

> When we arrived safely in Yunnan State, hundreds of people were excitedly awaiting our arrival. As we passed through each village on the way to the temple, we were greeted with warmth and enthusiasm. We finally arrived at the temple around 1 am.

Sayādaw stayed in Yunnan State for a few months, traveling around a bit locally.

> Every day, though, hundreds of people came to the temple to hear me give the Dhamma, which I offered in the Shan language.
>
> The local people said they could understand about 75% of what I taught them, as the Shan language was similar to their own language.

Within a few years, the Burmese government conquered the Communist regime in their country. Nineteen eighty nine was the last year of Communism in Burma.

A Visitor from Thailand

In early 1987, Sayādaw received a letter from a monk in Thailand.

> There was a very special, very famous monk in Thailand—the most famous monk in the country at the time—and he was only 30 years old. His name was Ajahn Nikorn. He was from Chiang Mai. He had millions of followers and 33 branch monasteries in Thailand.
>
> I don't know how he got my address—he later said he couldn't remember who gave it to him. But he and his friend asked me to lead them and some of their followers on a pilgrimage in Burma.
>
> I can speak Shan, of course, which is somewhat similar to the Thai language. Between that, hand gestures, and a bit of English—which they didn't really speak—we got by. I took them to Mandalay and Bagan—everywhere in Burma—twice.
>
> For the first 2-week pilgrimage, there were 40 people. The second 2-week pilgrimage, which I took them on a year later, had 84

people—40 monks and 44 lay people. I was still teaching during that time but took time off to do these pilgrimages.

This would prove to be the beginning of the end of Sayādaw's time living in Burma.

On the Practice of *Jhāna*

While instructing a student on the *arūpajhānas*, Sayādaw was asked if someone who attains one of these formless *jhānas* is close to being an *arahant*.

No, because it's tranquility meditation.

He elaborated by telling a story from the time of the Buddha:

He had two teachers—Ālāra Kālāma, who gained the third formless *jhāna*, and Uddaka Rāmaputta, who gained the fourth formless *jhāna*.

The Buddha went to them and learned from them both. But after a few days he reached the same levels of *jhāna*. He then asked his teachers if there was more to their practice.

They told him, "No, that's it."

The Buddha recognized that theirs was not the way to liberation, so he left and practiced on his own in the jungle for six years.

After the Buddha gained supreme enlightenment, he pondered who could understand his teaching. He remembered both of his teachers but then learned that Ālāra had passed away just a week earlier and had been reborn in the formless sphere (*arūpaloka)*. He also learned that Uddaka had just died the night before.

"What a great loss for them," the Buddha thought. "If only they could listen to my Dhamma, they could gain enlightenment."

But since both teachers had been reborn in the *arūpa* plane, the Buddha couldn't teach them because they no longer had a body.

Sayādaw added that the new lifespan of the Buddha's two teachers is very long—as much as 84,000 *mahā-kappa*. It would be an extremely long time before they could be reborn in a celestial world or the human world and therefore capable of hearing the Dhamma.

And, even then, they could do bad *kamma* and be reborn in a plane of misery. As such, the Buddha didn't recommend one rely on tranquility meditation *only* to help them.

Sayādaw continued his reply to the student with some discussion on Jainism.

Jainism is one of the world's oldest continuously-practiced religions. Although their tradition holds that the religion was established millions of years ago, its most current leader was Mahavira (c. 599 BCE to c. 527 BCE), who was an elder contemporary of the Buddha. Although the two Indian masters knew of each other, they are not believed to have met.

> The Jains practice *samatha* meditation and can sit for days, by the power of their *jhāna*. But they can't gain enlightenment; that is, their method of practice will not take them to the end of suffering.
>
> They've practiced like this since before the Buddha was born.
>
> The Buddha taught that the Jain path wasn't the right way, as it was not the Noble Eightfold Path. They have *sīla* and *samādhi* but they don't understand mind and matter as arising and disappearing. The Buddha taught *aniccā*, suffering, and non-self, or *anattā*.
>
> But the Jains believe in self—*atta*. And it's because of this that they can't gain enlightenment.

Sayādaw explained that the Jains can acquire incredible willpower because of their concentration and *jhāna*.

> They torture themselves, especially with respect to sexual desire. They torture their bodies. Even though it's the mind that wants, they hurt the body first.

He recalled one of his four visits to India, when he paid a visit to a large Jain temple. Although he didn't see any of their monks around, he acknowledged that the supporters respect the Jain ascetics a lot, as they believe them to be content and practicing hard.

But the Buddha said their practice is not correct.

Sayādaw also spoke of a group of Jains who went to practice at a Bombay meditation center in the tradition of the famous Burmese-born lay *vipassanā* meditation teacher S.N. Goenka. The Jains soon returned to their temple and continued to follow their own tradition.

> They're attached to their tradition. But this has gone on for centuries. You can't easily convince them to change their beliefs, so we (as Buddhists) are lucky.

As a further elaboration of his point, Sayādaw talked about the ancient Hindu belief that all of one's sins will disappear if one bathes in the Ganga River. Also known as the Ganges, this 1,569-mile-long Indian river is the most sacred river of Indian Hindus.

"Is this possible?" he asked rhetorically. "No, it is not. The Buddha said if it was possible then all the fish and other living creatures living in the river would have no sin at all."

Sayādaw told the student about another one of the trips he'd made to India.

> At 4 am one day I went to the Ganga to watch the people trying to purify their minds in the river.
>
> The Buddha said this is not the right way.
>
> And *I* don't recommend practicing *jhāna*.

The student asked, "Then why did the Buddha tell his disciples to practice it?"

Sayādaw explained that it was a good practice in the time of the Buddha. But it wasn't enough. After gaining *jhāna*, meditators have to continue practicing *vipassanā* in order to attain enlightenment.

And in those days, it was very easy for meditators to gain *jhāna* because they didn't live in cities, or even villages. They lived in the forest, where it was quiet and free from distractions.

> But nowadays, you're confronted with good and bad things, which give rise to *lobha* and *dosa*.
>
> In the forest, there was nothing. So it was very easy to gain concentration and *jhāna*. A meditator would then practice *vipassanā* and gain enlightenment.
>
> But doing this is very hard these days, given all the distractions around us.

Sayādaw explained to the student that if you gain enlightenment, you'll never lose it. Not even in the next life. But you can lose *jhāna* anytime.

> A meditator needs to practice for years to gain *jhāna* but can lose it in just one second. And it can take a long time to get it back, particularly if one is upset about losing it.

The master then shared an old short story about a novice monk who'd practiced meditation, gained the fifth *jhāna*, and acquired supernormal knowledge—he could fly.

The novice was flying around one day, when he heard a group of teenage girls singing. When attachment to the beauty of their song arose in him, he dropped to the earth.

After he got up and dusted himself off, he talked to one of the singers and then decided to leave the monastic life. He eventually went on to marry the girl.

The student commented to Sayādaw about a book he'd read in which it said how someone who practices *vipassanā* can take a break and switch to *samatha* meditation.

Sayādaw explained that this can be done, as *samatha* is a useful practice.

> However, once one's practice has progressed to the point of gaining the higher insight knowledges, to practice *samatha* meditation would be a bit like reviewing your old high school textbooks after finishing your BA degree.

Sayādaw continued by saying that if someone gains *jhāna*, it's because they practiced a lot of *samatha* meditation in a previous life. But if you

weren't interested in *samatha* meditation in a previous life, you can't gain *jhāna* in this life.

And then there are those meditators who gained both *jhāna* and *magga* in a previous life.

It all depends on the *pāramī* we've accumulated.

Our ultimate goal—*vipassanā* takes us there directly. But *samatha* takes a meandering route; it's indirect, and takes a long time.

So do you want to go directly or indirectly?

Time is too short, life is too short. Go directly. If you don't reach it before you die, no worries—just continue in your next life. You're already 75% there.

This is why one person may gain enlightenment easily but others have to work very hard: it depends on our *pāramī*.

Chapter 4: Thailand (1988-1989)

Around the spring of 1988 Sayādaw received a letter from one of the Thai monks he'd taken around Burma earlier in the year as part of the Ajahn Nikorn pilgrimage.

The letter was an official invitation on behalf of Phra Kru Vachirakitsophon—abbot of Wat Khao Takhrao, Ban Laem, Phetchaburi Province, Thailand—for Sayādaw to travel to Thailand and be a guest in a big annual celebration to introduce a new Buddha statue being offered to their temple, which was located some 70 miles southwest of Bangkok.

Sayādaw was interested—he'd never flown internationally before—but he didn't have quite enough money for travel expenses. To cover the difference, he decided to sell some of his extra robes.

Soon, he was bound for Thailand, with a determination to spend some extra time in the country.

Only For Angels

Amongst the five predominantly *Theravāda* Buddhist countries, Myanmar is the country which most emphasizes *Abhidhammā* in its teachings. In that country, high-quality instruction on the subject is given to 7- and 8-year old children just as they begin their spiritual education.

In contrast, while Sri Lankan students learn about *Abhidhammā* in public school, there is very little emphasis of it at all in Thailand. There, the subject is generally reserved for university-level learning (even that being a recent addition) simply to acquire the knowledge necessary to pass an exam.

It's for this reason that very few Thai monks are adept and skillful teachers of *Abhidhammā*.

Decades after Sayādaw eventually came to the United States, a young Cuban-American monk would ask him why Thai Buddhist monastics don't emphasize *Abhidhammā* as part of their spiritual education.

Sayādaw explained that in Thailand some people believe that the Buddha intended *Abhidhammā* to be for angels only; that is, he specifically taught it to celestial beings because it is beyond a human being's ability to understand.

But *Abhidhammā* is very useful. In Burma, even the laity learn it.

> It is the essence of the Buddha's teaching. It will very well support our meditation in order to understand reality.

Sayādaw offered some historical background to the Buddha's approach to teaching *Abhidhammā* to human beings.

> The Buddha initially taught *Abhidhammā* to just *one* human being—Venerable Sāriputta, who was one of the Buddha's two chief disciples and the disciple he considered to be foremost in wisdom amongst all his disciples. Venerable Sāriputta, in turn, taught *Abhidhammā* to 500 monks, all of whom gained *arahant*.
>
> The Buddha had asked Venerable Sāriputta to teach the monks because he knew that Venerable Sāriputta was very smart and could transmit the complex teachings to them very well.
>
> The Buddha himself later taught aspects of *Abhidhammā* to other humans too. Some of the seven books of *Abhidhammā* came directly from the Buddha.

The Buddha did, in fact, teach *Abhidhammā* primarily to celestial beings.

But around 1950 a famous Thai monk called Venerable Jodok Nyanasiddhi went to Burma in order to learn and practice meditation under Mahāsi Sayādaw using the Burmese master's method of cultivating awareness of the rising and falling of the abdomen as one's primary object.

Venerable Jodok had been living at Bangkok's Wat Mahadhat Yuwaratrangsarit—one of the ten royal temples of Thailand—during a time when the Mahāsi method of *vipassanā* meditation was famous in Burma but still largely unknown in Thailand. He'd graduated at the highest level of the *Pāli* exams in Thailand, and already interested in meditation, had been encouraged by his peers to travel to Burma to learn the method.

Venerable Jodok spent two years in Burma training under Mahāsi Sayādaw and a student who would come to be called Luang Por Asabha. That year the 39-year-old Luang Por Asabha had been appointed by Mahāsi Sayādaw the *vipassanā* meditation master of the Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā Meditation Center in Rangoon.

Venerable Jodok was in good hands and had good results using their method—("He might have gained some enlightenment," added Las

Vegas Sayādaw)—and upon his return to Thailand he began to teach it.

Venerable Jodok was later given the honorary title Phra Dhammadhirarajamahamuni and appointed Thailand's Chief Master for Vipassanā Meditation.

He was also instrumental in having two Burmese monks invited to his country in 1953 to teach *vipassanā* meditation using Mahāsi Sayādaw's method. Early that year Somdej Phra Buddhachariya of Thailand, and the Thai minister in charge of *Saṅgha* affairs—Venerable Vimaladhamma—made an official request of the government of Burma to send monks specializing in *vipassanā* meditation to Thailand.

Mahāsi Sayādaw personally chose Luang Por Asabha to lead that mission. Luang Por Asabha would be aided by his assistant—U Indawamsa—who was assigned to teach *Abhidhammā* as it relates to *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation.

The two Burmese monks arrived in Thailand around 1954.

With the assistance of Venerable Jodok, Luang Por Asabha and U Indawamsa began teaching *Abhidhammā* and Mahāsi Sayādaw's method of *vipassanā* meditation at Wat Mahadhat.

Wat Mahadhat was home to Thailand's oldest institution of higher education for Buddhist monks and one of the most important universities in the country—Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. And thanks to the hard and dedicated work of Venerable Jodok, Luang Por Asabha and U Indawamsa, the temple would soon also become home to a *vipassanā* meditation center.

The program was a huge success. By 1960, Mahāsi Sayādaw's method of *vipassanā* meditation had gained wide support in Thailand, with hundreds of thousands of people trained in the technique in that country alone.

Luang Por Asabha would eventually establish himself at Sorntawi Vipassanā Center in Thailand and continue teaching there for the rest of his life. He died in 2010.

After the passing of Venerable Jodok in 1988, one of his disciples became a professor at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and *Abhidhammā* eventually became part of the curriculum.

Still, Thailand and Myanmar have a complex and tumultuous history, and it's been said that part of the reason why many Thai monastics continue to resist acceptance of *Abhidhammā* is simply because of Myanmar's strong emphasis of it. There's a convoluted cultural and historical dynamic at play.

Perfecting Patience

A student was speaking with Sayādaw about his struggles with pain while sitting in meditation for longer or more frequent periods than those to which he was accustomed. In reply, the master gave the student a couple of different approaches for dealing with pain, one of which was to sit with it and welcome it.

As the student worked with Sayādaw's instructions, he slowly began to understand just what his teacher was getting at.

"I'm beginning to see," he reported back to Sayādaw half-jokingly, "that pain is a very good—but *cruel*—teacher."

"Yes," replied the master. "But it's very important to have the right attitude. We need to develop our *khanti pāramī*—our perfection of patience."

Just a few months after Sayādaw's arrival in Thailand, the 8888 Uprising in Burma was in full swing. What had started as a student movement on August 8, 1988 had turned into a series of national protests and riots. Over the six or so weeks that followed, there had been massive bloodshed in the country.

> In Burma it was reported that the military government killed 2,000 people in 1988—monks and regular people.
>
> I talked with my abbot—Sayādaw U Pandissa—back at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti, and he said to me, "The situation here is not good. Even if you come back, I don't think you will have a chance to teach—the situation is too unstable. It's up to you if you want to stay in Thailand for a while longer."
>
> So I made a decision to stay in Thailand and not return to Burma.

Since it seemed he'd be staying on at Wat Khao Takhrao for a while longer, Sayādaw decided that he needed to learn the Thai language.

He sat down with the abbot and expressed his interest.

One of the resident monks had formerly been a public school teacher, so Phra Kru Vachirakitsophon called a meeting between him and Sayādaw. During the meeting the abbot told the monk that beginning the next day he was to start teaching Sayādaw the Thai language.

But the monk had left the teaching life behind and wasn't interested in being Sayādaw's language teacher. It soon became clear to Sayādaw that he needed to find another way to learn the language.

He decided instead to learn the language through self-study. And just five months after beginning his study of the Thai language, he was able to read and write it.

One day not long after Sayādaw was able to gain basic fluency in Thai, Phra Kru Vachirakitsophon approached him.

> The high priest said to me, "We have over 300 monks and 90 nuns living at this temple. I've heard that Burmese monks are smart about *Abhidhammā*. If possible, I want you to teach *Abhidhammā* to the monks and nuns."
>
> "Yes, Bhante," I replied. "I will try my best."
>
> And then the abbot said, "Don't teach the nuns and monks together—separate them."

Soon, Sayādaw found his command of the Thai language put to the test.

> I started to teach the nuns for two hours—from 12-2 pm—then the monks for two hours—from 4-6 pm. I did this every day.
>
> When I taught the nuns, I'd tell them, "If I say something wrong in Thai—if I use bad grammar—please let me know. I appreciate it."
>
> And they helped me learn their language.
>
> I'd teach the nuns, take a break for two hours, and then teach 100 of the monks. I taught them *Abhidhammā* and the Commentaries.
>
> I taught them without a book because I'd already been teaching it for close to 14 years. The subject matter wasn't a problem, but the language was.
>
> I did this every day for three months and really improved my Thai. Otherwise, it was very difficult. There were no Burmese people

around, just Thai people. I'd teach for at least four hours a day. My Thai got better very quickly.

Sayādaw would later share that although the Thai monks who were his students at Wat Khao Takhrao treated him with respect, the centuries of strained relations between Thailand and Burma had sometimes cast a strange light over the monastery.

Since Sayādaw was the only monk from Burma amongst the 300 Thai monks living at the temple, he used to regularly encourage them to not think of him as being Burmese; rather, to think of him as being a member of an ethnic group from Shan State.

It wasn't personal; it was cultural.

Sayādaw took advantage of any free time he had by traveling all over the country with Ajahn Nikorn, with whom he'd reconnected shortly after arriving in Thailand.

The two monks traveled just about every day when they could over the course of the year Sayādaw lived in Thailand, covering most of the country in their explorations. They often had an entourage, all of whom treated Sayādaw very kindly.

Sometimes they traveled by tour bus and Sayādaw would often be invited to use the in-cabin P.A. to teach Dhamma to the monks and lay people in his new Thai as they journeyed about.

Sayādaw and Ajahn Nikorn spent time in the south and east of Thailand, and made perhaps four or five visits to the latter's home—Chiang Mai—in the north. Sayādaw was impressed by the forests of northern Thailand, thinking that perhaps one day he could spend time on retreat there, as it had already been more than a decade since his last intensive meditation retreat.

Of the Bangkok area, Sayādaw would later remark that the Emerald Buddha statue, which is housed at Wat Phra Kaew on the grounds of the Grand Palace, had made a particular impression on him. The famous 2'-tall statue—made of a green semi-precious stone, not emerald—is widely considered to be the sacred palladium of the Kingdom of Thailand.

At the end of his getaways with Ajahn Nikorn, Sayādaw would always return to his lodging at Wat Khao Takhrao.

Decades later, Sayādaw would reflect on his impressions of and time spent with Ajahn Nikorn.

He was very handsome and had a very good heart. He had a good voice and spoke well too.

He wasn't educated about Dhamma though, because he'd become famous very young and was then too busy to learn. He had no time.

He became a novice at seven years old, then an abbot shortly after becoming a monk.

When he was still very young, he'd said one time, "When I practice meditation, I go to heaven and see a pagoda. I want to build a pagoda just like the one I see in my meditation."

So the people built a pagoda for him in Chiang Mai.

That made him famous. After that, he was very busy offering "good luck" ceremonies for people.

He had no chance to learn once he became famous because he had to travel every day, even during *vassa*. On any given day, he might have breakfast in Chiang Mai and lunch in Bangkok. He had no time to practice.

Around late 1988, Sayādaw had another opportunity to put his newly acquired knowledge of not just the Thai language, but of Thailand itself, to use.

The abbot of the last temple I lived at in Burma—Thathanawdaya Pariyatti—and the famous lay *vipassanā* teacher U Ba Khin had been friends because Sayādaw U Pandissa was born in the same village in Burma as U Ba Khin's chief disciple. Her name was Sayamagyi Daw Mya Thwin.

U Ba Khin had a massive influence on the 20th century *vipassanā* meditation movement, and Sayamagyi Daw Mya Thwin would eventually fulfill her teacher's aspirations to teach Buddhist meditation in the West.

U Ba Khin had died in 1971 at the age of 72, but later—while I was living at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti—the local U Ba Khin meditation

> center would temporarily ordain foreigners for ten days each year and then lead them on a silent meditation retreat.
>
> Because of the connection between U Ba Khin and Sayādaw U Pandissa, every year me or some of the other monks from my temple would get invited to the center to conduct the ordinations, let the new monks confess their transgressions of the *Vinaya* to us, and generally help take care of them during their retreat.

Another famous lay *vipassanā* teacher—S.N. Goenka, a Burmese-born Indian instructor who would also have a massive influence on the worldwide lay *vipassanā* meditation movement—was another one of U Ba Khin's students.

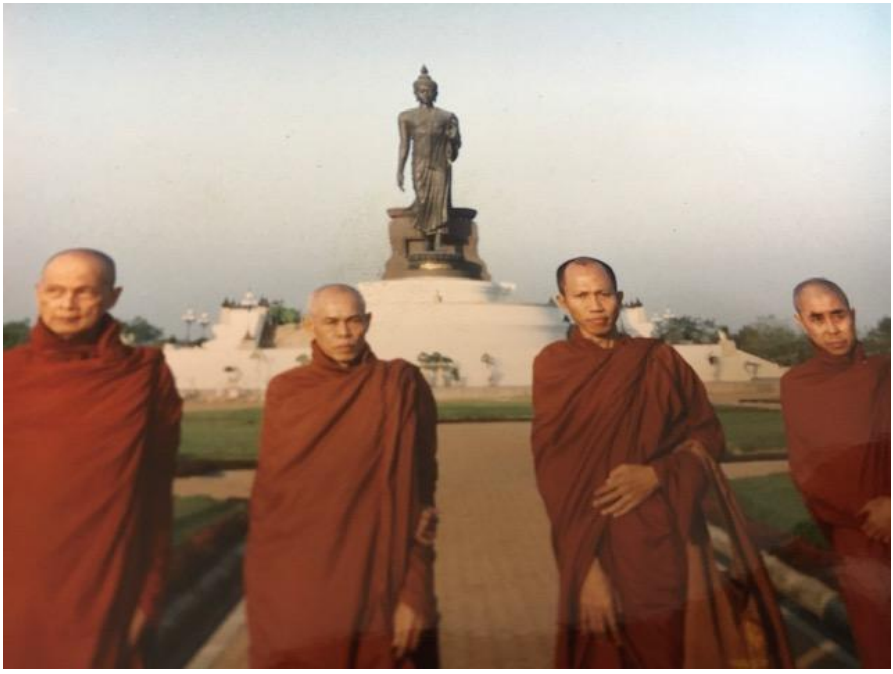
> I knew Goenka through the work we did at the U Ba Khin center in Rangoon. Every year he'd be at the U Ba Khin center while we were there helping out with the temporary monks. This was before he started spending all of his time in India.
>
> Also, ever since U Ba Khin had died, every year in January—on the anniversary of his death—his followers would come to the temple where I lived and ordain for ten days.
>
> I had a lot of interactions with that community in those days.

S.N. Goenka had become very famous, and so by 1986 or 1987 the U Ba Khin community had branch meditation centers in London and Sydney.

> Although I've never been to either of those centers, every year the center in Sydney would host these temporary ordinations—just like they'd done in Rangoon—and then the new monks would go off on a 10-day silent meditation retreat.
>
> Around 1988—after I'd gone off to Thailand—Sayādaw U Pandissa had gone to the Australia meditation center with three other monks. They'd been invited to ordain the temporary monks and help out during the retreat as we'd always done.
>
> After the four monks were done in Australia, they stopped in

Thailand to visit me. We spent a few days traveling around together. I mainly took them around the north of Thailand but we spent some time around Bangkok too. We visited Chiang Mai, Lampang, and other places.

None of them could speak Thai, but I could. So I was able to give them a nice tour of Thailand. I was happy to show them around the country.



Las Vegas Sayādaw at Putthamonthon with his last Rangoon abbot—Sayādaw U Pandissa (left)—and two other monks visiting from Burma. (Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand, 1988)

Take the Direct Line

A lay student once asked Sayādaw about the assertion of some meditation teachers that one must have *jhāna* in order to attain enlightenment.

"Not so," responded Sayādaw. "The Buddha said there are two paths—direct insight, or by first attaining *jhāna*.

"It's like this—" He started drawing a rectangular map.

"Here's *nibbāna* in one corner of the map. We're over here in the opposite corner of the map, at a diagonal.

"We can take the slow, meandering route that works its way to the destination along the outer edge of the map—via the *jhāna* path—or the efficient line that heads straight to the goal—via direct insight.

"We don't have much time. So we should take the direct line."

Headed for India

In early 1989, Sayādaw was offered another good opportunity to travel abroad.

> Ajahn Nikorn decided that he wanted to go to Bodh Gaya—the northern Indian site of the Buddha's enlightenment—and other places around India.
>
> In Thailand there was this deal going on at the time where if you had eight people traveling, you got a free 9th person. Because they had enough people going, the travel agent working with the Thai monks gave them *three* free people.
>
> So Ajahn Nikorn asked me if I wanted to go with them.
>
> "Why not?" I said. "Yes, I'd like to go."

So Sayādaw and two others were able to join Ajahn Nikorn's group on a trip to India at no charge.

But the pilgrimage didn't go quite as Sayādaw might have expected.

> We'd wake up at 5 am and have breakfast about 6 am. Then we'd leave the place where we were staying and start out for our next destination. We'd have to travel all day until about 5 pm to get there then rush to pay respects to the place.
>
> The next day, we'd do the same thing all over again—rushing around from place to place. It kept going on and on and on. We didn't have a chance to do anything, really—just spend days traveling.

Then, the pilgrimage was finished and the Thais had to return to Thailand.

Lunch beside the road with Ajahn Nikorn, seated in center (India, 1989)

Sayādaw wasn't about to limit his time in India to rushing about.

I thought, "My old university teacher is still studying in New Delhi." So I decided to reach out to him.

And I wanted to travel around India for a few months instead of returning to Thailand with Ajahn Nikorn and the others in our pilgrimage group.

"I won't return with you," I told them. I said goodbye.

Then, all of them donated all their money to me. They were very kind. India was very poor in those days, and they gave me 20,000 *rupees*—it was a lot of money.

I thought, "They're so very kind. I have to use this money to be beneficial."

Sayādaw bid his fellows safe travels and was soon on his way to meet up with his old teacher in New Delhi. When he did, the two monks decided to travel together around India for three months.

> We explored all over India—we went to the south, to Madras, and other places too. We went everywhere except for the region of Kashmir, where we'd hoped to visit the nearby Golden Temple.

Located in the state of Punjab, the Golden Temple is the preeminent spiritual site of Sikhism in India.

> But the region was closed to outsiders at the time due to an ongoing territorial conflict between India and Pakistan.
>
> We also went back to Bodh Gaya, where we visited and traveled around with my other university teacher who'd left Burma to get his PhD in India.

Although Sayādaw would again see his New Delhi teacher after the trip was over, he would never again see his Bodh Gaya teacher.

Considering the educational experiences in India that his old teachers had shared with him and neighboring Sri Lanka's reputation for being a fine Dhamma learning center, Sayādaw began to wonder how educational opportunities in the two countries compared.

> So after our tour of India was over, I flew to Colombo and asked for information about educational opportunities in their country. I figured the education was better there than in India.
>
> I used the remainder of the donated money I'd received from the Thais in the pilgrimage group and moved to Sri Lanka for study. And I studied hard.

Reincarnation or Rebirth?

Sayādaw once explained to a student that *Mahāyāna* Buddhists often speak of reincarnation. Some believe that after the body dies, the mind continues on to another world of existence.

"In *Theravāda* Buddhism," he said, "we don't say 'reincarnation'. We call it 'rebirth'. But they're not the same."

Reincarnation is a Hindu concept. It is based on the idea that after death, one's immortal soul—*atta*—leaves the body through the forehead and then enters another body.

The Buddha declared that "*sabbe dhamma anattā*"—all phenomena are not-self.

"This includes *nibbāna* too," added Sayādaw. "But there are some who think that *nibbāna* is *atta*.

"This teaching that *nibbāna* is *atta* is against the teaching of the Buddha. *Nibbāna* is *anattā*."

The Buddha taught *anattā*—no soul, no self.

"That's why Buddhism didn't last long in India," explained Sayādaw.

The Indians of the Buddha's time didn't want to accept his teachings but initially had to because the Buddha had the support of the king and other high officials.

After the Buddha died, though, the orthodox Hindus of the day eventually made Buddhism disappear from their culture.

"It's still gone from India," Sayādaw said.

The *Pāli* word for rebirth is *paṭisandhi*. Some people may confuse it with reincarnation, but if we learn *Abhidhammā* we will understand exactly what it means and how it works.

Chapter 5: Sri Lanka (1989-1990)

A student once asked Sayādaw if he'd traveled to Sri Lanka to learn more about *Abhidhammā*.

Sayādaw replied that he hadn't, as the *Abhidhammā* education in Myanmar is of the very highest quality—there's no need to go somewhere else to learn it. The children of Myanmar—including lay children, not just monks and novices—start learning it at a young age.

> No, we mostly go to Sri Lanka or Thailand to *teach* it.

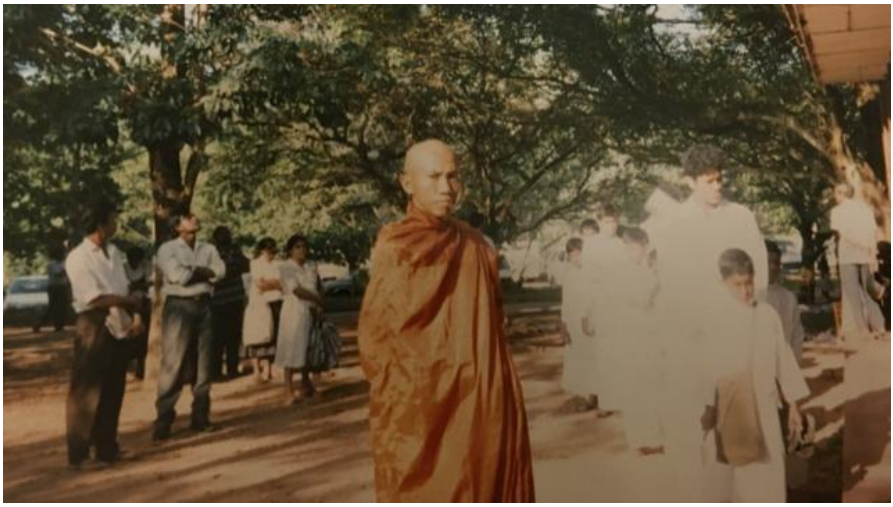
But, he explained, he'd gone to Sri Lanka for postgraduate studies of *Pāli* and Buddhism in general. And, although he'd already studied these topics in his home country, he'd traveled to Sri Lanka specifically to learn them in English.

> I studied English at Aquinas College of Higher Studies, which was a very famous college in Colombo. It was the only college in Sri Lanka that offered an English program. I was able to study English grammar there.
>
> I was also accepted at the Postgraduate Institute of Pāli and Buddhist Studies in Kohuwala, where classes were held in a two-story building. This was a part of the University of Kelaniya, though it was on a different campus.

Sayādaw's teachers for his postgraduate studies were Chinese, Japanese, and Sri Lankan. They'd mostly graduated from university in Russia (where they'd studied Buddhism!). But the students generally knew the subject matter better than the teachers, though their articulation was usually limited to their native tongues.

Although the instructors asked basic questions that Sayādaw could have easily answered in Burmese, it was a difficult challenge learning how to respond in his still-limited English.

> I was accepted at the Postgraduate Institute because I had already finished my Buddhist education in Burma—I'd received my *dhammacariyā* degree—and I wanted to pursue a master's degree. They were offering MA degrees to Burmese monks who already had their *dhammacariyā* degrees.



Las Vegas Sayādaw visiting Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi at Mahamewna Gardens. Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi is from a southern branch of the original Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. The tree was planted in 288 BCC. It is the world's closest authentic living link to the Buddha. (Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, 1989)

Sayādaw also studied Sinhalese every day and eventually got to a point where he could read, write and speak the Sri Lankan language.

Sayādaw would reflect decades later that after leaving Sri Lanka he'd stopped practicing the language. Although he could still understand Sinhalese, his monastic duties had kept him too busy over the decades to continue studying and remain fluent in the language. He added that he didn't even have time to speak his native tongue with his fellow Palaung monks at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

Saliva Soup

Sayādaw was telling a young student about the importance of speaking rightly. According to the Buddha, our speech should be true, beneficial, and conducted at the right time. As such, Sayādaw wishes for visitors to the monastery to speak only when it is necessary. He admonishes overnight guests to refrain from talking altogether.

> We have a rule here. While the monks, the nuns, and the eight-precept retreatants are having lunch, all the day-visitors do the morning chanting then sit in meditation until we are done.

When we're done, I offer them a quick Dhamma talk and then they go have their lunch.

But it doesn't always work out that way.

While we're eating lunch, some of the lay people are just talking, talking, talking. And what happens is that you'll have some people sitting in meditation while others around them are talking. It's very ugly.

Sayādaw added that this is very dangerous too, for it destroys the meditator's concentration.

I don't get mad. I'm the teacher, and it's my duty to teach, to remind, and to admonish them. But they just talk about food, politics, clothes—vain talk.

Someone once asked him what he thought of the newly-elected president.

I have no idea. It's not my duty to be concerned with it.

And when he was asked what political party he preferred, Sayādaw responded, "It doesn't matter who. I just wish for us to have a good president."

The vain talk sometimes bleeds over into the meal area too.

People are talking, talking, talking while they're eating, and their saliva ends up on someone else's lunch.

So I had to put up a sign that said '*Don't allow your saliva to be someone's soup*'.

Sayādaw explained that these admonitions are for the benefit of the people.

Most people trust the outside world, but they forget the inner world. We need to improve our *inner* world to gain peace and happiness.

Las Vegas Sayādaw in front of Sri Pada, a holy mountain in southern Sri Lanka. The mountain is revered for a rock formation near the summit that some believe to be the left footprint of the Buddha, left behind when he visited Sri Lanka.

While studying in Sri Lanka, Sayādaw received word from home that a younger sister had died in Myanmar. The rigors of his daily study schedule and an unstable local political climate didn't allow much time for reflection on his sibling's passing.

> Unfortunately, I had just one year of studies before the JVP crisis really flared up again.

JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) was a political movement in Sri Lanka that was involved in two armed uprisings against the government. The first uprising was in 1971, while the second uprising occurred from 1987 to 1989.

> The JVP's were communists from Moscow.
>
> There was constant fighting and people were being killed every day. There were curfews too, and because of the curfews the days became shorter and shorter.
>
> We couldn't go anywhere. I just stayed at the temple. The crisis eliminated any real opportunities to study for about the next six months. It was very difficult at that time.

Sayādaw decided to leave Sri Lanka.

> In mid-1990, I was talking one day with my old teacher in New Delhi. He said to me, "Do you want to go to Australia? They need a monk at a monastery there. I'll give you the phone number to contact them."
>
> I considered this opportunity. There was a doctor from Sidney that I'd met while I'd been in Sri Lanka, and he said to me, "It's the right time to go because the situation in Sri Lanka is not good."
>
> So I decided I might go to Australia.

In the midst of all the instability in Sri Lanka and at home in Myanmar, the 43-year-old Sayādaw also experienced something of an existential crisis during his time in Sri Lanka.

There'd come a moment when he'd questioned whether all the years of study had been the best use of his time. He'd thought, "Why don't I practice as much—or more—than I study?"

He'd sometimes reflect on his years of intensive summer meditation retreats in Burma—back before he'd started teaching—and how beneficial those experiences had been for him. He longed for an opportunity for deep seclusion and a long-term retreat in the jungle.

But then the uncertainty of life presented yet another unexpected direction for Sayādaw.

A Change of Plans

During his year of study in Sri Lanka, Sayādaw had become friendly with a Thai monk named Ajahn Naroung with whom he'd attended classes at Kelaniya University.

Ajahn Naroung was from a monastery near Bangkok where there had been an elderly monk who had ordained later in life after a career in government. The elderly monk's name was Ajahn Panyavaro.

Ajahn Panyavaro, who despite his 80 years of age had only been in robes for ten *vassa*, had been given an opportunity to travel to the United States to establish a new Thai temple there. With a plan for it to be established in the Las Vegas area, the temple was to be the first Buddhist temple in Nevada.

Ajahn Panyavaro was a good fit for the job, given that his previous career had made him adept at dealing with people from different countries and across cultures.

In mid-1990, Ajahn Panyavaro invited Ajahn Naroung to join him at the new monastery in Las Vegas. The English that Ajahn Naroung had picked up while studying in Sri Lanka would be an asset in America.

After Ajahn Naroung had settled in the United States, Ajahn Panyavaro commented to him one day that he'd also like to find and invite a monk with a strong meditation background to come and teach meditation. Ajahn Naroung told the elderly abbot about Sayādaw and suggested that he be the monk they invite.

Ajahn Panyavaro thought this was a good idea and encouraged him to contact Sayādaw.

> Then my plans changed.
>
> Instead of Australia—where I didn't know any monks or even lay people—I decided to go to America. There, I had my friend, Ajahn Naroung, who knew me well. I knew him well too.

In late 1990, Sayādaw received formal invitation from Venerable Ajahn Panyavaro, abbot of Wat Buddhabhavana in Las Vegas, Nevada, to travel to the United States to teach meditation at his new monastery.

Sayādaw formally accepted.

> I went to the U.S. embassy in Colombo and told them I wanted to go to America.
>
> They told me, "We can't give you a visa here. You have to return to your own country to get a visa."

Sayādaw explained to them that the political situation in Myanmar was not good.

> I told them that if I went back I might not be allowed to leave again. So I said, "If possible, please give me a tourist visa."
>
> The person said, "Wait a minute." He went off to talk to his supervisor. He returned a few minutes later with my visa. It was that easy.

Ajahn Naroung had recently called Sayādaw and said that if he could get a visa he'd send an airline ticket for him.

> When I told him I'd gotten the visa, he told me that I could pick up the ticket at the Dusit Thani hotel in Bangkok.
>
> So I left Colombo and returned to Thailand to retrieve the ticket.

Return to Thailand

Sayādaw had not been complacent during his last weeks in Sri Lanka. He'd continued to study as best he was able given the limitations the JVP had placed on life there. He wanted to take full advantage of the educational opportunities the country could afford him.

> Because I'd studied so hard, I got sick. I couldn't eat for a few weeks.
>
> When I arrived in Thailand, I picked up my Korean Airlines ticket then went to a very big Bangkok temple called Wat Bungsankae. There were actually two temples there—one inside the compound, and one outside.
>
> The abbot of the inside temple—whom I called Luang Por Bungsankae-nai (*nai* is a Thai word meaning 'inside')—was a very nice monk whom I'd met while he was on pilgrimage in Colombo. He'd been in Colombo for about a week and stayed at the temple where I'd been living. We'd gotten along very well.
>
> It turned out that Luang Por Bungsankae-nai was very famous in Thailand, and he was a vegetarian like me. He let me stay with him for three weeks in his building at Wat Bungsankae while I recovered from my illness.

Sayādaw didn't go anywhere and just stayed put in the monastery as he slowly regained his strength.

> I just tried to rest and recover. But I did spend some of that free time teaching Luang Por Bungsankae-nai some of the English I'd learned in Sri Lanka.

Sayādaw gradually began to improve as the monastery residents went about their usual routines.

> Every day Luang Por and about five or ten of the monks would get invited out for breakfast and lunch. Whenever they did, the people would donate a lot of money to them—maybe 500 or 1,000 *baht*.
>
> Luang Por Bungsankae-nai was very kind. He gave me all the donations he'd received during the three weeks I was there. He said to me, "This is for your education in America." He gave me over $2,000.

Soon, Sayādaw was on a flight to America.

> The day I arrived at Wat Buddhabhavana, I paid back Ajahn Naroung for the airline ticket he'd sent me.
>
> As it turned out, Ajahn Naroung would later disrobe and settle in Las Vegas as a lay person. And the kind abbot who gave me all that money eventually died too.

Those with Wisdom Would Know Better

Once while speaking with a student about the nature of having an improper view of reality, Sayādaw shared a story about an occasion when he'd been invited to another state to speak before a group of doctors.

For each of the group's monthly meetings, they'd invite a monk to give a Dhamma talk and answer their questions. As that month's monastic guest, Sayādaw gave the group a one-hour Dhamma talk then answered their questions for another two hours.

Although the doctors were well-educated people, most of them had refused to believe his teachings on heaven and hell realms or past and future lives.

Later that evening, a man and a woman who'd been at the talk sat for a while with Sayādaw. As they talked, they told him that this group of doctors asked those same questions of most of the monks who gave talks to them each month, yet they still refused to accept the truth of the teachings.

Sayādaw commented to his student that the doctors could not accept his teaching because of their strong attachment to their own views.

Even the Buddha couldn't help them.

In a similar vein, Sayādaw spoke of a doctor who'd given him free care for ten years. He was a very nice man. The doctor would sometimes tell Sayādaw of his fishing vacations in Alaska or his hunting trips to Utah.

See? The doctor was an educated man but didn't have the wisdom to know that hunting was bad *kamma*.

Someone with wisdom would know better.

Chapter 6: Wat Buddhabhavana (1990-1995)

Las Vegas was still a relatively small city of about 275,000 people when Sayādaw arrived in late 1990. It was a far cry from the 680,000 people who would call it home by 2021 (with Clark County having a total population of nearly 2.8 million people).

> I didn't really have any expectations or impressions of Las Vegas.
>
> Ajahn Naroung showed me around the city. He took me downtown and pointed out the casinos. It was the first and only time I've ever gone to those places.

Wat Buddhabhavana's intended new campus on Gowan Road in neighboring North Las Vegas was not yet under construction. While preparations were underway, Nevada's first Buddhist monastery had been established in a narrow house that the Thai community rented for $700 a month near the intersection of Desert Inn and Sandhill.

Sayādaw settled in quickly, and within a month's time Ajahn Panyavaro approached him about teaching meditation to the lay community.

> Luang Ta (which is a Thai honorific meaning 'venerable grandfather' usually reserved for elderly monks who ordained later in life) asked me to start teaching.
>
> Because of the limited room on the narrow property, I started teaching at a different community member's house each week. I had around fifteen students, and we shuffled around between about five different houses.
>
> I'd usually start teaching after lunch—about 1 pm—then we'd practice sitting meditation and chanting. I taught them *vipassanā* meditation.

One of Sayādaw's earliest students in the United States was a Thai woman he met shortly after he arrived at Wat Buddhabhavana. She would eventually ask him for ordination as an eight precept nun. She'd come to be called Nun (or Maechee) Medhavi.

Luang Ta Panyavaro passed away in 1992 before construction of the Gowan Road monastery campus had been completed.

Although there were seven other monks living at the temporary monastery residence near Desert Inn and Sandhill—including an older, more senior monk, as well as Sayādaw's friend Ajahn Naroung, who'd played such a critical role in him being invited to the United States—the Thai laity instead asked Sayādaw to stay on as the new abbot.

He told them, "I'll continue to teach but I don't want to be the abbot."

When they persisted, Sayādaw explained to them that what he really wanted to do was embark upon an extended intensive forest retreat—a dream he'd harbored for years, and a particular yearning for which he'd started to feel when he'd been in Sri Lanka.

Sayādaw hadn't enjoyed a sustained silent meditation retreat since the summer of 1975—it had been 17 years.

> My original intention when I came to the United States was to help out at Wat Buddhabhavana for five years then return to either Thailand or Burma and go on a retreat in the forest. I'd already found a good location when I'd traveled around northern Thailand with Ajahn Nikorn a couple of years earlier.

But the community kept on, urging Sayādaw to put his name in for consideration amongst some of the other monks who were interested in the position.

Sayādaw considered all of the meals and other requisites that the community had provided for him since he'd been there, and so in time he agreed to accommodate their request. He put his name in for consideration.

A month later Sayādaw was told that every single member of the lay community had voted for him to be the new abbot.

He accepted the position with humility—it was his first time being an abbot—but he made it clear that he would only do it until they could find a replacement. He urged them to start looking right away.

A Controversial New Abbot

A new Burmese abbot of the first Thai temple in Nevada was not without controversy. There was even a headline in a Thai newspaper:

BURMESE MONK NEW ABBOT OF LAS VEGAS TEMPLE

Sayādaw could sense the uneasiness some felt about the situation.

Then someone filed a complaint with the *saṅgharāja* of Thailand alleging that Sayādaw had coerced his way into the abbot role at Wat Buddhabhavana.

The *saṅgharāja* sent his secretary to Nevada to investigate the matter.

During his 2-week stay at the temple while the complaint was investigated, the secretary learned that the lay community not only loved Sayādaw but that they had actually *begged* him to be the new abbot. The secretary also took notice that Sayādaw was a very good meditation teacher.

Upon completion of the investigation, the *saṅgharāja* found the complaint to be unfounded.

Through it all—from beginning to end, and beyond—Sayādaw remained humble and didn't say much.

Soon, construction of the Gowan Road monastery campus in North Las Vegas was complete. Sayādaw and the rest of the resident monks moved in.

Once established at the new campus, Sayādaw—the very first abbot of Wat Buddhabhavana's Gowan Road monastery complex—carried on teaching meditation. He also introduced a new topic of study for the Las Vegas Thai community—*Abhidhammā*.

But at each monthly board meeting, Sayādaw would ask about the community's efforts to find another abbot. Yet they always responded that they hadn't found a replacement yet.

He longed to depart for his intensive forest retreat, yet time continued to wear on.

Sayādaw would later reflect on some of the early adjustments he'd made to life in a Thai temple in the United States and how it had shifted when he became the abbot.

> When I first came to Wat Buddhabhavana, they did chanting for one hour in the morning then sat in meditation for just 20 minutes. They did the same thing in the evening, but for just one hour in total. We meditated only two times a day.

> That's their tradition—to focus primarily on chanting practice—so I couldn't really change it even after I became the abbot. I just followed their tradition.
>
> But when I became the abbot, I did adjust the schedule a little bit.
>
> Now, we'd wake at 4 am then chant and meditate until 6 am. And we'd chanting and meditate again in the evening from 5-6 pm. It was still only twice a day, but I had us start meditating for longer in the morning.
>
> Sometimes in the evening I had to go to school and wouldn't have a chance to do the evening chanting or sitting meditation. But I'd do it whenever I didn't have class.

Sayādaw had begun taking college classes—anywhere from nine to fifteen credits per semester—at Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN; now College of Southern Nevada, or CSN) on Charleston Boulevard in Las Vegas.

During the five years he'd eventually be at Wat Buddhabhavana, Sayādaw's schedule kept him too busy to keep in touch with any of his supporters or many of his contacts back in Myanmar, or even in Thailand or Sri Lanka. He was focused completely on his responsibilities and his new community in America.

He slept only three or four hours a day, using the remaining hours to attend to monastery duties, study, or do homework.

He'd later reflect on his busy schedule during his years at Wat Buddhabhavana.

> I would offer lectures three days a week. One day was dedicated to *Abhidhammā*, another was dedicated to a general Dhamma topic, and a Dhamma talk was given on each Observance Day. After lunch *every* day during those years, I'd give another Dhamma talk to the community.
>
> Then I'd hurry off to school. I'd end up doing my homework in the school library.
>
> Eventually, I'd get to bed about midnight.

> In the meantime, I used to record all my Dhamma classes on cassette tapes, so I'd have to label and catalogue them too.
>
> I was the abbot, so I had to do all of this myself. But I was happy to do it.

During his time at CCSN, one of the topics that Sayādaw studied was the Spanish language. The school required a language—typically German, French, Japanese, or Spanish—and he chose to take two years of Spanish. He studied from a book (which he later still remembered being called *Como Se Dice* (or *How Do You Say…*) and passed the exams for Spanish 101 and 102.

Although he successfully learned to speak Spanish during those two years, some 25 years later he reflected that his lack of follow-up practice had impacted his skills in the language, as it had with the Sinhalese he'd learned in Sri Lanka. Still, he retained the ability to at least understand the two languages when spoken, as well as the Chinese he'd learned growing up in Kunhawt.

Sayādaw's fluency in a wide variety of languages is impressive. Over many decades, he's been a competent communicator in Palaung (his native tongue), Tai Yai (the primary language of the Shan people), Burmese, Thai, English, and Laotian (even though his only visit to Laos was ultimately blocked by visa issues).

Add to those the Chinese, Sinhalese and Spanish that have since fallen into disuse, and that's *nine* languages in which Sayādaw could at one time or another communicate.

In 1993, Sayādaw ordained a new monk for the first time. The new monk—a Thai man they called Phra Jimmy—had been one of Sayādaw's new *Abhidhammā* students.

Phra Jimmy remained as a monk at Wat Buddhabhavana for six years, even after Sayādaw eventually left. In time, though, Phra Jimmy disrobed, moved away, and started a family.

Created by *Kamma*

Sayādaw once talked with a student about the first human being of this world cycle, the full matter of which (and more) is described in detail in *Aggañña Sutta*.

This was a discourse given by the Buddha describing the process by which the universe and human society evolve at the beginning of each new *kappa*. Whether interpreted literally or as a parable, this important teaching was clearly intended by the Buddha to refute the attitudes of those high in the Indian caste system of his time.

The first human being was spontaneous. Where did he come from? Not from creation. A *brahmā* came first—after its lifespan expired, it was spontaneously reborn in the human world.

Brahmā don't have a gender—they have no body-sensitivity. And because they have no tongue-sensitivity, they don't eat. They dwell in *jhāna*, happiness and rapture—they don't have to eat.

But as more *brahmā* came to be reborn in the human world, they ate and enjoyed the flavor of the food—and motivated by greed, ate too much. As they did, they slowly began to evolve dense bodies.

Then, they needed to go to the bathroom. Those who'd been men in previous human lives (during another *kappa*) formed male organs, and those who'd been women in previous human lives formed female organs.

And then, in line with nature, they began to have sexual intercourse.

Lobha, *dosa* and *moha* had arisen.

What about the first *brahmā*?

After it was reborn in the *Brahmā* world, another was reborn in that realm. When the second *brahmā* saw the first *brahmā*, the second thought the first must have been the creator, as there was no one else around.

The first *brahmā*, in turn, wanted other *brahmā* to come. And when they in fact came to be reborn in the *Brahmā* world, the first *brahmā* assumed itself their creator, as his wish had apparently come true.

In time, all the inhabitants of the *Brahmā* world came to believe the initial *brahmā* to be their creator.

Sayādaw explained that they were all mistaken. They'd mistaken the *kammic* process for a creative process.

I don't like to compare religions, but people should know this.

Some people think a creator creates the world and its people. But in Buddhism, the world is just nature. It's just a *kammic* process.

Who creates the creator?

If someone's narrow-minded and just believes what they've always believed, it's hard to convince them otherwise.

But Buddhists don't believe in a creator. *Kamma* is our creator. And that's how we become humans, angels, *brahmā*, animals, hell beings, hungry ghosts, and demons.

Kamma is our creator. We need to have an open heart and an open mind. Then it's easy to accept it—it just makes sense.

Going on Retreat

After almost five years at Wat Buddhabhavana, in early 1995 Sayādaw informed the community that he would soon be leaving his duties and undertaking a one-year intensive forest retreat—the very retreat he'd told them some three years earlier that he'd wanted to do.

The laity, some of them crying, begged him to stay on and continue serving as their abbot.

But he was firm in his resolve.

By now he was well-established in Nevada. Rather than travel back to Thailand or Myanmar for his retreat, he'd learned of opportunities for an intensive retreat right there in the United States.

He'd recently visited a nearby Burmese forest monastery—Taungpulu Kaba-Aye Monastery—outside of Santa Cruz, California, and asked the abbot for accommodations. The abbot had agreed to put him up in a tent on the forested monastery grounds.

Taungpulu Kaba-Aye Monastery was an ideal place for an extended solitary retreat.

Situated on perhaps ten acres of redwood forest in the Santa Cruz Mountains close to Boulder Creek, California, the monastery—the first Burmese monastery in the United States—was founded in 1982 by the great 85-year-old Burmese meditation master Taungpulu Tawya Kaba-Aye Sayādaw four years before his death.

Like Mahāsi Sayādaw, Taungpulu Tawya Kaba-Aye Sayādaw was a disciple of Mingun Jetawun Sayādaw. The ascetic monk was known for keeping many of the *dhutaṅga* practices, including not lying down—a practice he kept for 70 years. The master was believed by many to have been an *arahant*.

Boulder Creek Shwe Thein Daw World Peace Pagoda—the first Burmese-style pagoda built in the United States—at Taungpulu Kaba-Aye Monastery in Boulder Creek, California.

When Sayādaw didn't budge in his resolve to go on an intensive solitary retreat the community countered by offering to rent a local Las Vegas house for him to use so that he could do his retreat in seclusion and without the distractions that can come from living in a monastery.

He wouldn't have to go to California, they said. He could do his year-long retreat right there.

And so he agreed.

The community soon found a two-story, four-bedroom home to rent for $1,500 a month (plus about $500 a month for utilities) and offered it to Sayādaw as his retreat-residence.

On Vesak Day—the full moon day of May—of 1995 one of Sayādaw's lay *Abhidhammā* students, a Thai artist they'd call Phra Arom, took temporary ordination at Wat Buddhabhavana in order to stay at the rented hermitage and accept the community's daily food offerings, a suitable portion of which the new monk would then leave outside Sayādaw's bedroom door.

On July 13, 1995, Sayādaw stepped down from his role as abbot of Wat Buddhabhavana and the two monks left the temple to begin the year-long retreat.

Conditioned by Our *Kamma*

While speaking with a young student about how our past *kamma* created our current conditions in this life, Sayādaw spoke of a blind and mute Thai woman who had visited him at his temple 20 years earlier.

Although she had been born with these disabilities, the woman eventually earned a master's degree and became very wealthy. As she gained wealth, she used her financial resources to support an organization for the deaf. Eventually, the organization invited her to New York to receive an award for her good work.

Sayādaw explained to his student that despite her disabilities, the woman had enough good *kamma* to be educated, to be wealthy, to be generous, and that if she practiced meditation, she could gain enlightenment too.

This good *kamma* would also benefit her in future lives.

Sayādaw then went on to elaborate that a being's rebirth consciousness will determine in which plane rebirth will take place.

The student had a good question.

"For someone born without wisdom," he asked, "what should they do to be reborn with wisdom in the next life?"

Just practice meditation.

Study and practice, study and practice—accumulate knowledge. Then, the knowledge will follow them.

Sayādaw then shared a story of a young girl in Rangoon who'd seemed to know everything.

When her parents took her to school, the principal quizzed her and found that there was nothing he could teach her. She never went to school again. When the girl grew up, she became a nun and was soon teaching Dhamma.

In her previous life, she was the abbot of a monastery. Studying will follow us to the next life.

The student then asked Sayādaw to explain how someone could be born with autism but still be very smart.

For some, their rebirth consciousness is very good but their bad *kamma* takes it back.

Like with the Thai lady I spoke of—she had a master's degree and was very smart, yet she was blind and mute. This was because of her bad *kamma* in a previous life.

Chapter 7: The Early CMM Years (1995-2008)

Though Sayādaw had stated his wish to do a one-year retreat, it was after just a few months that the lay Thai community urged him to come out of seclusion and resume teaching. They proposed founding a brand new monastery, which he could lead.

Sayādaw again expressed his desire to practice meditation intensively, to which the community countered with another idea. They offered to buy a small house and donate it to him as a hermitage—it wouldn't be a *wat* (which is the Thai word for a Buddhist monastery or temple); rather, it would be a meditation center for his personal use.

Sayādaw offered a compromise—he would be the abbot of a new monastery but would spend at least three months each year on intensive solitary retreat.

The community agreed.

Within a few weeks, they'd already collected enough money for a $30,000 down payment on a $100,000 two-story home they found at Tropicana and Buffalo, across the street from Spanish Trails in Las Vegas. A generous temple supporter named Carolyn Wolfson single-handedly offered $10,000 toward the down payment.

The home would be the community's new monastery.

Although the new monastery-house was sufficiently large for people to practice sitting meditation and take meals, Sayādaw and the rest of the community knew that a bigger property would eventually be needed.

With additional fundraising—including a single donor who gave $70,000—near the end of 1995 they were also able to purchase five acres of undeveloped desert at Rainbow and Warm Springs, a mere 7-minute drive from the recently purchased monastery-home.

At the time, there'd been nothing around but open desert all the way south from Tropicana Avenue. The community paid just $100,000 for the acreage. It was purchased in Sayādaw's name.

The generous woman who'd donated $70,000 toward the purchase of the land had originally expressed interest in paying the full amount. Unfortunately, as Sayādaw would later share, she had a heart condition and he was concerned that the extra $30,000 expenditure would be a financial strain on her.

Sayādaw told the woman not to worry, ensuring her that he would raise the rest of the money.

Indeed, he did.

When we bought the property, we knew that it could be very difficult to get it zoned as a place of worship. We'd have to hire lawyers, have a public hearing, and go to court.

And what would we do if we couldn't pass the public hearing?

Four families who were members of our community spoke up and said "Don't worry about passing the public hearing. We'll just build homes around the temple."

Normally, a temple might not pass a public hearing because the neighbors are concerned that the temple-goers won't follow rules or that it will be too noisy.

But we're a meditation center, so we had confidence that we'd be quiet enough and wouldn't disturb our future neighbors.

Not only that, but the four families said they'd occupy homes around the temple. So we'd be in the middle—no problem.

So as soon as we raised the money and bought the land in my name, we kept 2.5 acres for the temple and legally transferred the other 2.5 acres to those four families to build around us.

The lots were divided between the four Thai families, one of which was the family of the woman who would become Nun Medhavi.

They'd already paid for their portions of the land through their donations for the property anyway.

And so in those days there was nothing else around, so we went to the public hearing and it was very easy to pass—everyone was in favor.

The 2.5 acres belonging to the temple received zoning for a place of worship, while the other 2.5 acres received residential zoning.

And so with the help of the Las Vegas Buddhist community, near the end of 1995 Sayādaw formally established Chaiya Meditation Monastery in

the two-story residence at Tropicana and Buffalo.

It was a moment of great celebration.

The Thai laity who'd been Sayādaw's students and supporters at Wat Buddhabhavana—as well as most of the Thai community scattered elsewhere around the greater Las Vegas area—immediately followed him to the new monastery.

The vast majority of Sayādaw's supporters were the Thai lay people. The people of Thailand had treated him very kindly ever since his days living at Wat Khao Takhrao.

Still, he'd later comment that it didn't matter to him whether his supporters were Thai, Lao, Burmese (of which there were only about ten individuals living in Las Vegas at the time), or otherwise—he never forgot their kindness. He would later say that he treated all of his supporters the same and loved them like family.

Despite its English legal name, many of the Thai supporters began to refer to the new monastery by its Thai name—Wat Chaiya Dhamma Vihara (or simply, Wat Chaiya). And as more Burmese supporters joined the new community, it also came to be called by the Burmese name Zeya Dhamma Yeikthā.

A Pilgrimage to Asia

In celebration of the establishment of the new monastery, before year's end Sayādaw led 40 members of the Chaiya Meditation Monastery community on a pilgrimage to Asia.

The group spent two weeks in Myanmar—Sayādaw's first trip back since he'd left in 1988—and a week in Sri Lanka. After so much conflict, both countries were finally enjoying periods of relative stability.

Sayādaw also made his second visit to India, where he spent 16 days touring the community around the sprawling country.

In the northeast, they visited Bodh Gaya and the holy city of Vārāṇasi. Vārāṇasi was the location near where the Buddha gave his first teaching—*Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta*, or The Discourse on Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion.

The group journeyed to Uttar Pradesh in the north, where they visited Agra, a significant city 130 miles southeast of New Delhi. Agra is home to the famous Taj Mahal, the 42-acre site of a stunning mausoleum built in 1632.

They also traveled some 28 hours by car southwest across India to Mumbai, whose name had been Bombay until it was changed that very

year. Mumbai is a massive western Indian city that in 2021 would boast a population of 20 million people.

As they journeyed to Mumbai, the group stopped to visit a UNESCO World Heritage Site along their path—Ajanta Caves, which consists of about 30 rock-cut Buddhist cave monuments dating from the 2nd century B.C. They also visited Ellora Caves, another UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the largest rock-cut Hindu temple cave complexes in the world.

While the group was in Myanmar, Sayādaw had an opportunity to spend some extra time in Yangon with his father, older brother, and two younger sisters. He'd brought with him two boxes of old pictures—photos from his younger days as a monk in the country, as well as images taken years later of his times spent in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India—which he gave to his family.

Las Vegas Sayādaw with his father, younger sister Win Win, older brother—the future U Sandawara—and another younger sister in Myanmar in 1995. The photo was taken at a supporter's family home during Sayādaw's first trip back to Myanmar since leaving in 1988.

Finding a Balanced Approach

Sayādaw later reflected on some of the adjustments he had to make as he settled into his position as abbot of a new Burmese monastery that was substantially supported by Thai people.

> When I was the abbot of Wat Buddhabhavana, I was too busy to do anything extra, like write Dhamma books or do other things.
>
> But when I left the Thai temple, I had more time to practice meditation. I didn't get involved with things like paying bills because now I had our director to take care of that.
>
> I was also able to focus on my primary duty, which was mainly teaching the community.

Over time, as more monks came to live at the temple and there was greater diversity amongst the membership of the temple community, Sayādaw had to consider everyone's needs.

> Whatever we do, we should not think only about ourselves, but about others as well. We should know the time, the place, and the people impacted—and then make our decisions.
>
> Even though I was the abbot, I couldn't force the monks or the community to do something that I wanted to do. It's not *my* temple—it's for the community.

One of Sayādaw's first modifications had to do with daily chanting practice.

> When you stay at a Thai temple, they often chant for an hour or more each time. We did a lot of chanting when I lived at Wat Buddhabhavana. But eventually, Americans started to join us from time to time. And they didn't know how to chant in Thai.
>
> So, now, at Chaiya Meditation Monastery we chant only briefly—often for just 15 minutes—and focus our efforts mainly on meditation. We had to adjust our approach for our guests.

In Myanmar, temple communities don't do morning or evening chanting. In Thailand, on the other hand, this chanting is traditionally done every day in temples across the country.

> In Burma, we did *Paritta* chanting instead.

> On Sunday, we might do *Ratana Sutta*, *Maṅgala Sutta*, and maybe another one. Then on Monday we'd do another couple of *Paritta* chants. We had a schedule for every day of the week—we'd know which *Paritta* was chanted on which day of the week.
>
> There are 11 *Paritta* chants, and in one week we'd complete them all.

Paritta are protective verses chanted in order to ward off ill and create blessings. Such protective chants, comprising passages from the *Pāli Canon* and traditional verses in praise of the Triple Gem, are traditionally chanted by monastics and lay Buddhists in *Theravāda* Buddhist countries on auspicious occasions.

> Sometimes we would chant *Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta*, *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*—the Buddha's second discourse, during which he delivered his not-self doctrine—or maybe we'd chant another *sutta*.
>
> But we did *Paritta* chanting *every* day.
>
> It's not like that in Thailand. The system is different in Burma. The Burmese like to chant *Paritta*, and even lay people can chant it. It's the same in Sri Lanka, too. They don't do morning and evening chanting either.
>
> When I first came to Wat Buddhabhavana, I had to keep a chanting book in front of me because I hadn't yet memorized the morning and evening chanting. Eventually, I didn't need the book anymore. I just followed the Thai tradition while I was living there.

Sayādaw realized that he needed to find a balance between the traditions of the temple's many Thai supporters and the multi-cultural membership otherwise forming within the community.

> So because we had so many Thai people coming to Chaiya Meditation Monastery, I decided to keep doing the morning and evening chanting I'd learned when I first came to Las Vegas.

> But now we just do it for 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes in the evening. They do chanting for much longer in a regular Thai temple, where their practice is mainly based on chanting.
>
> Now, though, I see Burmese people, American people, Sri Lankan people—and others—coming to our temple. How can we do only Thai chanting? That's why we do it just briefly, so everyone can do it together.
>
> But the last chant we do each morning and evening is in Burmese. The Thai people can't do that one, though. So the Thais can't follow the Burmese chanting and the Burmese can't follow the Thai chanting—and that's not right.

Sayādaw came up with a partial solution to the dilemma.

> So I wrote the Burmese chant in Thai for the Thai people. So now they can read it. The accent isn't quite right, but it's close.
>
> But the American visitors still can't read it. I'm sorry about that.

Sayādaw also had to consider the best way to transition the community to a meditation-focused approach to practice.

> In a meditation center (or *paṭipatti* monastery) in Myanmar—like Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā Meditation Center, where I did my intensive retreats those first three summers I was in Rangoon—they practice meditation the whole day.
>
> On the other hand, in study (or *pariyatti*) monasteries—such as the one I lived and taught at while I was in Rangoon—they might just meditate a little in the morning and evening. Other temples might just do it in the evening. Mostly, though, in *pariyatti* monasteries they study—a lot. In some of them they might study during the day and practice meditation at night.
>
> It depends on their tradition. And traditions can be quite different.

> And, as I said, most Thai temples use chanting practice as their primary form of meditation. So this was a third approach.

He realized that he needed to consider what was best for the overall temple community.

> Slowly, I began to transition our temple to a meditation schedule of four times a day.
>
> I'd like us to wake at 3 am, but some people don't want to wake up that early. But we're a meditation center, so we have to meditate at least four times a day. And a lot of people come for silent retreats too, so we also offer an adjusted schedule to accommodate that.
>
> I had to consider the time, the place, and the community itself. But four times a day became our permanent meditation schedule.

In time, Sayādaw succeeded in blending the various cultures to support everyone's backgrounds and practices—there was now traditional chanting twice a day in Thai and Burmese (with chanting books offered in *Pāli* and Roman script for Americans and others), almost four hours of silent sitting meditation each day, and the regular offering of Dhamma and *Abhidhammā* classes.

***

As soon as the monastery had opened its doors at the two-story home at Tropicana and Buffalo, the community began searching for a large Buddha statue for the shrine room.

In early 1996, a family of Thai supporters flew to Bangkok, where they selected a suitable statue for the new monastery. The statue was purchased, and through Sayādaw's friendship with the president of Thai Airways, who lived in Los Angeles, it was shipped to its new home in Las Vegas.

It would become the central Buddha image of Chaiya Meditation Monastery for decades to come.

With the community still settling into its new home, Sayādaw received word from Myanmar that he'd lost another sister to early death.

His mother had died decades earlier while he was still a teenager, and another sister had died some six years earlier around 1990. Now, only months after he'd seen her in Yangon, Sayādaw's family suffered another loss.

It was now only his father, his older brother, and his younger sister Win Win left amongst Sayādaw's immediate family.

Near the end of 1996, Phra Arom—the new monk who'd ordained at Wat Buddhabhavana in order to assist Sayādaw during his intensive retreat and had been Sayādaw's only monastic companion as Chaiya Meditation Monastery was being established—decided after 18 months in robes to disrobe.

As a replacement, another Thai man soon took temporary ordination and stayed a while with Sayādaw to help him out at the new monastery.

Sayādaw needed a long-term solution to the growing demands of a young monastery that was anticipating expansion.

In 1997 he reached out to his former student U Zawtika in Myanmar and asked him if he'd finished his university studies yet.

When the young monk replied that he had, Sayādaw asked him if he'd like to come to the United States to help him at the new monastery.

Indeed, he would. U Zawtika accepted the invitation.

He arrived later that year and established himself at Chaiya Meditation Monastery. Shortly after, the temporary monk who'd replaced Phra Arom disrobed.

It was now just Sayādaw and U Zawtika as the resident monks at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

Mercury Sayādaw

In the mid-1970s, Sayādaw had lived for a short time with a senior monk called U Satila at Thathanawdaya Pariyatti in Rangoon. The two monks had grown very close.

Around 1976 or 1977, U Satila left that monastery and became the abbot of a temple about ten miles from downtown. Although the temple was informally called "Ten-mile Temple," it was also known by two other names: Thathanabiman (*thathana* is the Burmese equivalent of the *Pāli* word *sāsana*, and *biman* means mansion); and Aung Zay Dee, which was the name of a pagoda on the property.

U Satila came to be called Aung Zay Dee Sayādaw.

The two monks had stayed in touch and remained close even after Las Vegas Sayādaw left Burma in 1988.

In 1997 Sayādaw reached out to U Satila and invited him to Las Vegas for a visit. The elderly monk happily accepted.

During the visit, U Satila shared something interesting with Sayādaw. He said that he'd made two Buddha statues out of mercury, one of which weighed 265 pounds. The other one, which he'd made first, was much smaller.

Sayādaw was intrigued.

Myanmar has a colorful history of alchemy, and the conversion of a liquid like mercury into a solid was fascinating to him. Some Burmese "wizards," as they've sometimes been called, are also said to be able to metamorphose certain metals (commonly mercury) into gold.

Sayādaw asked U Satila how he'd used mercury—a liquid which disappears when touched by fire—to make a Buddha statue.

U Satila explained to him that he'd had a dream. In the dream, a monk was teaching him the secrets of alchemy. Then, the monk suddenly disappeared from his dream.

The day after his dream U Satila had been visited by a high-ranking Burmese government official and his cabinet. They came to pay their respects to him. As they talked, U Satila told the official and his cabinet members about his unusual dream.

The official was inspired—he offered to sponsor the creation of a Buddha statue to be made out of mercury.

Soon, the official had eight boxes of mercury delivered to the temple and commissioned artisans to make the statue. A group of some fifty esteemed officials eventually assembled for a ceremony as the Buddha statue was being made.

The mercury was brought to a boil.

"A group of *devas* then possessed the bodies of the artisans—human beings weren't themselves capable of converting mercury to a solid—and they were dancing and singing," U Satila said. "It was amazing. Something unseen made the statue. Humans couldn't do this."

This first mercury Buddha statue had been modeled after a revered 650-year-old Buddha statue in U Satila's hometown. The famous statue was known as Pancalohalabhamuni. When U Satila moved to Rangoon, he'd brought with him a photograph of the famous statue. Every morning and evening, visitors to the monastery would offer water

to the photograph. One day, a glass of water that had been offered to the photograph turned into nine Buddha relics.

The creation of the mercury Buddha statue in the presence of esteemed government officials had made U Satila very famous in Myanmar and people had started to call him "Mercury Sayādaw."

As he finished recounting the story, Mercury Sayādaw told Las Vegas Sayādaw that if he swallowed a little bit of mercury mixed with honey every day, he would have a long life. He took some of it himself every day, he said.

The elder monk then said, "If you'd like that first statue I made, come to Yangon and you're welcome to have it."

Las Vegas Sayādaw accepted the generous offer and began making plans for a trip to Myanmar to receive it.

Around 1998, Sayādaw made his second trip back to Myanmar—a very short trip—simply to pick up the mercury Buddha statue that Mercury Sayādaw had offered him.

He flew to Yangon and met with his old friend, staying just a short time at Aung Zay Dee. Sayādaw received the heartfelt gift from Mercury Sayādaw and found that the statue was perhaps 15" tall and surprisingly heavy. He would further reflect years later on how "very quiet" the monastery had been.

After he left Aung Zay Dee, Sayādaw stopped to pay his respects at Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda. The sacred gilded pagoda—standing nearly 400 feet tall—is said to contain relics of the last four Buddhas, including eight strands of hair from Gotama Buddha, a piece of the robe of Kassapa Buddha, the water filter of Konāgamana Buddha, and the staff of Kakusandha Buddha.

He still had some time before he had to go back to the airport for his return flight to Las Vegas, so Sayādaw decided to wander a bit around a nearby market.

As he explored the market with a lay patron who'd offered to drive him to the airport, something caught Sayādaw's eye—an antique Buddha statue perhaps 250 years old whose style was remarkably similar to the mercury Buddha statue he now had in his possession.

Sayādaw curiously asked the vendor how much she was asking for the old statue.

"Don't ask," she replied. "It's too expensive for you."

Sayādaw's lay patron spoke up and again asked the vendor how much she was asking for the old statue.

"3,500 *kyat*." That was a bit more than one hundred U.S. dollars in those days.

The lay patron bought the statue and then offered it to Sayādaw as a gift.

Soon, Sayādaw was on his plane and headed back to America. He brought both statues back with him to their new home at Chaiya Meditation Monastery, where decades later he would share these fascinating stories with a lay student.

The Chaiya Meditation Monastery community had really appreciated having Mercury Sayādaw around when he'd visited their monastery in 1997. Around 1998, the laity encouraged Sayādaw to invite the elder for another visit.

This time, Mercury Sayādaw stayed for a month. And he didn't come alone.

> When I invited Mercury Sayādaw to come again, I also reached out to my last sister, Win Win, and offered to sponsor her in coming to the United States.
>
> So Mercury Sayādaw, a nun, Win Win, and a friend of my sister all traveled here together from Myanmar.

A strange thing happened during Mercury Sayādaw's visit to the United States.

> He'd brought the Pancalohalabhamuni Buddha statue with him and took it to this doctor's home in Los Angeles. A lot of people started going there to pay their respects to the statue and take pictures of it.
>
> When the film was developed—this was before everyone had digital cameras—sometimes the background was red and sometimes it was green.

Sayādaw had an explanation.

> No scientist believes any of this. But it was because of Mercury Sayādaw's good *kamma*.

Pancalohalabhamuni

Win Win and her friend decided to stay on and settle in Las Vegas. They soon started coming to Chaiya Meditation Monastery every Wednesday to offer breakfast to the community.

It would become a beautiful and generous tradition they would maintain for more than twenty years.

Sayādaw would later remark to a student that "Win Win has a very good heart."

Perhaps the assertion that Mercury Sayādaw had made about the benefits of eating the mercury and honey solution was true: he would eventually die in 2021 at the age of 101.

An Unexpected Visitor

One *vassa* while Sayādaw was tucked away on his annual silent meditation retreat, Chaiya Meditation Monastery received an unexpected visitor.

Ajahn Nikorn—whom Sayādaw had twice led on pilgrimage around Burma with the former's followers in 1987 and 1988—showed up at the monastery one day. Having become good friends, the two monks had traveled together around Thailand in 1988 and 1989, and around India in 1989.

Ajahn Nikorn—now a lay person dressed in white—had disrobed around 1990. He eventually found himself in Las Vegas and looked up Sayādaw at his new monastery, though the master had been unavailable to meet with him at the time.

The two men never saw each other again. Ajahn Nikorn died in 2020.

In late 1998, another one of Sayādaw's monastic disciples from Myanmar accepted his invitation to come to America and join him at the monastery. U Silasara would be a part of the Chaiya Meditation Monastery community for many years, until he eventually relocated to Oregon in 2013.

In the meantime, an American man from Arizona contacted Sayādaw and requested *bhikkhu* ordination. The new monk lived at Chaiya Meditation Monastery for seven months before eventually deciding to disrobe and return to lay life in Arizona.

In 1999, Sayādaw received word from Myanmar that his father had died in Yangon.

He soon made arrangements for his third trip back to Myanmar, this time for his father's funeral. While there, he stayed with Mercury Sayādaw at Aung Zay Dee.

Las Vegas Sayādaw next to his father's casket (Yangon, Myanmar, 1999)

An Unusual Dream

In October of 2002, Sayādaw had an unusual dream that would play a direct role in setting the ambience at Chaiya Meditation Monastery even decades down the road. He'd share the story of his dream with a student almost twenty years after it happened.

> The story of the Guanyin statue in our garden is very interesting.
>
> On the last night of the *vassa* in 2002, I dreamed a very special dream. In my dream, I was flying around in the air like a bird, but I didn't know where to go. Then I looked down and saw a lady about 40 years old below me. She came out from a building and raised her hands toward the sky to welcome me. In my dream, I knew right away that she was Guanyin. Then I woke up.

Also known as Avalokitesvara, Chenrezig and Kannon, Guanyin is a central figure in *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayana* Buddhism. Guanyin is a *bodhisattva* embodying the compassion of all Buddhas.

> At the end of *vassa* every year, people from Los Angeles come to the temple at 2 am to welcome me back from my annual meditation retreat. They always wait for me downstairs—they do this every year.

So I came down for the end of that *vassa* and eventually had breakfast.

After breakfast, one lady came up to me and told me about a dream she had. She asked me whether or not I thought it was a good omen. I then thought about my dream and said to her that I'd also had an interesting dream the night before.

Sayādaw recounted the vivid details of his dream.

The lady then begged me to bring a Guanyin statue to Chaiya Meditation Monastery. She said, "Please order it and I will donate the money."

She donated $1,200 right there then another person who was sitting nearby donated $700. Then another person donated $500. In just a few minutes, people had donated $3,000 for a statue.

It happened very quickly.

Sayādaw called Mercury Sayādaw in Yangon and asked for his help.

I told him that I wanted a Guanyin statue for the monastery. I asked him to help me get a seven-foot-tall statue.

Six months later, it arrived.

The impact of Sayādaw's unusual dream would live on.

Quite a few years later, when we were building the temple complex on Virtue Court, we designed the garden in the northwest corner of the property to look just like what I'd seen in my dream.

It had the Guanyin statue, the building that the woman in my dream had come out of in order to welcome me—that's now the structure over the Guanyin statue—and we even built columns with birds on them, just like in my dream. Later, we also built the pagoda, which had been a part of my dream.

Sometimes confused visitors will ask Sayādaw why there's a Guanyin statue at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

> They might say, "We're *Theravāda* Buddhists. We don't venerate Guanyin."
>
> This was all because I was flying around in my dream and didn't know where I was going.
>
> Many, many years after I had my dream—perhaps around 2014—the local *Mahāyāna* Buddhist community began inviting monks from Taiwan or mainland China, or even Canada, to come to Las Vegas for some special chanting that they do.
>
> They venerate Guanyin as their Buddha.
>
> So I agreed to start letting them use our main hall at Chaiya Meditation Monastery to do it. There would be about 200 people here reciting their chants from 9 am to 9 pm.
>
> One evening after they were finished with their chanting, they went outside by the main hall doors. When they did, they looked up into the night sky and saw these interesting clouds being illuminated by the city lights. One of the clouds was shaped like Guanyin, so they started taking video and prostrating to it.
>
> This story of our Guanyin statue is amazing.

***

One of Sayādaw's earliest students and supporters upon his arrival in the United States was a Thai woman who'd followed him from Wat Buddhabhavana to Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

Around mid-2004, the woman asked him for ordination as an eight precept nun, or *maechee*. She was soon ordained and given the Buddhist name Medhavi, which in *Pāli* (*medhāvī*) means "wise."

Nun Medhavi joined Sayādaw, U Zawtika—whom the temple's many Thai supporters started to call Than Cho—and U Silasara as a resident of Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

While the three monks lived upstairs, Nun Medhavi lived alone downstairs.

Robes

A student had noted that although Nun Medhavi and temporary *maechee* at Chaiya Meditation Monastery wear brown robes, nuns in Myanmar can sometimes be seen wearing pink robes.

The student asked Sayādaw about the two robe colors.

> Burmese practice (*paṭipatti*) traditions use brown. For instance, Pa-Auk Forest Monastery uses brown.
>
> Study (*pariyatti*) traditions use pink.

The student had also noted that while Burmese monks are usually seen wearing reddish (or maroon) robes, Sayādaw had in recent years begun wearing brown robes.

> The color is simple and not so bright. And it's kind of like we're an army—that is, our tradition comes from the jungle and so we should blend in with our surroundings.
>
> The Buddha allowed us to wear robes that match with our region. I prefer wearing the brown robes.
>
> In Thailand, you have the *Mahā nikāya* and the *Dhammayut nikāya*. The latter's monks wear brown robes, while the former's mostly wear very bright robes.
>
> I don't like the bright robes. I like simple, soft-colored robes.
> In Myanmar, you mostly see brown or red robes—the bright yellow or orange you see in Thailand is very rare.

Sayādaw elaborated.

> In Myanmar it's not like Thailand, where the different orders wear robes of a certain color. Where I come from, the monks use whatever is available to them. We're not attached to this color or that color for a specific order.

> Whatever you want to wear is fine, but in Myanmar about 90% of the monks wear maroon or brown robes. You see almost no yellow robes.
>
> Meditation monks, in particular, use brown robes.

One of the other resident monks at Chaiya Meditation Monastery would later add some additional context.

> You see many different robe colors in Myanmar these days. Some monks want to wear red, some want to wear yellow, and so on.
>
> It doesn't matter what color the monks' robes are. It's not important.

The monk then offered some insight into Sayādaw's choice to wear brown robes.

> Sayādaw wore red robes until perhaps 2013, when he started to wear brown robes that were similar in color to the forest monks of Thailand. He did this because most of the donors who support Chaiya Meditation Monastery are Thai. They donate everything, and they do it *every* day.
>
> So to honor their intentions and their culture, he decided to wear the brown robes of the Thai meditation tradition.

In July 2005, a nun from Myanmar joined Sayādaw and the other residents at Chaiya Meditation Monastery for the *vassa*.

Sayādaw had known the nun since she was very young, having met her when he was still living in Rangoon. Even then, she would come to pay her respects to him before and after each *vassa*. (Today the nun has her own temple in Mandalay.)

Near the end of that year, the two-story monastery residence at Tropicana and Buffalo was sold for $300,000 (triple what the community had paid for it) in order to move forward with construction of a new monastery complex on the land near Rainbow and Warm Springs that the community had purchased in 1995.

As they prepared for construction to begin, the community rented a temporary home for Sayādaw and the other residents at Sahara and Torrey Pines Drive, where they could live until the new property was ready for move-in.

As Sayādaw strategized the eventual transition to the larger monastery property, he recognized that it would require considerably more upkeep. He soon began to recruit additional monks to join him and the other residents in Las Vegas.

Recruitment

In early 2006, Sayādaw returned to Myanmar on pilgrimage.

One day a senior Palaung monk from Namhsan came to see him. The monk's name was U Mageinda, and he was a friend of Sayādaw's brother. Sayādaw's brother had told U Mageinda that Sayādaw would be coming to Myanmar and suggested the two monks find an opportunity to meet.

U Mageinda had recently graduated from university in the city with his BA degree and he expressed interest to Sayādaw in coming to the United States.

Sayadaw replied, "I need some monks. If you want to stay with me, I'll help you get a visa."

Sayādaw's brother knew another monk from quite close to where they had grown up. That monk was also interested in coming to the United States.

The young monk, whose name was Ashin Uttara, had worked on his family's tea farm in north Kunhawt village before deciding one day to enter the monkhood. He'd since gone to university and completed his degree.

Hearing of the young monk's interest, Sayādaw encouraged his brother to have Ashin Uttara—whom he wouldn't have occasion to meet until he eventually arrived in Las Vegas—begin his visa application process as well.

Although U Mageinda and Ashin Uttara were interested in coming to the United States to help Sayādaw as the new monastery complex was being developed, they were also interested in obtaining a degree of freedom and independence not easily found in Myanmar—a country that

continued its decades-long struggle with oppressive cultural and political turmoil.

The political situation at the time could make it difficult to get a visa and it would be nearly three and a half years before the two monks could secure passage to the United States.

Around late 2006, a 65-year old Burmese man formally requested *bhikkhu* ordination from Sayādaw. U Wazirañana soon took ordination with Sayādaw as his preceptor.

Before becoming a monk, U Wazirañana had been married and worked as a seaman. He'd also worked for three years in a factory in Japan.

One day his wife decided that she wanted to move to the United States. U Wazirañana wasn't interested, but he encouraged her to go without him. She ended up in Guam.

After she settled, she sent him some photos of her beautiful new surroundings. Situated in the Western Pacific, Guam is a U.S. island territory punctuated by gorgeous tropical beaches with clear, blue-green water.

U Wazirañana was impressed, and so he decided to join his wife after all.

Eventually, a serious health issue caused U Wazirañana and his wife to travel to Los Angeles, but they soon settled a few hours' drive away in Las Vegas.

They found and moved into a home not far from Chaiya Meditation Monastery's previous location near the intersection of Tropicana and Buffalo.

One day U Wazirañana decided to go to the monastery's temporary rental home at Sahara and Torrey Pines Drive to pay his respects to the monks in residence.

There, he met Sayādaw.

As they talked, Sayādaw commented to him that perhaps he should consider ordaining as a monk.

"For how long?" the elderly visitor asked.

"Don't worry about it," Sayādaw replied.

U Wazirañana soon took *bhikkhu* ordination.

And once a week for more than 15 years since his ordination, U Wazirañana's former wife has offered breakfast to the monastic community at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

Las Vegas Sayādaw with members of the Chaiya Meditation Monastery community on pilgrimage at Ta Prohm at Siem Reap, Cambodia (November 2007)

In mid-November 2007, Sayādaw led members of the Chaiya Meditation Monastery community on a pilgrimage to India, Cambodia and Nepal.

> In 2007, the situation in Burma wasn't good once again. The Burmese government had been arresting people who spoke out against their policies, and it was no longer safe for foreigners to visit.
>
> A group of us had initially planned to go on pilgrimage to Burma and India that year, but because of the conflict in Burma we decided to visit Cambodia and Nepal instead.

While in Cambodia, the group focused the bulk of their attention on Siem Reap province in the country's northwest.

There, they visited Angkor Wat—at nearly 402 acres, the largest religious complex in the world. It was constructed in the early 12th century as a Hindu temple, but converted to a Buddhist temple by the end of the century. It eventually became the country's most significant tourist attraction, and it has been argued that Angkor Wat played a major role in the conversion of Cambodia into a Buddhist nation.

The group also visited the tree-covered 13th century *Mahāyāna* Buddhist monastery and university Ta Prohm, as well as Banteay Srei—a

beautiful 10th century temple built of red sandstone and dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva.

Las Vegas Sayādaw in Cambodia (November 2007)

Although this was Sayādaw's first time in Cambodia, he'd visited Nepal three times previously while traveling around India.

> I'd always gone to Nepal to visit Lumbini—the Buddha's birthplace, which is only about 20 miles from India—but this time we decided to fly to Kathmandu as well. I knew the owner of a casino in Kathmandu because he used to live in Las Vegas.
>
> While we were in Kathmandu, my friend took us to visit a famous dome-shaped Tibetan stupa with bells surrounding it in the middle of all the city activity. It was called Boudhanath Stupa. We spent two days exploring the area.

Sayādaw's friend then took the group to see Everest.

> We went by car up into the mountains, passing many resorts.
>
> The roads weren't very good, so it was slow and very difficult travel. And we had a big car, so we had to drive carefully up and down through the hills and valleys as we ascended.

The group had started driving in the afternoon and finally got to where they were staying about 6 pm. They'd planned to stay in the area for a few days.

Early the next morning, the weather was good and so we had a clear view of Everest.

Las Vegas Sayādaw at Angkor Wat (November 2007)

Life is Choice

A student once asked Sayādaw whether all beings in the celestial realms know the Dhamma.

Just like in the human world, some know it and others don't.

Anyone who does good—whether Hindu or Christian or Muslim, or whatever—can be reborn in a celestial realm. If a human being wasn't interested in Dhamma or meditation, they could still be reborn in the celestial world without ever knowing about the Dhamma.

The hell realm is the same. It doesn't belong to any particular religion. Any person who does bad things—Buddhist or Muslim or Hindu or Christian—can be reborn there.

The student had another question. "In the human world, we are very lucky to hear the Dhamma. Is it the same in heaven?"

> They have Buddhist holidays in heaven too. *Devas* will go listen to the Dhamma.
>
> Here in Las Vegas, people come for the casinos—for entertainment—but they seldom come to the temple or go to a church.
>
> It's the same thing in heaven. Some *devas* will go out for singing or dancing but won't go to hear Dhamma talks. The situation is very similar to the human world.

Sayādaw once wrote a book that touched upon this matter.

> I wrote a book talking about 'special vacations' being like going to hell.
>
> People come to Las Vegas for one or two weeks for a 'special vacation' at the casinos. But how many of those people are interested in the Dhamma? Some will search online for a meditation center and end up here, but very few.
>
> There is good and bad everywhere. Life is choice. Where do you want to go? You can choose.
>
> It's the same in the celestial world. Some *devas* are happy with *lobha* and *rāga*, and go off enjoying singing and dancing, forget to eat, and then die.

The student was also curious how beings end up in different celestial realms.

> The six celestial realms are different—they get better and better as you go higher.
>
> Why might someone be reborn in a particular plane? It depends on their *desire*.

Even with the highest level, the *best* level, someone may not want to be reborn there, even though they may be qualified—have the good *kamma*—to go there.

It's the same in the human world. You might study for 5-6 years and become an engineer. You might be qualified to not only get the job, but you might also qualify to be the boss. But if you don't *want* to be the boss—you just want a regular position—it's your choice.

"What about if you want to be reborn in a particular celestial realm but you're not qualified?" the student asked. "What realm will you be reborn in?"

It's based on our *kamma*. It shapes our destiny.

It doesn't matter what level—if you're qualified *and* have the desire, it's up to you where you go.

The student had another question. "How hard is it to get into heaven?"

It depends. If we do many good things, it's easy to go to heaven.

"If someone was a monk," asked the student, "would they automatically go to heaven when they die?"

It depends on our *kamma*.

If he does bad things, a monk can go to hell. A monk can become an animal too. Even the Buddha-to-be was an animal before.

Bad *kamma* is like going to jail, like our punishment.

Chapter 8: Virtue Court (2008-present)

Construction of what would become the Virtue Court monastery complex had finally begun in early 2007.

> It took almost 12 years to start building after we bought the land. We had to acquire more funds and get necessary permits in order.
>
> Not only that, but we knew that whoever decided to build first on all that isolated, open land would have to pay for water and utilities to be established. So we waited for a couple of the big developers to start their own projects before we started ours.

Sure enough, in 2006 developers came in and built walls and roads, including what would become Virtue Court, where the monastery is today.

> Because they had it all done, we didn't have to build all the walls. And water and electricity were now close to our property.
>
> Otherwise, it would have been very expensive. That's why we had to wait for all those years, since 1995.

Construction finally started once the developers had finished establishing the area around the monastery land.

> By the time we were ready to build the monastery in 2007, the value of our land—for which we'd only paid $100,000—had gone up to $3,000,000.
>
> So we were able to start building without sponsors or cosigners, since the bank readily loaned us $2,400,000 to build the temple. Otherwise, we couldn't have built it like we did.

In early 2008, while construction of the monastery was still underway, Sayādaw ordained the first new monk at Chaiya Meditation Monastery's Virtue Court campus. Although the ordination hall was not yet complete, the land it would sit on had already been consecrated for ordinations.

The new monk—Phra Timmy—would remain in robes for about two weeks.

One of the finishing touches as the property neared completion early in the second quarter of 2008 was the addition of traditional Thai- and Burmese-style decorations on the exteriors of the monastery buildings.

The former Phra Arom—the Thai artist who in 1995 had taken temporary ordination as monk in order to assist Sayādaw during his intensive retreat—volunteered his services with the design and construction of the decorations.

> I'd initially reached out to a contractor about doing the decorations for the temple, but he quoted me $90,000 for the job.
>
> The former Phra Arom had remained a regular supporter of the temple all those years. When he heard how high the quote was, he offered to do it for free.
>
> So these decorations you can see today at Chaiya Meditation Monastery were the work of the former Phra Arom, who eventually moved away to Chiang Mai.

Las Vegas Sayādaw being assisted by the former Phra Arom as decorations are added to the exterior of the buildings at Chaiya Meditation Monastery (2008)

Near the end of the second quarter of 2008, some 14 months after construction began, the four main buildings of the monastery—the main Dhamma hall, the north (nuns') and south (monks') residential wings, and

the ordination hall—were complete and the monastic community was ready to move in.

A complete block wall was built around the 2.5 acres of the monastery compound, and a grand opening was set for June 1, 2008.

As Sayādaw had continued to recruit monks to come to Chaiya Meditation Monastery, around 2007 he'd reached out to his older brother—a grocery store worker in Myanmar—and invited him to come to the United States as a guest at the upcoming grand opening ceremony.

Sayādaw helped his brother obtain a tourist visa then sponsored the trip overseas.

Grand opening of the Chaiya Meditation Monastery complex on Virtue Court. The ceremony was attended by 134 monks, 13 nuns, and over 1,000 lay supporters. (June 1, 2008)

Not long after his arrival in the United States, Sayādaw's brother requested *bhikkhu* ordination. He was soon ordained in the newly completed Virtue Court ordination hall with Sayādaw as his preceptor. U Sandawara has been a resident monk at Chaiya Meditation Monastery ever since.

One of the temple's Western lay supporters would later say that although it's difficult to communicate with U Sandawara because of his limited ability to speak English, the elderly monk is "very nice and gentle."

In mid-2009, about a year after U Sandawara's ordination, his friends U Mageinda and the young monk from north Kunhawt village,

Ashin Uttara—having finally secured their visas—arrived in the United States and settled in at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

As Sayādaw and the other monastics had been settling in well at the Virtue Court monastery, the master had been thinking about finding a special Buddha statue for the ordination hall.

> For our ordination hall, I wanted a Buddha statue made from the highest quality jade.
>
> I contacted my friend Mercury Sayādaw in Rangoon. He knew many people and had many connections. So in 2009 he arranged for me to get some high-quality white jade from a mine in Madaya, which is near Mandalay.
>
> We had to pay for it in advance but then they started digging for the jade. It took them a year to find it, but then they made our Buddha statue out of it. They made it in Mandalay.

The monastery was also able to acquire a few small Bodhi (*Ficus religiosa*) trees.

> They came to us via a Vietnamese temple in Los Angeles. I was told that they were grown from seeds from the original tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment at Bodh Gaya in India.

Sometime that year Sayādaw spoke with his former university teacher who'd moved to New Delhi in the mid-1970s, catapulting the master to the role of being himself a teacher even before he'd graduated. He'd recently come to Japan—where he'd end up being for six months—and invited Sayādaw for a visit.

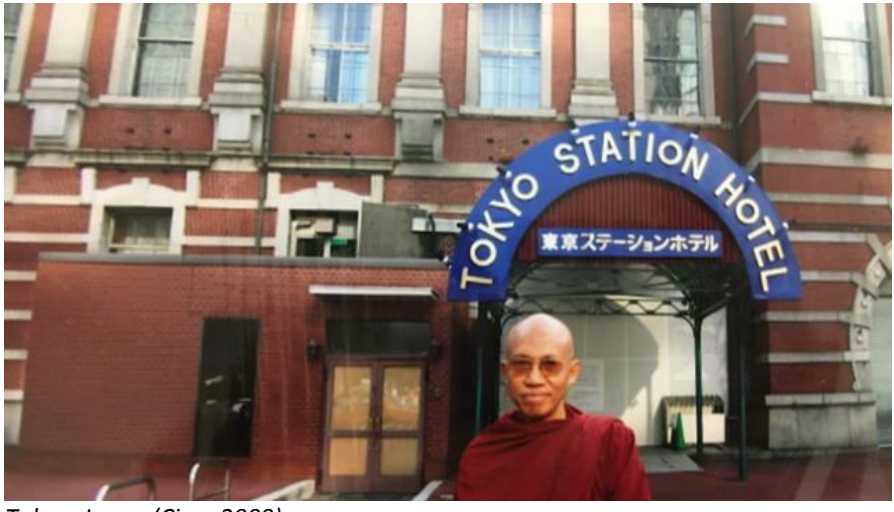
> There were maybe 20,000 Burmese people living and working in Japan at that time. But since there was no permanent Burmese monastic community there, every year the people would invite a Burmese monk to come for maybe six months. They'd rent an apartment for the monk and call it a "temple."
>
> Today there's a Burmese temple in Japan, but not back then.

The Burmese community in Tokyo had invited Sayādaw's former teacher to be their monk for six months.

> They rented him a small one- or two-bedroom apartment. So he invited me to join him in Japan for a while.
>
> While I was at the "temple," Japanese people would sometimes come to visit us and I'd teach them meditation. Then they'd offer to show us around the city.
>
> One day a Japanese Zen master came to the "temple" to meet us. The master was very nice and offered to take us to a nearby observation tower, where we went up an elevator and then had a nice view of the city.

Sayādaw and his former teacher spent their free time—almost every day—traveling all around Japan together, including some time spent visiting the classic temples of historic Kyoto.

Sayādaw was impressed by the to-the-minute timeliness and efficiency of the Japanese transportation system, including the bullet train—or *Shinkansen*—they often took to quickly cover long distances across the country. With certain trains reaching some 200 miles per hour, the *Shinkansen* system has been operating for more than 50 years without a single accident-related fatality or injury on board.



Tokyo, Japan (Circa 2009)

The Brahmā of Caesar's Palace

One day Sayādaw was teaching a foreign monk about the cultivation of *brahmavihārā*. These four sublime states include *mettā* (goodwill), *karunā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity).

He explained that the word *brahmavihārā* can be broken down into two words: *brahmā*, which refers to a noble person; and *vihāra*, which refers to a dwelling place.

In essence, the compound word refers to the dwelling of one's mind in a peaceful and sublime state.

> Yet in Thailand, India, and Cambodia, they have these four-faced Brahmā statues.

The Hindu people believe that Brahmā is the creator of the universe, and as such, that he actually has four faces. But, in fact, the four faces are symbolic of the four sublime states.

> They think Brahmā is the creator. But nowadays, humans create Brahmā and then they pay respect to the very thing they've created.

They've misunderstood the point.

Sayādaw was once told that in the early 1980s the very wealthy owner of a Thai newspaper started coming to Las Vegas every year. He'd apparently stay at Caesar's Palace and spend millions of dollars—sometimes returning to Thailand a winner, and other times returning a loser.

During those early years of his visits to Las Vegas, the man financed the casting of an 8,500-pound bronze statue of Brahmā, which he reportedly hoped would bring him good luck.

The statue was promptly donated to Caesar's Palace and put on display in front of the luxurious casino.

To this day, gamblers from around the world stop to pay respect to the statue before they go inside to gamble.

> People come to pay respect to the statue in hopes of winning. But now that the statue belongs to the casino, who do you think it will help: the customers, or the owner?

More than 25 years later, some people from Caesar's Palace approached Sayādaw and asked him if they could give the statue to Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

The casino representatives assured him that many people would come to the temple to pay respect to the statue, which in turn "would be good for the monastery."

I didn't accept it.

This is a meditation center. And I don't want a lot of people coming here to pay respect to the statue. That's not our purpose here.

And so the statue remains in front of Caesar's Palace to this day.

Sayādaw added that despite all the time wealthy Asian travelers and foreign government officials—even from Buddhist countries—spend in Las Vegas, they seldom visit Chaiya Meditation Monastery or offer any kind of support.

Even before Chaiya Meditation Monastery, when the first Buddhist temple in Nevada—Wat Buddhabhavana—was being built, ten acres of land had been purchased, but it was the same situation—it was left entirely up to the local people to fund and otherwise support the project.

Not only that, Sayādaw said, but a very wealthy Asia dignitary once gave a $5,000 tip to a cocktail waitress during a time when Chaiya Meditation Monastery was collecting money to send to victims of a major flood in Thailand.

Sayādaw has heard these things from his Thai supporters.

See? It's very important to have these *brahmavihārā*—goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—if we hope to achieve peace in the world.

Too many people don't know how to use their time or resources wisely.

And as such, they squander opportunities to be of benefit to themselves and others.

Vesak Day, Chaiya Meditation Monastery. The first four monks behind Sayādaw are (left-to-right) U Mageinda, U Zawtika, Ashin Uttara, and U Wazirañana.

The future Ashin Arsinna had been born and raised in a 100-person Palaung village called Kyauk Phyu, some 4-hours' drive from Sayādaw's home village of Kunhawt via dangerous mountain roads. He'd lost both of his parents when he was 12 years old and moved in with his aunt and uncle.

The young boy ordained as a 13-year-old *samanera* around 1996 at Namhsan Monastery (MyohMa) in the city of Namhsan, some three miles from his village. U Mageinda was living there at the time and soon became his teacher—the monk who would foremost expose him to the life of Dhamma.

In the second half of 2009, shortly after U Mageinda had left Myanmar and established himself at Chaiya Meditation Monastery, Ashin Arsinna received a call from his teacher. U Mageinda told him that Sayādaw was looking for more monks to come live at the Las Vegas temple. He suggested that his young student consider coming.

Ashin Arsinna was intrigued by the idea and expressed interest.

In early 2010, Sayādaw himself called Ashin Arsinna and told him that if he was really interested in coming he should start applying for a visa.

> When I first talked to Sayādaw, he asked me if I'd already completed my *Pāli* education. I told him that I had. He said to me that if I wanted to come to the United States to live at his

monastery, he would help me secure a visa. I told him that I really wanted to come.

But as Ashin Arsinna began the process, he found it difficult to get a tourist visa since he was only 27 years old and government politics at the time made it hard for younger people from Myanmar to enter the United States.

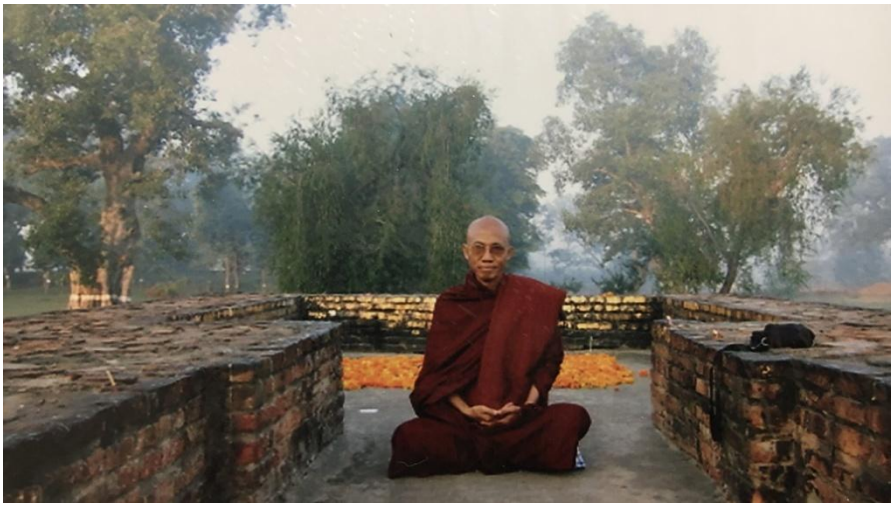
The two monks wouldn't get a chance to meet until a visit to Yangon by Sayādaw some three years later.

Las Vegas Sayādaw leading the Chaiya Meditation Monastery community on pilgrimage at Ramabhar Stupa. This is an important pilgrimage site, as it is the place where the Buddha attained parinibbāna. The stupa was built over some of the Buddha's ashes at the spot where he was cremated. (Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, India, circa 2011)

Around 2011, Sayādaw took a break from his duties at Chaiya Meditation Monastery in order to lead a 15-day pilgrimage to Asia for more than 40 members of the temple community. It was Sayādaw's fourth trip to India. They also visited Thailand and Myanmar—his fifth trip back to his home country.

In Myanmar, the group visited Yangon and Mandalay, stopping to see the three temples where Sayādaw had once lived. They also visited Bagan and Shan State, where the master grew up. Unfortunately, Sayādaw's obligations during the trip prohibited him from paying a visit to his home village.

In speaking of the Mandalay area, Sayādaw would later rave to a student about how wonderful it was at nearby Sagaing Hills. This spiritually rich area, teeming with monks and nuns for centuries, lies just southwest of Mandalay, on the other side of the Ayeyarwady River.



Las Vegas Sayādaw at the remains of the Buddha's hut at Savatthi Jetavana. The Buddha lived at Jetavana for 19 out of his 45 vassas. (Uttar Pradesh, India, circa 2011)

Sometime in 2012, a 67-year-old retired chief engineer from Myanmar came to Chaiya Meditation Monastery to participate in a temporary group ordination.

After his retirement, the man had settled in the United States after a 30-year career that was primarily based in Thailand and Singapore but also on barges traveling around the world. He had originally settled in Seattle, where he'd met Sayādaw a year or two earlier when the latter had traveled to Washington.

In time, though, the man moved to California—just a stone's throw away from Las Vegas.

He arrived at Chaiya Meditation Monastery for his temporary ordination with an existing meditation practice. During his working years, whenever he'd been able to return to his home in Yangon from his responsibilities abroad, he'd made a point to walk thirty minutes each day to Shwedagon Pagoda to practice meditation.

Given the strong meditative atmosphere of Chaiya Meditation Monastery, on the day of his temporary *bhikkhu* ordination the man

decided to remain a monk for the rest of his life. He was given the Buddhist name U Zawana.

Sayādaw would later offer a reflection on U Zawana coming to Chaiya Meditation Monastery:

> U Zawana used to live in Washington. He and two others (a man from Oregon, and another man from New York) wanted to ordain.
>
> So they came together to Chaiya Meditation Monastery. The other two soon disrobed but U Zawana wanted to continue.

U Zawana fit in well with the daily meditation schedule. In fact, he could often be seen meditating by himself for long periods in the main hall of the monastery.

In mid-November 2012, the beloved 62-year-old English monk Ajahn Brahm paid a brief visit to Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

A member of the Thai Forest Tradition—and a disciple of the legendary forest master Ajahn Chah—Ajahn Brahm is famous for his eloquence and his sense of humor.

A Sri Lankan supporter of the Ajahn Brahm community had invited him to Las Vegas and made arrangements for the monk to offer a Dhamma talk at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

Clearly exhausted from a long flight from Western Australia—where he was the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery—and a busy itinerary involving the offering of three Dhamma talks at three locations in just two days, Ajahn Brahm gave only a short talk then answered questions for about 20 minutes before departing.

One of the evening's lay attendees would later reflect that the busyness of Ajahn Brahm's hectic schedule showed in his demeanor—the usually jolly monk had appeared to her to be tired and a bit eager for the night to be over with.

In early 2013, construction began on a tall, golden stupa—named World Peace Lucky Happy Pagoda—in the garden in the northwest corner of the monastery complex.

The beautiful pagoda would be the last visual remnant from Sayādaw's unusual dream of Guanyin at the end of *vassa* in 2002 to be constructed on the temple grounds.

The stupa was completed on May 3, 2013.

The Last Pilgrimage

In mid-May 2013, Sayādaw and members of the Chaiya Meditation Monastery community embarked on a third pilgrimage to Myanmar. It was Sayādaw's sixth return to his home country since he left in 1988.

Las Vegas Sayādaw with members of the Chaiya Meditation Monastery community on pilgrimage at Kanbawzathadi Palace, built for King Bayinnaung in 1556. (Bago, Myanmar, May 2013)

U Mageinda had given his student Ashin Arsinna the heads-up that Sayādaw was coming to Myanmar and would be spending some time in Yangon at the start of the group's pilgrimage. He suggested the two monks meet.

Ashin Arsinna had recently moved to Yangon and was living in a *pariyatti* monastery there with his friend Ashin Mandala when Sayādaw arrived in the nation's largest city.

> When Sayādaw came to Myanmar in May 2013, he stayed with his old friend Mercury Sayādaw at Aung Zay Dee. I was staying at Pyi Lon Chan Thar Nan Hsan temple in Bahan Township, Yangon at the time.
>
> I'd never been to Aung Zay Dee, as it was in Min Galar Done Township—near the international airport, and about a 35-minute drive away from where I was staying.

I met Sayādaw for the first time while he was at Aung Zay Dee. Although we'd spoken three years earlier about me trying to get a visa to come to America, I'd not been successful.

He told me that if I was interested in staying at his monastery for a long time, I should apply for an R1 visa, since it would be easier to get.

Although Sayādaw would play a role in getting Ashin Arsinna's visa application changed to an R1 visa after he returned home from the pilgrimage, it would still be quite some time before the young monk would have his opportunity to come to the United States.

Las Vegas Sayādaw (seated; center) with the abbot of a local temple, Ashin Sumingala, Ashin Arsinna, and Ashin Mandala (left-to-right), joined by lay supporters at Aung Zay Dee, Yangon, Myanmar (May 2013)

Although Sayādaw's international travels continued, some eight years after the 2013 pilgrimage to Myanmar a lay student asked him whether he thought there would be more group pilgrimages to Asia in the future.

He replied that it was unlikely.

On May 3, 2015, the second anniversary of the completion of the World Peace Lucky Happy Pagoda, one thousand 11”-inch Buddha statues—each with a relic of the Buddha inside—were enshrined inside the pagoda.

Donors from some seven different regions of the world—including Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and China—had offered the relics to be enshrined.

Group portrait prior to enshrining the 1,000 Buddha statues inside the World Peace Lucky Happy Pagoda (May 3, 2015)

Before the pagoda was resealed the following day, a mysterious woman showed up at the monastery and approached Sayādaw.

> It was very strange. A lady—maybe about 40 years old—showed up with some relics from the Buddha’s blood. They were red and yellow.
>
> She came up to me and said that she’d gotten lost trying to find the temple. She said it took her two hours to find it. She then said, “I know you’re about to close the pagoda, but I want to offer these relics to you.”

Sayādaw didn’t know who she was or what her name was. He had never seen her before.

> She gave me the relics then left. It was very strange.

Relics

A student once asked Sayādaw about the relics of enlightened beings.

The master explained that the relics of the Buddha and the relics of "ordinary" *arahants* look different.

Arahant relics resemble semi-spherical pieces of bone, generally the size of a pea, whereas relics of the Buddha tend to be smaller.

The Buddha's bone relics are usually irregular in shape and off-white in color. They resemble fine gravel. The Buddha's blood relics, on the other hand, are tiny red or yellow spheres, about the size of a grain of sand.

The great Burmese meditation master Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā—Las Vegas Sayādaw's primary meditation teacher at Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā Meditation Center in 1968—was believed by many to have been an *arahant*, yet reportedly the only relics found amongst his cremated remains after he died in 2016 resembled gold leaf.

The student asked Sayādaw whether relics ever appear like gemstones or gold leaf.

The master replied that he'd not seen that before, reiterating the description he'd just given of genuine *arahant* relics.

> You can go to India and see the bone relics of Venerables Moggallāna and Sāriputta to see what I mean.
>
> Mahāsi Sayādaw's relics look like their relics.

Sayādaw shared that over the years temple supporters had donated relics of some of the Buddha's great *arahant* disciples to Chaiya Meditation Monastery. Delivered in several small bottles, Sayādaw had over time received some of the relics of Venerable Sāriputta, Venerable Moggallāna, and Venerable Sīvali.

The student then asked Sayādaw how there are enough Buddha relics to be shared amongst different peoples around the world, as it seems there would be a rather limited amount of the precious material.

> Relics can multiply for the faithful—for those who pay respect to them.

He recalled an occasion decades earlier when he'd been in Myanmar.

His friend Mercury Sayādaw had given him one of 81 unusual Buddha relics associated with the very famous Pancalohalabhamuni Buddha statue in Myanmar. Sayādaw kept the relic near him and had venerated it in his room at his home monastery over the years. He happened to look at the relic one day about six years after receiving it and was shocked to see that the single relic had become three.

> It's because the Buddha had a short life. Other Buddhas had long lifespans—maybe 20,000 or more years—but our Buddha lived only 80 years.
>
> Since his missionary work lasted only 45 years, he made a determination before dying that the relics from his body should remain so that the faithful could respect them. And it's because of this determination that they multiply for the faithful.

Sayādaw added that although relics have been known to multiply, they can sometimes disappear too. He recalled an occasion when he had given several small relics to a devotee. To his and the devotee's surprise, they saw that within just a few minutes the relics had formed into a single relic.

The student asked whether any relics housed at Chaiya Meditation Monastery had been known to multiply.

Sayadaw's reply was simply, "Yes."

Community procession of the Buddha's relics and the 1,000 Buddha statues prior to enshrinement in the World Peace Lucky Happy Pagoda (May 3, 2015)

Sometime in 2015, Sayādaw received a donation that would soon become a signature element of daily meditation practice at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

> Before they moved to Orlando, Florida, a Lao family donated a big grandfather clock to the monastery. We put it right in our main hall, where it chimes every 15 minutes. We use it as our timer for our 1-hour group meditations four times a day.
>
> Prior to receiving the big clock, we had a smaller clock we used. After we got the big one, we initially moved the smaller clock to the ordination hall but it would eventually settle in the meditation hall of a new men's retreat building we'd have built.

Around mid-2015, Sayādaw reached out to Ashin Arsinna in Yangon to follow-up on his efforts to secure an R1 visa to come the United States. Although the visa hadn't yet been approved, Ashin Arsinna wouldn't have to wait much longer—it was finally issued in May 2016.

> After I got my visa, I stayed at my Yangon temple for another two months as I prepared to head to America. My best friend, Ashin Mandala, came with me.
>
> Ashin Mandala was a very smart guy and kind too. Because of him, we had no trouble at all during our travels to the United States. He would eventually disrobe, though.
>
> After a nearly 15-hour flight, on July 1, 2016 we arrived safely in Las Vegas and settled at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

Other than a 10-day retreat in the Mogok Sayādaw tradition at Yangon's Mogok Yeikthā Meditation Center in 2008 when he was 25 years old, Ashin Arsinna had no real experience with meditation practice.

It was only upon his arrival at Chaiya Meditation Monastery that he was introduced to the Mahāsi Sayādaw method and began to practice *vipassanā* meditation consistently.

> My favorite thing to do is practice meditation. It makes me feel calm and peaceful.

Burmese Names

An American visitor was talking one day with Ashin Arsinna about the proper way to address Burmese monks.

The monk explained that the honorific *ashin* was used for monks under 40 years of age, while the honorific *U* was used for monks age 40 or older. Both terms are respectful. *Ashin* essentially means *bhante*, and *U* is like "mister." Ashin Arsinna added that the word *sayādaw* is specifically used for highly venerated monks or the abbots of monasteries.

The visitor asked Ashin if it would be extra polite to refer to him, for example, as Ashin U Arsinna. No, said the monk. Just use *Ashin* or *U*, as appropriate for the age.

In the case of a *sayādaw*, such as Sayādaw himself, one might make formal reference to him as Sayādaw U Zeyathuta. However, this formal naming convention is seldom used in Myanmar. Instead, there is first referenced the place where the *sayādaw* is living. Hence, Sayādaw U Zeyathuta is more commonly known as Las Vegas Sayādaw.

Similarly, Sayādaw U Sobhana is more widely known as Mahāsi Sayādaw—"*mahāsi*" (meaning "big drum") being a reference to a large drum in Seikkhun village in Upper Myanmar, where the great master was born in 1904.

Sayādaw elaborated on the polite and appropriate ways to refer to Buddhist monks from Myanmar.

> According to Burmese Buddhist culture, it's not polite to refer to a monk in a way that is outside of established naming conventions. Even calling me 'Ajahn Chaiya', for instance, can be considered somewhat impolite.
>
> Take Mahāsi Sayādaw as another example. If we call him by his ordained name—U Sobhana—it's very impolite.
>
> *Mahāsi* means "big drum." In the village where he lived, they had a big drum. When they would practice meditation, they'd hit the drum to let people know that the meditation was starting. So because he came from the village with the big drum, he came to be politely called Mahāsi Sayādaw.

This is Burmese Buddhist culture.

> What about Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā? We didn't call him U Paṇḍitā. We called him Shwe Taung Gone Sayādaw.
>
> After Mahāsi Sayādaw died, Sayādaw U Paṇḍitā left Mahāsi Sāsana Yeikthā Meditation Center and established his own center about a half-mile away. The place was called Shwe Taung Gone. *Taung gone* means mountain. *Shwe* means gold. So: "golden mountain." A big house was offered to him there at Shwe Taung Gone, so we started calling him Shwe Taung Gone Sayādaw.

Sayādaw offered another example.

> There was also Taungpulu Tawya Kaba-Aye Sayādaw. He was called that because the mountain where he practiced meditation was called Taungpulu. Again, *taung* means mountain. So in this case, *Taungpulu* means a very small mountain.
>
> Even in the time of the Buddha, there was Venerable Sāriputta. His birth name was Upatissa, but no one called him that. They called him Sāriputta. *Putta* means son, and Sari was his mother's name. So they called him Sāriputta. That was the tradition.

Sayādaw next offered some context to the different ways that people refer to him.

> Since I am here in Las Vegas, they call me Las Vegas Sayādaw. If I was living in Mandalay, they might call me Mandalay Sayādaw.
>
> If you called me by my name, it would be impolite. My Buddhist name is Zeya. In *Pāli*, it's "Jeya," which means victory. In Thailand, they pronounce it "Chaiya."
>
> Sometimes Burmese people who are new to the temple will come for a visit and see the sign out front that says "Chaiya" on it. They think it's a Chinese temple.
>
> A few months ago, a Burmese couple from Daly City, California came here for the first time. When they showed up, I was talking in Thai to a group of Thai people.

The Burmese couple sat there for ten minutes waiting for me to finish. Then I heard them say to each other in Burmese, "We came to the wrong temple."

But then I spoke to them in Burmese and they were very happy.

They said, "Oh, we thought this was a Chinese temple!"

Most Westerners know Sayādaw by his Thai name—Ajahn Chaiya.

I started being referred to as "Ajahn Chaiya" when I was in Thailand. And when I came to the United States and lived at Wat Buddhabhavana for those five years, there were no Burmese people around, I went nowhere, and so everyone there called me Ajahn Chaiya too.

But it wasn't very polite by Burmese standards.

The more appropriate way to refer to a monk using Thai naming conventions would be to call me Phra Ajahn Chaiya. This is polite. It's similar to how the Thai word *krub* means yes, but *krub pom* is a more polite way of saying yes.

So the Thais call me Ajahn Chaiya.

The Burmese call me U Zeya. *U* means mister. Burma is the only country in the world where people don't have last names. When we apply for a passport to leave the country, we use U (for 'mister') as our first name. In young monks, Ashin becomes the first name.

But this is only because we don't have last names. Even the former United Nations secretary-general U Thant didn't have a last name!

The visitor asked Sayādaw about his birth name.

In Burma, once we ordain it's rude for someone to use our lay name. We give it up as soon as we take robes.

> Even if we disrobe, we still don't use our old lay name. And in Shan State we just continue to use our monastic name.
>
> It's the same for everyone in Burma. It's our culture. No monk in Burma shares his birth name.

Sayādaw explained that it's different in Thailand.

> Amongst Thai monks, maybe 10% use their Buddhist name but 90% use their birth name.
>
> Consider Ajahn Chah. Chah was his birth name.
>
> It's a matter of culture.

Although the monks' and nuns' residential wings at Chaiya Meditation Monastery were suitable for typical monastic and lay retreatant usage, Sayādaw realized that the community needed more lodging for larger-scale events, such as when some 70-90 visitors might come from out of state to attend his annual birthday celebration.

The community could also benefit, he realized, by having a private space for retreatants engaged in intensive silent meditation retreats.

More land for future building construction was needed.

A Thai family that had bought two of the lots adjacent to the monastery compound back in 1995 had since moved back to Thailand without developing the land. Sayādaw reached out to them to see if they might be open to selling the lots back to the monastery for future construction of both men's and women's dormitory buildings and meditation halls.

The family was open to it. They offered to sell the lots back for just $37,000. (Today, the two lots are worth $400,000.)

And so the temple was able to obtain two residential lots just outside the wall of the monastery compound for future construction of two large buildings—a men's and a women's dormitory building, each with a sizeable meditation hall.

In 2017, the first building—a two-story women's dormitory and meditation hall—was constructed on Virtue Court just outside the monastery compound entrance.

It was built at a cost of $1,200,000.

Around 2017 Sayādaw had an opportunity to travel to Europe. It was a destination he'd had the good fortune to visit from time to time over the years.

> On this trip, I visited Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Germany, and Moscow. I'm interested in learning about the cultures of these places.
>
> It can be difficult for Americans to get permission to enter Russia, but it wasn't for me.
>
> Burma and Russia are connected through their communist backgrounds, and over the years the Burmese government has sent 5,000 soldiers to study in Moscow. Because of all the Burmese students there, Moscow even has a Burmese Buddhist temple. A few monks live there.

Sayādaw didn't visit the temple—perhaps the *only* Buddhist temple in Russia—while he was there.

> When we were in Russia, we visited the Kremlin and many other places. We saw a big palace too. I especially liked a museum they had there, but no pictures were allowed. The architecture in Moscow was amazing.

Las Vegas Sayādaw in Moscow (circa 2017)

Not the Middle Way

Sayādaw had begun experiencing great difficulty speaking sometime in 2018. The issue had actually started more than 20 years earlier, around the time he began doing his annual 3-month silent meditation retreats. With no talking for three months each year, the muscles on the right side of Sayādaw's throat had over time become terribly weak.

Whereas in the early years of his retreats his voice would return shortly after he started speaking again and was able to rebuild the muscle, by 2018 he was finding it very difficult to speak and began using a microphone so that he could be heard.

"It's my fault," reflected the master. "It's not the Middle Way."

The Middle Way taught by Lord Buddha encourages us to avoid extremes. One of the key components of the Buddha's teaching is the cultivation of Right Speech, which entails speaking well (as opposed to not speaking at all).

On the advice of a doctor, Sayādaw now tries to do daily voice exercises intended to strengthen the weakened muscles. They help, the master acknowledged, but finding time to do them is the hard part.

***

Sayādaw traveled to Jordan and Egypt via Italy from late November to early December 2018.

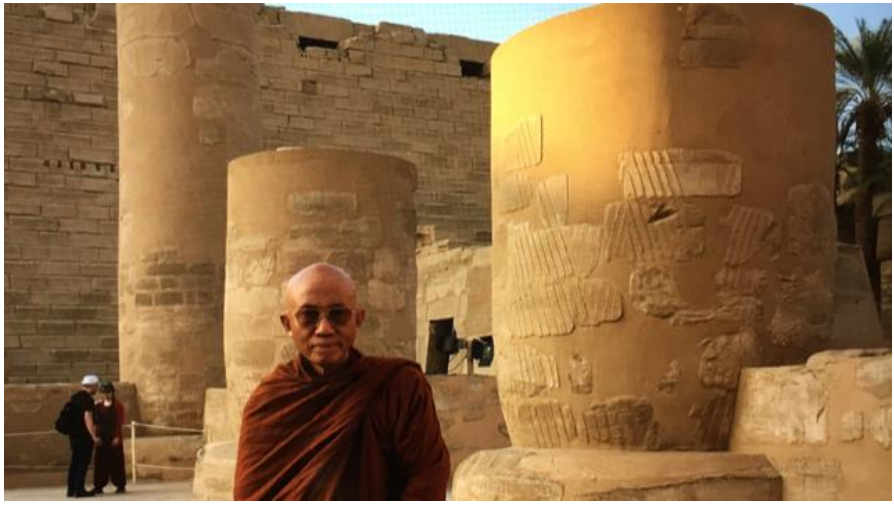
> I first went to Jordan. There was a UNESCO World Heritage Site—a very interesting place—that I wanted to visit. It's called Petra. From the capital of Jordan, it's about a 3-hour drive to the south.
>
> Once there, getting around the sprawling site requires about three hours of hiking in mountainous, desert terrain. Given the rugged trails at the site, many visitors opt to hire mules to take them around. When I got there, I saw thousands of tourists there to see it.
>
> I also visited some Christian churches while I was in Jordan.

While in Egypt, Sayādaw visited the Great Pyramids and other archaeological and cultural sites, staying in hotels as he toured about the desert country.

> I'd traveled to Jordan specifically to see that World Heritage Site, but I was mainly interested in seeing Egypt, which is where I headed next.

The capital of Egypt—the metropolis of Cairo, which is home to more than 21 million people—is only 350 miles west of Petra. A small sliver of Israel separates Jordan from Egypt.

> Ever since I was young—when I'd studied Egypt in school—I'd wanted to see a mummy. So I went to Egypt because I wanted to see a mummy.
>
> And I did. I traveled all over the country too.



Egypt (December 2018)

On June 9, 2019—some two years after the construction of the women's dormitory and meditation hall—was the grand opening of a two-story men's dormitory and meditation hall right across the street from the new women's dorm. The building had been constructed at a cost of $1,600,000.

With a large meditation hall on the first floor and a smaller meditation area on the second floor, as well as a kitchen and dining area, the building also had sufficient sleeping quarters to comfortably accommodate perhaps 15-20 overnight guests.

The grand opening ceremony was attended by several hundred people, including more than 50 monks, ten of whom had taken temporary ordination the day before.

Las Vegas Sayādaw and members of the Chaiya Meditation Monastery community during a June 2019 intensive meditation retreat.

By late 2019, all but three of the ten lots outside of the monastery compound along Virtue Court had seen development by various members of the temple community.

Two of the remaining vacant lots were owned by a Thai woman who was currently living in Chiang Mai. The third lot was owned by Nun Medhavi's brother-in-law, who lived some eight hours' drive away in San Francisco.

By the end of the year, the temple was able to purchase the lot from Nun Medhavi's brother-in-law at a cost of $150,000. It was decided to pass on the remaining two lots, as their value had risen to $200,000 each.

At the end of 2019, a middle-aged Burmese man asked Sayādaw for *bhikkhu* ordination. His wife had recently died and he'd lost his home. Upon ordination, the former sushi chef was given the Buddhist name U Vimala.

U Vimala settled in as the newest resident monk at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

Re-ordination

On occasion, a monk at Chaiya Meditation Monastery will undertake a re-ordination ceremony.

A curious member of the temple's lay community once asked Ashin Arsinna about this.

> We sometimes re-ordain because a donor requests to sponsor us to do so.
>
> All monks should try to support those who want to make merit and do good things with their lives. By doing good things, people can achieve a lot of good things and they will be happy, healthy and wealthy.
>
> Everyone can do good things, and if someone wants to sponsor a monk to ordain again, we can do that. By doing this, both the monk and the donor benefit a lot.
>
> It's like having a clean towel that someone volunteers to wash again. The towel just gets that much cleaner.
>
> And because of this, some monks will re-ordain again and again. In Myanmar, some of the popular monks have re-ordained hundreds of times.

An Author

Given how busy Sayādaw's schedule has kept him over the years, it's remarkable that he's written some twenty Dhamma books, including volumes in English, Thai and Burmese.

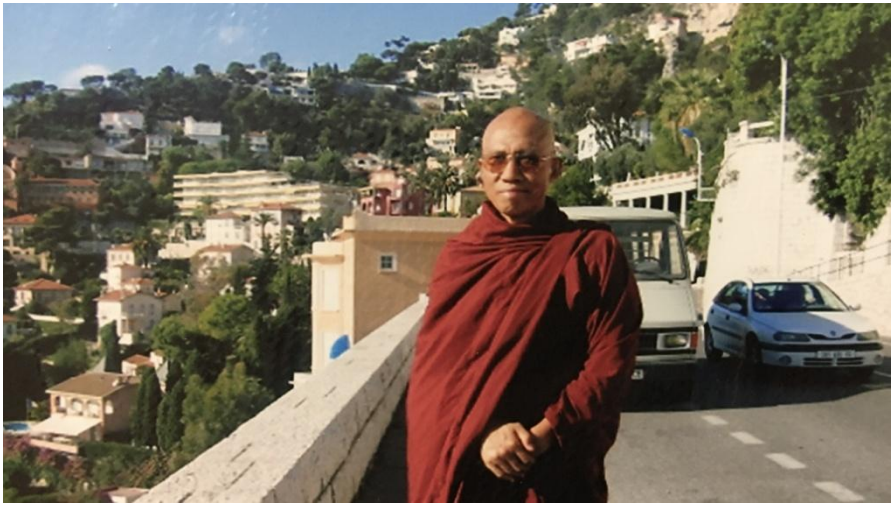
> Most of the books I've written have been in the Thai language—I've written 14 books in Thai. I've also written five books in Burmese.
>
> My books have covered a wide variety of Buddhist topics, from Buddhism in general, to the highest blessings, the Noble Truths, meditation, loving kindness, and even *kamma*.

Sayādaw has authored only a single book in English—a very short book of his teachings called "Requirements for Peace and a Better Life."

> I'd been invited to the San Francisco area to give a series of Dhamma talks over three nights. The first night was going to be in Burmese, the second night in Thai, and the third night was going to be in English.
>
> As I formulated a plan about what I should talk about each evening, I sketched out my thoughts for the night I would be teaching in English. These sketches eventually turned into "Requirements for Peace and a Better Life."

[Interested readers might consult Venerable Ajahn Chaiya's book Just Practice: The Collected Teachings of Luang Por Chaiya*—a 20-year collection of Sayādaw's transcribed Dhamma talks—and refer to the chapter titled "The Requirements for Happiness." The chapter contains a transcription of the actual talk Sayādaw gave in English that evening at Theravāda Dhamma Hall in Daly City, California.]*

> Because I'm so busy at the temple, the vast majority of my writing has been at airports or on long international flights, often to Europe.

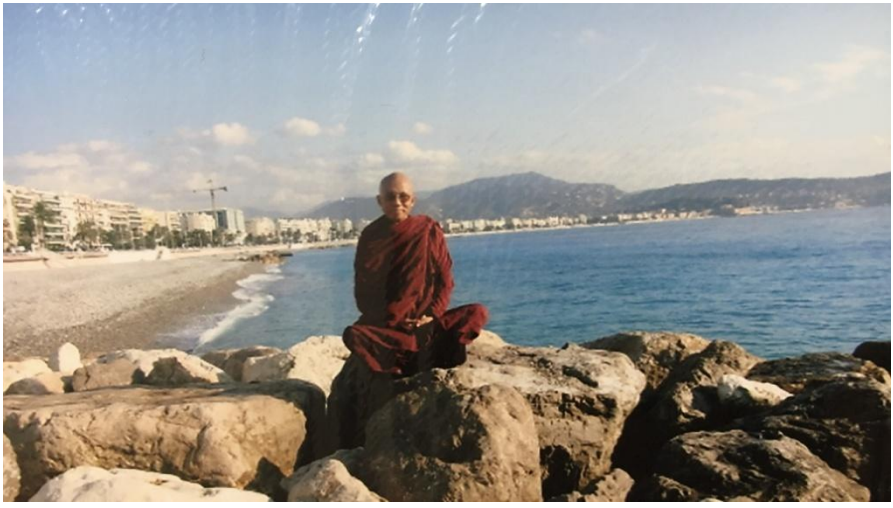


Las Vegas Sayādaw in Monte Carlo.

Over the years, Sayādaw has been invited practically everywhere in Europe. He's visited France, Germany, Italy, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Monte Carlo, Norway, and the gorgeous, mountainous country of Switzerland, whose rolling, green hills reminded him of his home village of Kunhawt. By his estimation, he's been to every country in Europe except Greece and Spain.

Sayādaw has been to Paris seven times after being invited to the city for house blessings, birthdays, and the like. His sponsors have shown him much of their city, visiting the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower, and have also taken him elsewhere around France.

> One of my *Abhidhammā* students back when I was the abbot at Wat Buddhabhavana was a man from Laos who used to be a monk for 32 years. A lot of his former students were living in France, and he told them about me. So they started inviting me to Paris.
>
> The man from Laos—his monastic name used to be Maha Boonlom—is still a regular supporter of our temple.



Las Vegas Sayādaw in Nice, France.

As an author, Sayādaw has learned how to use his extended flight times well. He once recalled a particular non-stop, 12-hour flight from Las Vegas to Frankfurt during which he spent the entire flight writing a book in Thai in one marathon session.

During March and April of 2020, when the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was raging through the United States and much of the rest of the world, Sayādaw used the slowed visitation and enhanced solitude of the monastery to write his autobiography. Written first in Burmese, he eventually began the slow process of translating the 300-page book into the Thai language.

Although the book is ready to be printed, the timing may not be good.

> The political situation in Burma isn't good right now.
>
> In my book, I talk about my experiences living in my village. In those days, we had the Shan ethnic group fighting with the government. They are still fighting today. There's been a lot of suffering. When the government came, they killed a lot of people. I saw this happen.
>
> My autobiography talks about this stuff.

There are political repercussions to consider if the book is printed and distributed now.

> When the government army used to come to my village, they would trick the men to see if they would lie to them. If they did, they would kill them.
>
> So when the army came, all the men would run into the jungle. The women stayed but then the soldiers made them carry their stuff everywhere for them.
>
> In those days, I was still young. I used to run to the temple and hide under the pagoda the whole day. The abbot of the temple would just close the door and I'd stay in there alone whenever the army came.
>
> Then, when the army left, I'd come out from underneath the pagoda.

Sayādaw once nearly died while hiding under the pagoda because it was so difficult to breathe in the confined space.

People living in Mandalay or Rangoon don't understand this, because they didn't experience it. In Shan State, they've been fighting for 70 years.

Eventually, that area became a "black area"—they'd fight and then the schools would be closed for years.

My dad was the leader of the village. When the army came, they made him take care of their every need. But later, they sent him a letter saying they were coming to kill him the next day.

So Sayādaw's father left the village, ordained as a monk in Mandalay, and basically disappeared for two years.

He had no choice; otherwise, he would have been killed.

The Shan ethnic groups were fighting against a thousand soldiers, which the Chinese supported. And every year, they'd enlist villagers in Shan State to be their new soldiers.

These were difficult times. It was all terrible, so I wrote a book about it. But we might need to wait a while before we have it printed and can give it to people.

Las Vegas Sayādaw visiting a Christian church in Estonia.

Meanwhile, in the autumn of 2020, *Just Practice: The Collected Teachings of Luang Por Chaiya* was published. The 400-plus page book was the first significant volume of Sayādaw's teachings to be published in the English language.

Covering some twenty years of Dhamma talks offered by the master, the book covers an interesting range of topics related to Buddhist practice, including the four elements, the guardian meditations, the many methods of practicing loving kindness meditation, the seven stages of purification, the attainment of supramundane knowledge, meditation on the impurity of the body, and the cultivation of mindfulness in our daily lives.

The Path of the *Bodhisattva*

A student asked Sayādaw about the *Mahāyāna* teachings on the path of the *bodhisattva*; that is, delaying one's final enlightenment (as one gradually strives for full Buddhahood) for the benefit of all living beings.

Helping others is *samatha*.

And *samatha* practice alone cannot lead us to enlightenment.

He added that in *Theravāda* Buddhism, enlightenment is the state of a noble person—the state of one who has gained at least the first of the four stages of enlightenment—whereas in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism they may sometimes refer to an insight, or a mundane *realization*, as "enlightenment."

But that's not what the Buddha taught.

Sayādaw finished his reply to the student by offering a thought-provoking perspective:

> An enlightened person may be reborn as an angel. As they continue to practice meditation, they go higher and higher. But to return to the human world for the purpose of helping others would be very hard because most people generally don't want to listen.
>
> The *suttas* don't have stories of noble beings returning to the human world.

Giving

In January 2021, Sayādaw was encouraging a student to keep a written record of the donations he makes, the occasions he undertakes the eight precepts, and the number of hours he practices meditation.

"It's good *kamma*," he told the student, "to reflect on our good deeds."

This is especially true as one nears the time of death, as reflecting on one's wholesomeness at the end of life is the proximate *kamma* that could lead to a good rebirth.

"What about you?" asked the student. "Do you keep track of your good deeds?"

Sayādaw's reply was noteworthy and inspiring:

> I don't do that. But I do a lot of good deeds. For me, I won't forget the big things I've done.
>
> Like here in Las Vegas, for 30 years on the occasion of my birthday, supporters have made donations—but I never, ever use it for personal things. Instead, I make a lot of donations.
>
> We bought the land and built this building. I made many $10,000 donations toward that.
>
> It's not my money; it's from the people who support me—I just give it away.

Sayādaw is especially generous toward the Kunhawt community in Myanmar. Although he'd not had an opportunity to visit his home village in nearly 43 years, Kunhawt and its people had not been forgotten by the master.

> I do a lot of things for the place where I was born.
>
> I built a school for them, because it's very expensive; I built meditation and dormitory buildings for men and women; I even bought land and built a temple building and an ordination hall; I also built a large kitchen and dining hall; I provided electricity for the village, and built a road for cars; and I helped establish drinking water with a well too.

There's also the 200-year-old pagoda on one of the mountains above Kunhawt for which one of Sayādaw's paternal great-grandfathers had sponsored the construction.

> Well, no one took care of it for many decades, so it fell into disrepair. So now I sponsor the maintenance of it.
>
> And I funded the construction of a new pagoda at the temple in my village too.

Sayādaw uses the donations he's given to help others.

South Kunhawt village, where Las Vegas Sayādaw lived from 1947-1966. This photo was taken from Kunhawt Temple, looking roughly northeast from the center of the village.

In the foreground are two buildings belonging to a clinic staffed by two nurses. The clinic sits next to the temple. Sayādaw purchased the land for the eventual construction of the clinic.

To the left of the 200-year-old pagoda in the distance at the far end of the village is an ordination hall that Sayādaw funded the construction of around 2019. The original owners of the land had moved away, so Sayādaw bought the land and then donated it to the temple. Although Kunhawt Temple has only a single monk and perhaps two novices today, the ordination hall typically sees one or two ordinations each year.

Situated to the left of the ordination hall is a two-story middle school building for which Sayādaw also funded the construction. To the right of the old pagoda is a red-roofed meditation building, additionally funded by Sayādaw.

Next to the meditation building is a small, blue-roofed temple building. Although the temple building is considered part of the main temple located in the middle of the village, for a time a lone monk lived there. He chose the location because he liked to be alone, and because there is a cemetery next to the pagoda and the monk wanted to live near the cemetery. The monk died a few years ago.

The master continued:

> I've not only supported my birthplace; I've supported *five* villages.
>
> For example, in one of them they had to carry water a long way. Now, a water source has been established in front of ten houses. So now they can get water easily. It costs a lot of money to do this. They have electricity now too, for which I donated a lot of money.
>
> I'm happy to have an opportunity to do these things. A thousand people are happy now too.

Although he's not had a chance to return to that part of Myanmar for a long time, Sayādaw sees the value in supporting the people who still live there.

> Now, we have eight pagodas we're working on—we just finished three of them. It cost a lot of money, but I made donations for that. I have a picture of one of the pagodas too.
>
> So, even though I don't record these things on paper, I record them in my brain.

By his estimation, Sayādaw has donated many hundreds of thousands of dollars over the decades.

> Some people in those villages are very poor.
>
> And some are very rich—but they don't have *saddhā*; they don't understand the Dhamma. Some of these people have their own car and a good business, but they donate very little.
>
> I do things for their villages, like building walls and kitchens.

> Now, some of them go to the temple, observe the eight precepts, listen to the Dhamma and practice meditation—men and women both—in a big, two-story building like we have at Chaiya Meditation Monastery. It even has a big ordination hall, which we finished not long ago.

Sayādaw shared some more words about his ongoing efforts to help the people of northern Myanmar with their education:

> We built a school a few years ago. It's a two-story building for about 500 students. I provided them furniture, educational books, and school uniforms. And every year I send gifts to the ten teachers.
>
> Also, for any of the nuns, novices or monks who finish middle school and want to go to the city for university, I provide for that too. I support their education. I am very happy to do so. I've done this since I lived in Rangoon.
>
> I take care of almost 30 students. I even used to sell my robes for their education, for their tuition, for their books, and for their doctor appointments.
>
> It's good to do good things when we have an opportunity.

He closed with a few more inspiring remarks to his student:

> I don't use money I've been given for myself, except when I need to buy a plane ticket to travel overseas. I don't ask supporters to pay for this.
>
> If I told someone I needed to fly somewhere, they'd probably be very happy to buy a ticket for me—but I don't tell anyone. I just buy the ticket then tell them what I've already done.
>
> Except when I travel overseas, I don't use even $1 that I've been donated for myself. Instead, I keep it for students and poor people, for the temple, or for the school.
>
> Last year in March and April when the guests stopped coming

to the temple because of the pandemic, I wrote my book that talks about some of this stuff—I wrote my autobiography, and it's over 300 pages. I did that because I would like others to realize what they can choose to do with their resources. You can read about all this later when the English version of my biography comes out.

When I was young—about 10 or 11 years old—I finished 6th grade. I had no chance to continue my education in my village, although I was a very smart child. So I had to go to the city, though my parents initially hadn't wanted me to.

I don't want the next generation to be like that, so I support their efforts to go to the city and continue their education.

After I eventually went to Rangoon and continued my studies of Buddhist scripture, I finished my higher education and became a teacher. It was only then—at 30 years of age—that I started to learn my ABC's. It was very difficult, but I tried my best.

The original Kunhawt Temple, where Las Vegas Sayādaw was ordained and lived as a novice, burned down around 1971. This image of the new Kunhawt Temple—which is still situated in the middle of south Kunhawt village—reflects a much larger temple complex than in Sayādaw's time.

In 2011, Sayādaw funded the construction of a two-story men's meditation and dormitory building (the large building on the right). He later

funded the construction of a large kitchen and dining hall, and a women's meditation and dormitory building (seen behind the pagodas). Around 2017, Sayādaw also funded the construction of one of the pagodas.

Goodbye, U Zawana

In January 2021, one of the junior monks—75-year-old U Zawana, who'd ordained in 2012—began experiencing unexplainable fatigue and loss of appetite. A number of doctor visits didn't solve the problem and his condition eventually deteriorated.

In March, U Zawana's condition became acute and one day he was taken to the hospital. His two sons from his former marriage were notified and joined him at the hospital. One of the sons called Sayādaw and asked him to come quickly because things weren't looking good.

> It seemed like he was waiting for Sayādaw and the other monks to come because the minute they walked in through the doors, he passed away. I believe the time was 6:33 pm.

U Zawana

In honor of their father's passing, U Zawana's two sons took temporary *bhikkhu* ordination at Chaiya Meditation Monastery shortly after his death.

One of the temple's lay supporters would later reflect that he'd felt a particularly close kinship with the likeable monk, who was usually

the first one in the main hall for the daily group meditation periods. U Zawana would often encourage the lay supporter to stay on after the conclusion bell rang and meditate with him for an hour longer. The kind old monk was also remembered for being generous and cheerful.

Our Body, Our Life, Our Mind

While teaching *Abhidhammā* to a young monk, Sayādaw commented:

> We can study the Koran, or the Bible, or the Vedas, but we won't see something like this. Why do all the gods say something else, we might ask.
>
> Every religion is good, but we are fortunate to be Buddhists. We don't have to depend on what people say. We study, we practice—and we'll know for ourselves.
>
> That's why we need to learn. We don't learn from a book; we learn from our body, our life, our mind.

Chapter 9: Buddhist Society of Idaho (2017-present)

In 2016, Sayādaw had been invited to Boise, Idaho to give a talk at a Dhamma center owned by a group of Americans. The event was hosted by a small group of people from the Karen ethnic group of Myanmar.

While the five million Karen people of Myanmar have settled primarily in the south and southeastern parts of their country, significant numbers have also migrated to Thailand, where they've settled close to the Myanmar border. Some of the Karen people of Myanmar have also settled as refugees in the United States.

After the talk in Boise, the hosts shared a concern with Sayādaw. Their concern was that there were a lot of Karen refugees living in the Boise area, but with no Burmese Buddhist monastery nearby—and hence a feeling that there was no spiritual guidance or sense of religious community—some had begun to convert to Christianity. The hosts asked Sayādaw to help them establish a Burmese Buddhist monastery in Idaho.

Sayādaw agreed to help them.

Las Vegas Sayādaw posing with a group of friends and supporters after a Dhamma talk at a church in Twin Falls, Idaho.

The local community soon found a modest residence on 3.6 acres of land in the community of Nampa, which was about twenty minutes from the airport in Boise. And it was available for a good price—$380,000.

Sayādaw secured a loan for the property using his name and credit.

Once the property was secured, the local community set about seeking zoning approval as a place of worship. This involved hosting neighborhood meetings, which Sayādaw attended, in order to answer questions from the future neighbors. There were also public hearings held in the city.

The neighborhood meetings and public hearings went well and the community soon received formal approval for the eventual development of a Buddhist monastery in Nampa.

In 2017, the Buddhist Society of Idaho was established. The president of the first board was a Burmese woman who'd met Sayādaw at the brand-new Chaiya Meditation Monastery back around 1997.

> In those days, there were only five Burmese Buddhist temples in the United States. Besides our new monastery in Las Vegas, the only temples were in Washington, New York, the San Francisco Bay area, and Los Angeles.
>
> Las Vegas was the closest Burmese temple to her home in Idaho, so she and her fiancé came to Chaiya Meditation Monastery to get married. I conducted the wedding ceremony, and then they both took temporary ordination. Many years later, he ordained a second time at our current location on Virtue Court.

Throw *Abhidhammā* in the Ocean

While instructing a young student, Sayādaw explained that *Abhidhammā* is the main key to the Buddhist scriptures.

> If you don't know *Abhidhammā*, you won't clearly understand the *suttas*.

Yet someone once shared with Sayādaw that it's the perspective of some people that *Abhidhammā* "should be thrown in the ocean."

On hearing that sentiment, Sayādaw shook his head and thought, "Oh, no… What a tragedy."

People who hold that perspective perhaps feel that way because the Buddha didn't emphasis *Abhidhammā* in his teaching of human beings.

Sayādaw recalled an occasion when a group of new visitors came to the temple. They asked him whether it was important to learn *Abhidhammā*.

In his reply, Sayādaw spoke of how the *suttas* talk of the five aggregates, as an example. He asked the visitors to explain the fourth aggregate—*saṅkhāra*, which is commonly translated as 'mental formations'. They were unable to do so.

The visitors were completely unaware that the fourth aggregate refers to 50 of the 52 *cetasika* expounded upon in great detail in *Abhidhammā*.

> If you don't learn *Abhidhammā*, you can read the *suttas* but you won't understand the meaning in detail.

In 2019, Sayādaw's first branch monastery—Chaiya Meditation Monastery 2—officially opened its doors in Nampa. Sayādaw assigned his senior monk from the Las Vegas temple—U Mageinda—to be its first abbot.

> I will let the monks take turns acting as the abbot of the Idaho temple. Perhaps U Mageinda won't like it. Then another monk can try it. Sometimes, even if the monk likes it, the community doesn't want that monk there. Then I'd have to assign another monk.

In the fall, Sayādaw returned to Nampa for a grand opening ceremony and other monastery events, which some 30 or 40 members of the Burmese community attended.

The day before the grand opening ceremony, the visiting monastics consecrated a section of the property for a future ordination hall.

This involved a formal procedure of establishing clear boundaries on the land, chanting of the holy scriptures in *Pāli*, conducting a series of questions and answers outlined in the scriptures, and then setting up markers in either wood or stone at eight points to delineate the boundary.

Once complete, the area was formally established for ordination of new monks, as well as formal recitation of the holy scriptures.

Upon completion of the consecration of the ordination area, Sayādaw ordained the first two temporary monks at the new monastery.

A young lady was also ordained as a nun. The supporters who attended the event donated money, robes, shoes, and alms bowls, as well as food and juice.

In the afternoon after the November 2 grand opening ceremony, the community held a *Kaṭhina* robes offering ceremony. There were 12 monks and three nuns, as well as supporters and devotees from Idaho, Las Vegas, Arizona, Oregon, California, and even Myanmar there to celebrate the occasion.

After lunch the following day, the monks visiting from Chaiya Meditation Monastery returned to Las Vegas.

Unlike the main Chaiya Meditation Monastery campus, which is primarily supported by the Thai community, Chaiya Meditation Monastery 2 is a distinctly Burmese monastery supported by about twenty families in the Boise area.

Just a few of those twenty families—mostly Karen people—are actively engaged with the monastery. Some of the supporters are unable to speak Burmese, so communication between them and Sayādaw U Mageinda, who is Palaung but also speaks Burmese and a bit of English, can be challenging.

In mid-December 2019, Las Vegas Sayādaw recruited two monks—Ashin Dhammapala and Ashin Sundara, who were from Kya-In Seikkyi, Kayin State, but living in Mon State, Myanmar—to come to the United States to assist Sayādaw U Mageinda at the new monastery.

While Ashin Dhammapala didn't speak Karen (or much English), the 39-year-old Ashin Sundara was of Karen descent and also spoke some English. He'd also graduated in 2004 from State Pariyatti Sāsana University in Yangon.

The two monks would be useful at the Idaho monastery.

Having received their one-year R1 visas, Ashin Dhammapala and Ashin Sundara arrived in the United States in November 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. They stayed at the Las Vegas monastery for a few months before traveling to Nampa and staying awhile with Sayādaw U Mageinda.

In late winter, the trio of monks took a short trip across the United States, touring South Dakota and Niagara Falls, and spending time in Washington D.C., where they visited the White House and the Lincoln Memorial.

In spring 2021, Ashin Dhammapala and Ashin Sundara re-settled at Chaiya Meditation Monastery with the intention to stay in Las Vegas

long enough to secure their green cards. Once secured, they plan to rejoin Sayādaw U Mageinda as residents at Chaiya Meditation Monastery 2.

***

Las Vegas Sayādaw plans to have a formal ordination hall built at the new monastery once sufficient funds are raised. By early summer 2021, about $100,000 had been collected but anticipated costs for the construction of a hall are about $400,000. Without a significant local support base for the monastery, future plans are considered a day at a time.

In the meantime, Las Vegas Sayādaw retains the role of leader of the Idaho monastery, collecting donations and sending them to the new monastery as they are received.

An Impolite Question

A lay student once shared with Sayādaw that he'd asked a friend—a former monk—if he'd ever attained the various levels of *jhāna*. The student was curious whether his question to his friend had been inappropriate.

Sayādaw's reply was interesting and informative.

A group of yogis once came to Chaiya Meditation Monastery to practice meditation for a week or two. Some of them proudly told Sayādaw that they'd been able to attain *jhāna*.

But as Sayādaw spoke with the yogis, it became very clear to him that they'd *not* attained *jhāna*; rather, they'd had meditation experiences that were similar to the factors of *jhāna* and were thus led to mistakenly believe that *jhāna* had been attained.

After proclaiming their attainments, some of the students asked Sayādaw, "What do *you* think?"

He replied, "Ask yourself." He explained that one who masterfully attains *jhāna* can sustain it for hours, or even days. But if one can't do that, they haven't really attained *jhāna*. There's a difference between learning theory and experiencing something directly.

Sayādaw explained to the student that it's very difficult for a lay person to sustain *jhāna*.

As an aside, he pointed out that the famous Thai Forest Tradition meditation master Ajahn Chah didn't talk much about *jhāna*. Ajahn Chah was a disciple of the legendary master Luang Pu Mun and widely considered to be an *arahant*.

As Sayādaw brought his reply around to a direct answer to the initial question of appropriateness, he said that the question was a reasonable one to ask his former-monk friend but that the answer may not be indicative of the reality of the situation.

> Still, I wouldn't want to be asked a question like that. It's personal and impolite—a bit like asking someone how much their job pays them or how much money they have in the bank.

Chapter 10: Anumodanā

Parisā.

This is a word found in the *Pāli Canon* that refers to the fourfold assembly of Buddhists—that is, the monks, nuns, lay men, and lay women who have taken refuge in the Triple Gem.

Indeed, were it not for this fourfold assembly, the *buddhasāsana* would not have survived as it has for some 2,600 years.

While it is largely the monks and the nuns who have dedicated their lives to the study and practice of the Dhamma over these many centuries their endeavors have been (and continue to be) entirely dependent upon the support of the lay community.

It is the devoted and generous hearts of Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) lay men and women around the world that provide the meals, the clothing, the housing, and the medicine that the monks and nuns require for their survival, and for their practice.

The Buddha intentionally established this fourfold assembly because he recognized that it benefited all.

When monks and nuns practice well, they inspire lay people to be generous, to be moral, and to develop a beneficial perspective on the world and its inhabitants.

And likewise, when lay people are giving, virtuous, and wise, they offer not only the gift of requisites to monastic communities but also the gifts of harmony, peace and compassion to the rest of the world.

Over the decades since Chaiya Meditation Monastery was established in 1995, the principal financial donors have been:

1) Pratoung Nimchareon & Maneerat Anderson
2) U Sunn Tun Ni & Daw Khin May Oo
3) Nun Medhavi & Rita Chanvisanuruk
4) Arpakorn (Ping) Kumpanon
5) L.A. Food Fair Group

Each of these five donors has made total contributions to Chaiya Meditation Monastery between $100,000 and $500,000.

The first two ladies listed above have together donated $500,000 to the temple over the last 25 or so years. In one year alone, they once donated $300,000, routinely offering $1,000-2,000 each week. They made

two hundred $500 donations toward the construction of a new building on the property and also donated two hundred $500 Buddha statues to be enshrined inside the World Peace Lucky Happy Pagoda. Their donations during the annual *Kaṭhina* ceremonies have also been extremely generous.

Pratoung Nimchareon & Maneerat Anderson

The following donors have offered between $10,000 and $90,000 to Chaiya Meditation Monastery:

-Daw Yin Yin Aye
-U Aung Khin & Daw Win May Khin
-Dr. Khin Woung & Robert
-Daw Po Po Than Family
-Janifer & Daw Pu
-Surung Thongvivat
-U Tint Min Shwe & Daw San Hla
-U Chit Tun & Winston Tun
-U Htan Aung & Daw Tin Tin Hla
-U Kyaw Myint & Daw Mya Mya Myint
-Dr. Htoo Aung & Daw Wai Wai
-Thomas & Hellen & Dr. Katie, Tony Soe
-Dr. Mi Mi Kyaing
-Daw Li Li (Dolly)
-U Htun Hla & Daw Ohn Khaing
-Dr. David & Dr. Mi Mi Zin
-Dr. Nyo Zan Hla & Dr. Sandar Aung
-Kyi Aye Nyein Family
-Nyein Nyein Aung & Thomas Hpu
-U Myint Hein & Daw Sandar Hein
-Ko Myoe Aung & Thar Yar Thu Win Family
-U Khin Maung Maung & Daw Su Htar Kyi Family

-Daw Kyi Kyi Hline
-Dr. Than Naing & Dr. Wai Wai
-Kyaw Zayyar Lin & Moe Moe Lwin
-Daw Mya Thein
-Mr. Wilson & Daw Sandar Chen
-Sunil & Susana Arora
-Chewlun Family
-Carolyn Wolfson
-Aj. Chaiya
-Suda Sisook
-Darin Zimmerman
-Sirikorn Rungrattanakasin & Dr. Khis Suravallop
-Khun Arporn Ratanavicharn
-Khun Oht & Khun La Vongpanya
-Leang Mongtin
-Khun Arom & Tuenjai Noochoi
-Ampaipun Melton
-Somporn Foy
-Somprn Hassaler & Ahmad
-Puwaly Chunlamontreee
-Boukham Nun Suchitra
-Paitoon & Touy Inthavong
-Khun Samon & Nujing
-Mae Nooleang
-Khun Viboon Khunpasee
-Mae Pat Tim Chivv
-Khun Phorn Mann Family
-Khun Yong Keat & Khun Arunee Pathapong
-Dr. Witoon & Chintana Krailas
-Khun Bundith & Chitra Parnprone
-Khun Vibha Woodward
-Mae Samli Suvidalay
-Kraisri & Robert Riester
-Khun Wanphen McIntosh
-Khun Thanawat & Ratree Patannapanich
-Khun Montri & Bussaya Srichai
-Katie & Clint Jones
-Khun Manee Phakpiseth
-Dr. Todd Zang & Sujitra Yamkoksoung
-Khun Apisilp & Saisawat Chanvisanuruk
-Khun Isaree Krisanayuth
-Khun Amnuay & Laddwal Srisroi
-Khun Laddawan Ratananuparp
-Khun Wanida Keowen
-Khun Natwansa Levesque
-Khun Borwornpak Siriwej
-Khun Boulon Uttha
-Ko Than Win
-U Khan Htun & Daw Thein Kywe
-Khun Boupha & Nitaya Singsengsouvanh
-Dr. May Tynn Chow Family
-Nang Khin Win Yee
-Khun Pongsi Brown
-Khun Laksana
-Khun Saisudchai Thongsrisuk
-Khun Supatra Dibona
-Khun Sue Kamjorn
-Khun Kantamanee (Good Thai Spa)
-Hirudinee, Prabhanie Manukulasuriya Family
-Dave & Dee (Luxury Thai Spa)
-U Min Maw & Dr. Mya Win
-Meevasin Family
-Thu U Le
-Shwe Man Thu Family
-Dr. Eric Than Tun
-U Soe Paing & Dr. Mu Mu Tha
-Dr. Soe Win Myint & Susie, Su Tin Zar Myint
-David Teoh & Helen Lee Teoh
-Dr. Sajan & Dr. Tin Tin Thomas

-Khun Deng Pramong
-U Kyaw Than & Ma Khine Family
-Khun Pavinee Chen
-Khun Achara Kidson
-John Ducasse & Kate Um
-U Myo Naing & Daw Nwe Nwe Yee

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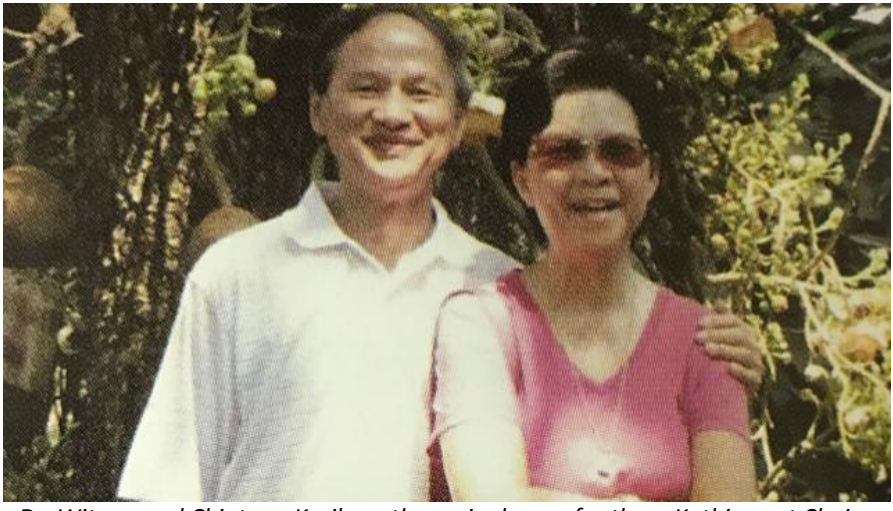
A snapshot of some of the principal *Kaṭhina* donors at Chaiya Meditation Monastery includes:

-2001 ($22,300.85) – Dr. Witoon and Chintana Krailas ($10,000)
-2004 ($16,129.00) – Khun Mae Gaew La ($3,010)
-2005 ($26,897.99) – Somporn Foy & Nalinthip Fowler ($5,518); Ampaipun Melton ($5,000)
-2006 ($28,933.98) – Somporn Foy ($5,083); Darin Zimmerman ($5,000)
-2007 ($29,796.99) – Arom & Tuenjai Noochoi ($3,000); Wanphen McIntosh ($3,000); Thanawat & Ratree ($3,000)



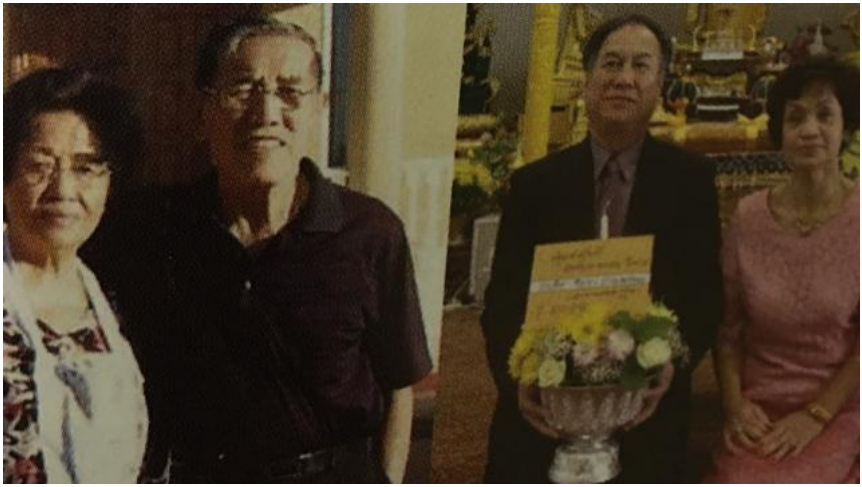
Dr. Witoon and Chintana Krailas—the main donors for three Kaṭhinas at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

-2008 ($48,145.99) – Arporn Ratanavicharn ($9,217); Rita Chanvisanuruk ($7,137)
-2009 ($38,570.99) – Somporn Hassler & Ahmad ($5,000); Jern Jern ($1,772); La & Oht Vongpanya ($5,000)
-2010 ($20,695) – Ampaipun Melton ($5,000); Rattana Nelson

-2011 ($32,263) – Ping and Maki Kumpanon ($10,000)

Arporn Ratanavicharn & Rita Chanvisanuruk—the main donors for three Kaṭhinas—at Kaṭhina in 2008, just months after the grand opening.

-2012 ($30,854.99) – Bundith & Chitra Parnprome ($12,602); Yongkeat & Arunee Pathaphong ($6,000)
-2013 ($31,424.83) – Kraisri & Robert Riester ($10,500)
-2014 ($29,145.98) – Tim Chivv & Family ($11,785)



Bundith & Chitra Parnprome and Yongkeat & Arunee Pathaphong —the main donors for three Kaṭhinas at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

-2015 ($35,467.99) – Ping, Maki, Jongkul Kumpanon ($10,000); Sumlee Sovidaray ($6,429)

-2016 ($44,371) – Wanida Keowen ($3,000), Ratree Simsookcharuen ($3,000), Natwansa Levesque ($3,000), Manoch & Suparwadee Meevasin, Raveevan, Pavinee ($2,000), Suphin Larson ($2,000), Tipawan Meevasin ($1,000)

Ping, Maki, Jongkul Kumpanon & Sumlee Sovidaray—
the main donors for three Kaṭhinas—at Kaṭhina in 2015.

There's a lot that goes on every day at Chaiya Meditation Monastery that has nothing to do with the generous writing of big checks or the kind offering of stuffed envelopes.

Donors also supply, cook, serve, and clean up breakfast and lunch every single day of the year.

The primary meal donors have been:

-Sunday (*breakfast*): Daw Eint, Daw Ohn Kyain, Dr. May Thinn, Zaw Win Aung & Ping Kumpanon

-Sunday (*lunch*): Khun Manee, Khun Montri & Bussaya Srichai, & Som, Sone, and the family of Hirudinee Manukulasuriya

-Monday (*breakfast*): Daw Khin Hnin Myint, U Soe Paing & Dr. Mu Mu Tha, Nu Nu Tha, Soe Soe Aye, and Nang Naw

-Monday (*lunch*): Moe Kyaw & Luksana, Khun Weena, Tont & Noo Khun Powt, Bungon, Wimon Ko Thant Zin & the family of Ma Naw Yin Hmway

-Tuesday (*breakfast*): Nok, Boonlert, Presert, Aew, La la, Took, Deng, Koog, Oo, Bob (L.A. Group)

-Tuesday (*lunch*): Went, Mali, Noi, Khin Mg Lwin & Urai, Rung, Ann Ork

-Wednesday (*breakfast*): Win Win & Daw Mu Mu Gale

-Wednesday (*lunch*): Somporn Foy, Kai & Aun, Lang, Supawadee, Khun Pat & Khun Ut

-Thursday (*breakfast*): the family of U Win Aung & Daw San San Myint (L.V.) and the family of Myoe Aung & Thar Yar (L.A.)

-Thursday (*lunch*): Khun Or & Noi, Deng, Jintana, Wasana

-Friday (*breakfast*): U Sann Tun Ni & Daw Khin May Oo, Ko Yan Naung & Ma Ngu Zar Ni, Ko Tun, Ko Okkar & Nwe Ni Lina

-Friday (*lunch*): Wanphen, Lek, Pate, Nitayee Phu Phu Aung, Khin Hnin Myint, Dr. Mu Mu Tha, Hia Nu Paing, Daw Myint Sein

-Saturday (*breakfast*): Ko Ye Win Tun & Saw Sanda Win

-Saturday (*lunch*): Khun La, Out, Sung, Mam

There are also many invaluable secondary meal donors who provide and offer meals to the community on an occasional basis, or on special occasions.

The meal donors have nourished the bodies of not just the monks and nuns, but also the countless thousands of lay people who have come to Chaiya Meditation Monastery over the decades to practice generosity, morality, and meditation.

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It would be impossible to recollect the name of every donor that has

played a role in the development and maintenance of this spiritual community.

The principal financial donors have been many; the consistent, week-to-week donors have been many more; and those unsung heroes who have given here and there when their time and resources allowed it have perhaps been the most.

Since 1995, countless donors have volunteered their time, whether it be to engage in development, maintenance, or creative projects around the property; have maintained the temple website; have provided rides to monks and nuns, whether to Home Depot or a doctor appointment; have decorated and setup for ceremonies and special events; have donated flowers; have written newsletters and books; and have sponsored the printing of these publications.

Donors have donated bottled water, toilet paper, batteries, soap, and countless other useful items; have sponsored a monk's education; have mentored a monk with his English; have donated medical, vision, or dental services; have sponsored a new pair of glasses; and have given white envelopes with perhaps just a few dollars in them.

People make merit in different ways.

As the saying goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." It is the collective generosity of many that has nurtured and grown this community into the healthy and vibrant space that it is today.

And it has not just benefited the monks, the nuns, and the lay people who come to Chaiya Meditation Monastery to practice meditation. Selfless giving benefits *everyone* who comes to the temple, and that includes the donors.

Sādhu! *Sādhu*! *Sādhu*!

Chapter 11: Epilogue

On June 1, 2021, Chaiya Meditation Monastery celebrated the 13th anniversary of the opening of the Virtue Court monastery complex.

In reflecting on the very cultural tradition that played a role in his *bhikkhu* ordination back in 1967, Las Vegas Sayādaw shared a few statistics with the congregation that had assembled to celebrate the occasion:

To date, Chaiya Meditation Monastery had seen the ordination of 269 temporary monks, 106 temporary novices, and 129 temporary nuns.

Group ordination of temporary monks (Chaiya Meditation Monastery, June 2019)

Indeed, even temporary ordination is a fine source of merit. The short-term monastic gains not only a spiritual education but also a glimpse into a way of life designed by the Buddha to provide the greatest possible support to one's spiritual endeavors.

The monastery's anniversary had also given Sayādaw an opportunity to reflect on the nearly thirty years he'd been an abbot. It had required incredible balance to serve his community as a counselor, role model, and tireless teacher—over the decades he's offered more than 1,500 hours of formal Dhamma talks in the Burmese, Thai and English languages—while at the same time setting aside time for his own practice and spiritual development.

Sayādaw still sometimes found himself thinking about his long-time dream of undertaking an extensive solitary retreat in the forest. It

was a dream that began in Burma, gained strength in Thailand, reached a critical point in Sri Lanka, and had as yet gone unfulfilled in America. He was now approaching 75 years of age.

The night before Chaiya Meditation Monastery's 13th anniversary celebration event, Sayādaw had a dream.

> I dreamed that I woke up and didn't want to live at the temple anymore. I wanted to move somewhere else—I wanted to renounce everything and go to the forest.
>
> So in my dream I started getting ready. I was deciding what I wanted to keep and what I wanted to put in the trash.
>
> Then in my dream I thought, "Why do I have to choose? Take your alms bowl and one set of robes, and just go. That's it. Do it for the rest of your life."

Then he woke up.

> I didn't have a chance to go to the forest.
>
> I looked at the clock. It was 1:55 am.
>
> I have to do something. I *need* to accomplish my goal.

Sayādaw was, of course, referring to the very goal of Buddhism itself—the very highest happiness possible, the cessation of suffering, *nibbāna*. It is realized upon the most profound penetration of the Four Noble Truths—that is, the truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation.

In the meantime, Sayādaw makes the best possible use of his available free time and continues to seclude himself for intensive meditation from July to October each year during the period referred to as Buddhist Lent. Buddhist Lent is a tradition going back to the time of the Buddha, during which monastics limit their travel, seek seclusion, and intensify their meditation practice.

In his absence, the six monks and one *maechee* in permanent residence at Chaiya Meditation Monastery continue to make themselves

available to provide visitor guidance and facilitate monastery programs. The monastery is open year-round for day visitors, as well as short- and long-term retreatants.

Chaiya Meditation Monastery

Who knows? Perhaps someday soon a Western man or woman will take ordination at Chaiya Meditation Monastery and decide to stay on indefinitely. In doing so, he or she would be joining the ranks of those who are fully intent on realizing the Dhamma in this very life.

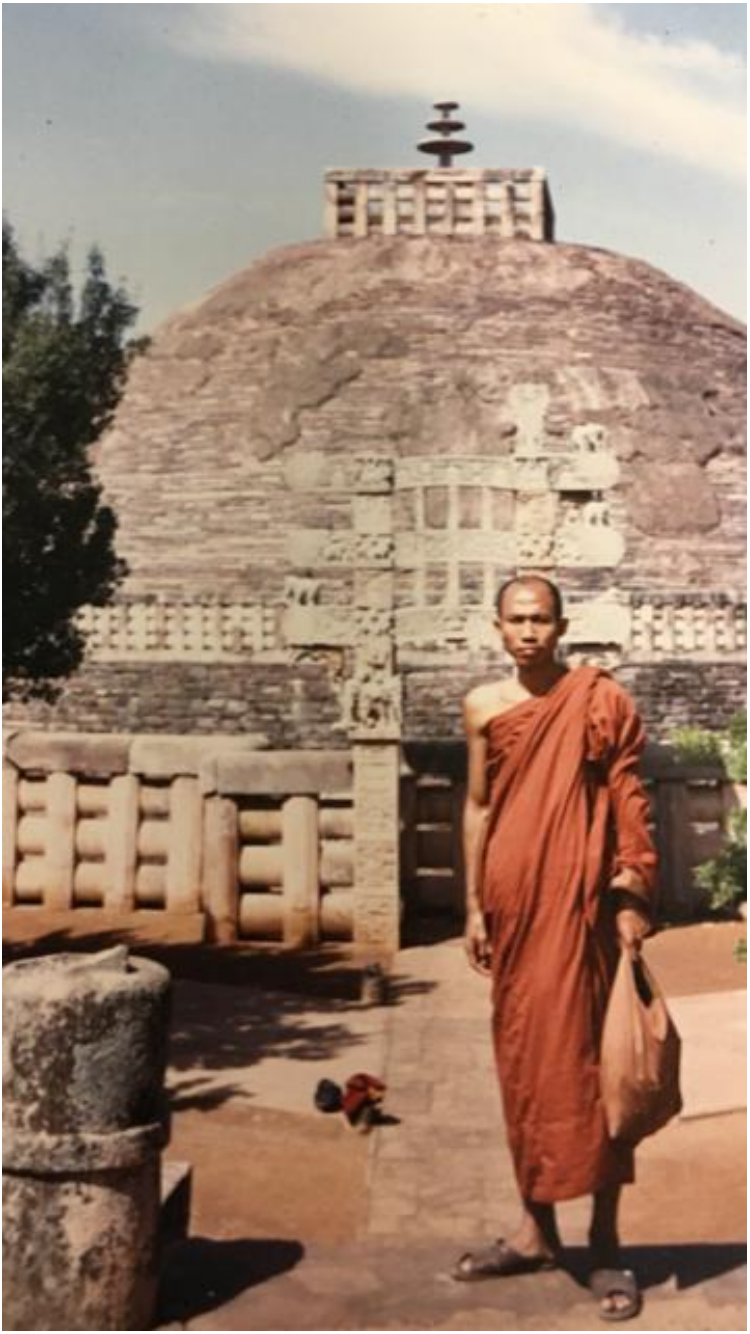
And maybe someday, too, Las Vegas Sayādaw will disappear into a forest somewhere—emerging in time as a fully enlightened one, entirely free from *dukkha*.

Photo Gallery

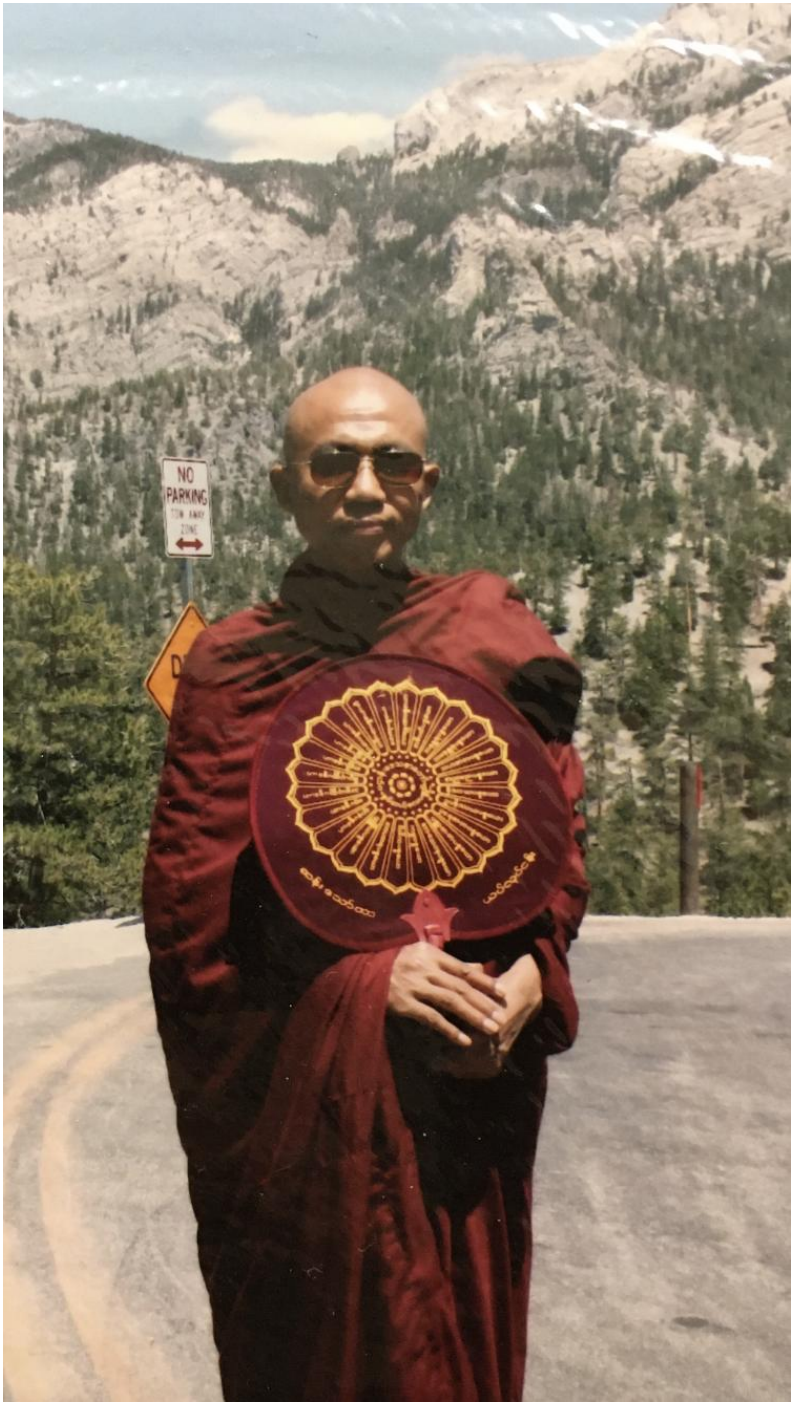
This and the following photo: Twenty-year-old Las Vegas Sayādaw and friends visiting with people from his home village. Each year in November and December, young people from Kunhawt would traditionally go on pilgrimage to Mandalay or Rangoon. (Rangoon, November or December 1967)

Las Vegas Sayādaw (circa 1972)

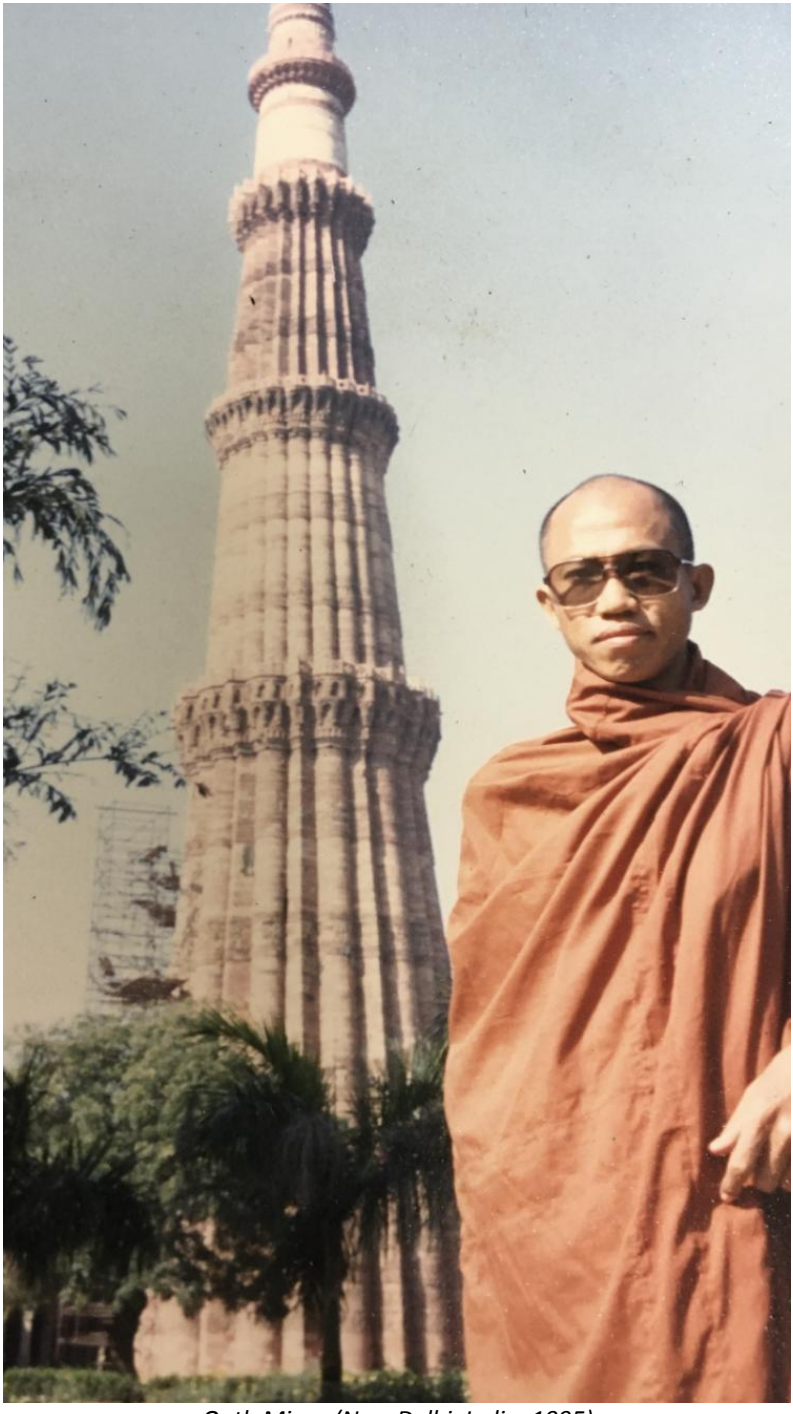
Wat Khao Takhrao, Ban Laem, Phetchaburi Province, Thailand (Circa 1988)



Sanchi Stupa—one of the oldest stone structures in India.
It was commissioned by King Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE
to contain relics of the Buddha. (Madhya Pradesh, India, 1989)

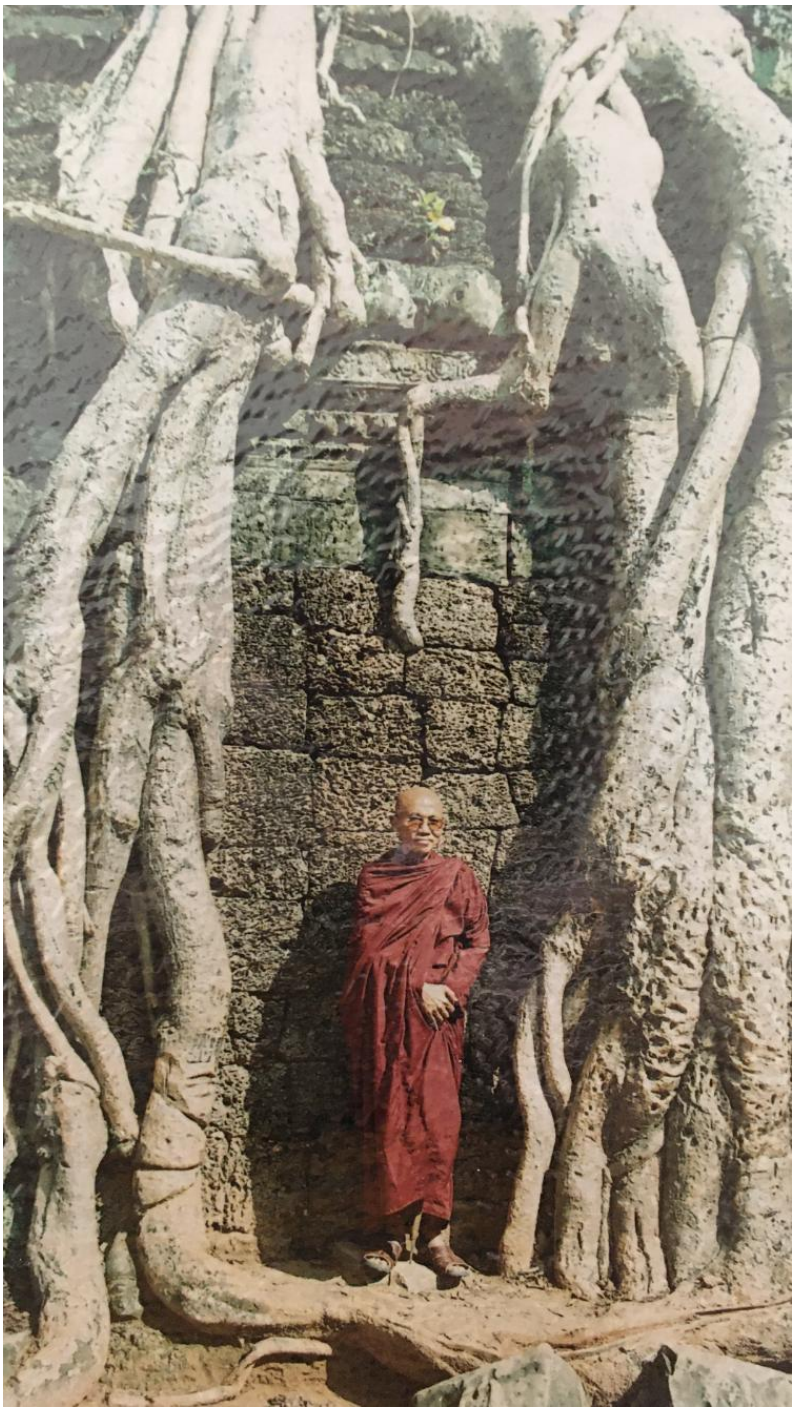


Lee Canyon, Clark County, Nevada (Circa early 1990s)

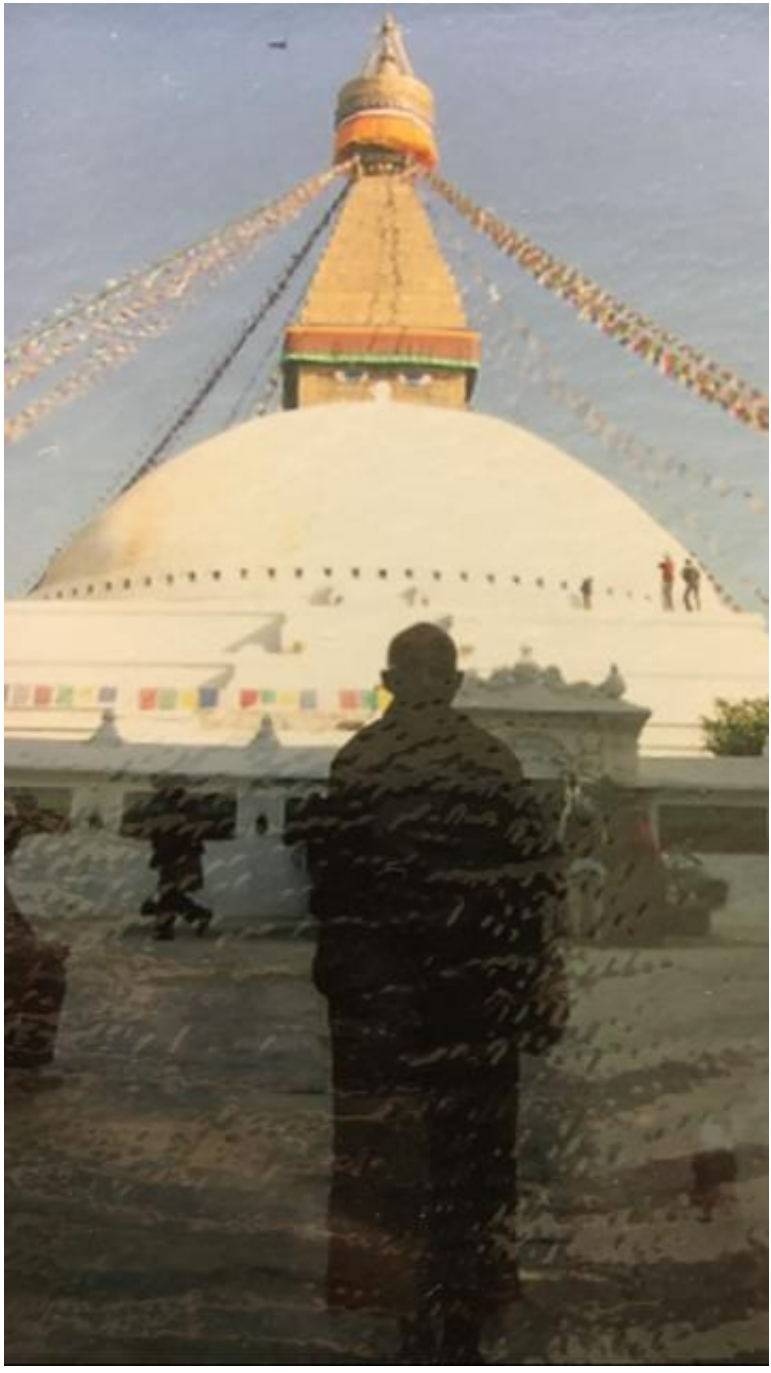


Qutb Minar (New Delhi, India, 1995)

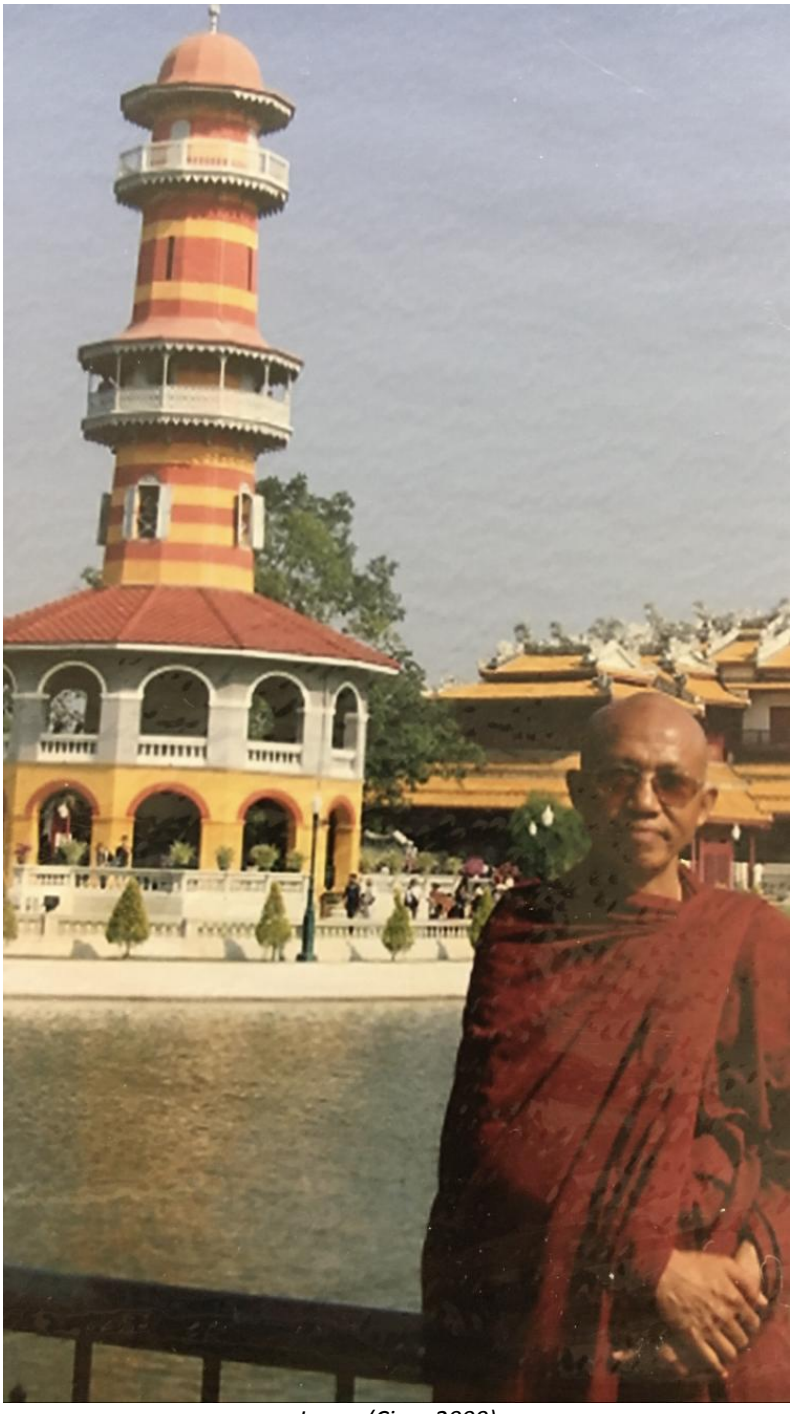
Banteay Srei, Cambodia (November 2007)



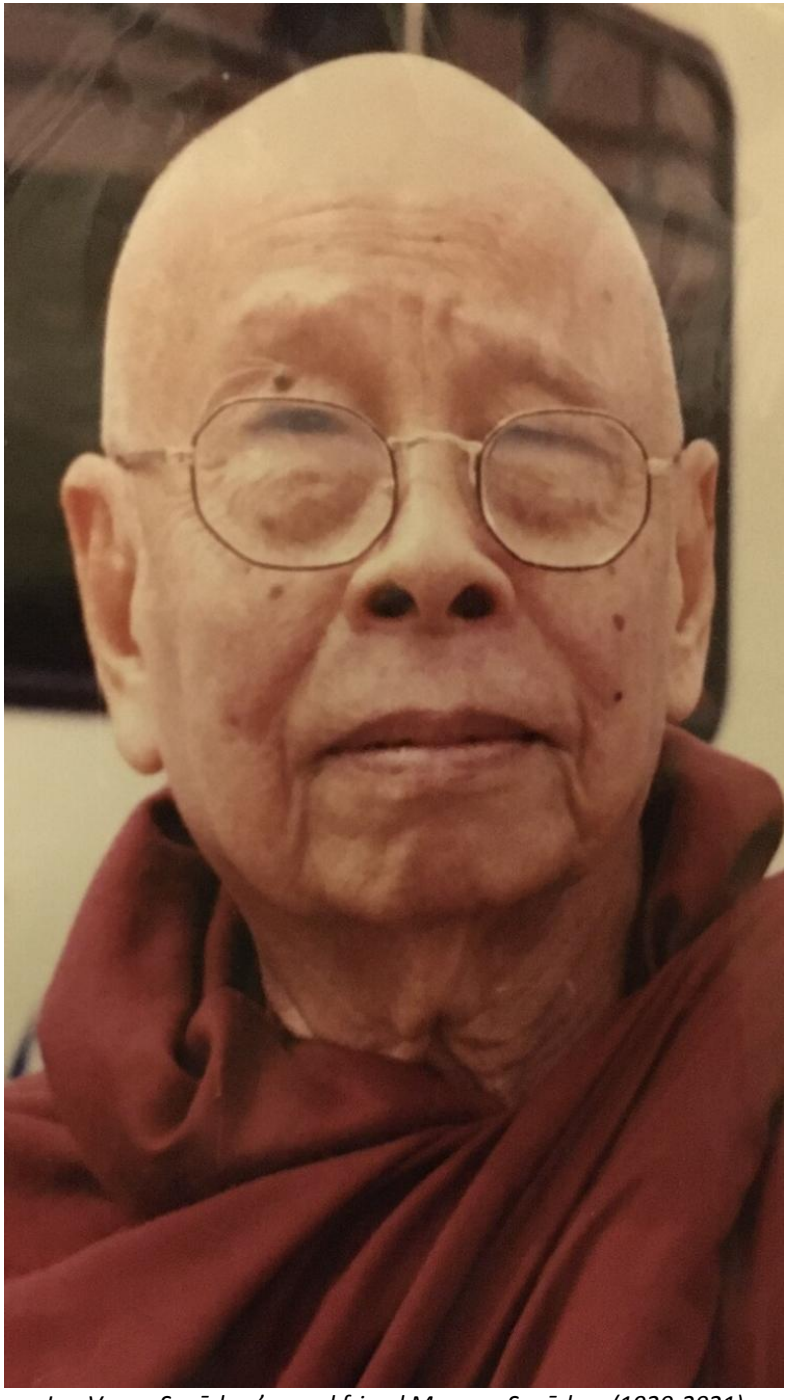
Ta Prohm, Siem Reap, Cambodia (November 2007)



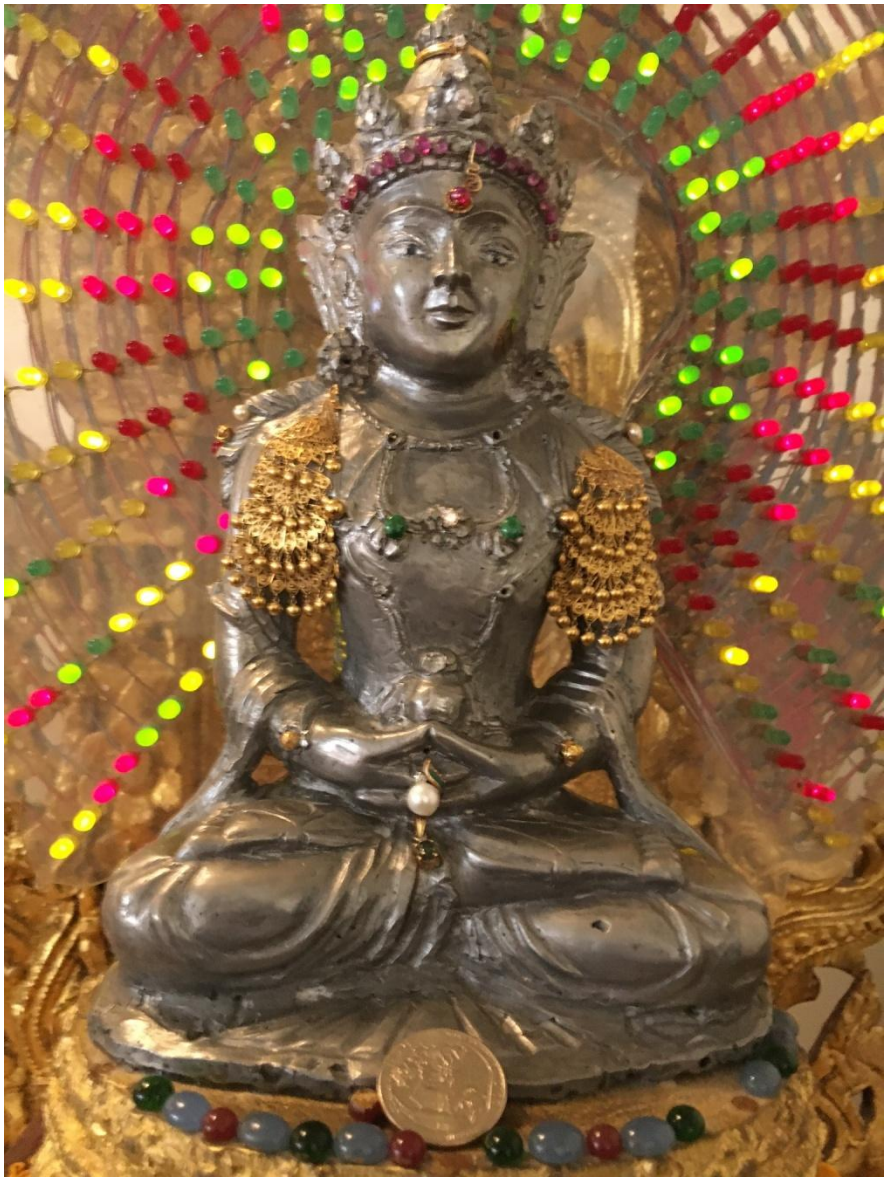
Las Vegas Sayādaw at Boudhanath Stupa
(Kathmandu, Nepal, November 2007)



Japan (Circa 2009)



Las Vegas Sayādaw's good friend Mercury Sayādaw (1920-2021)

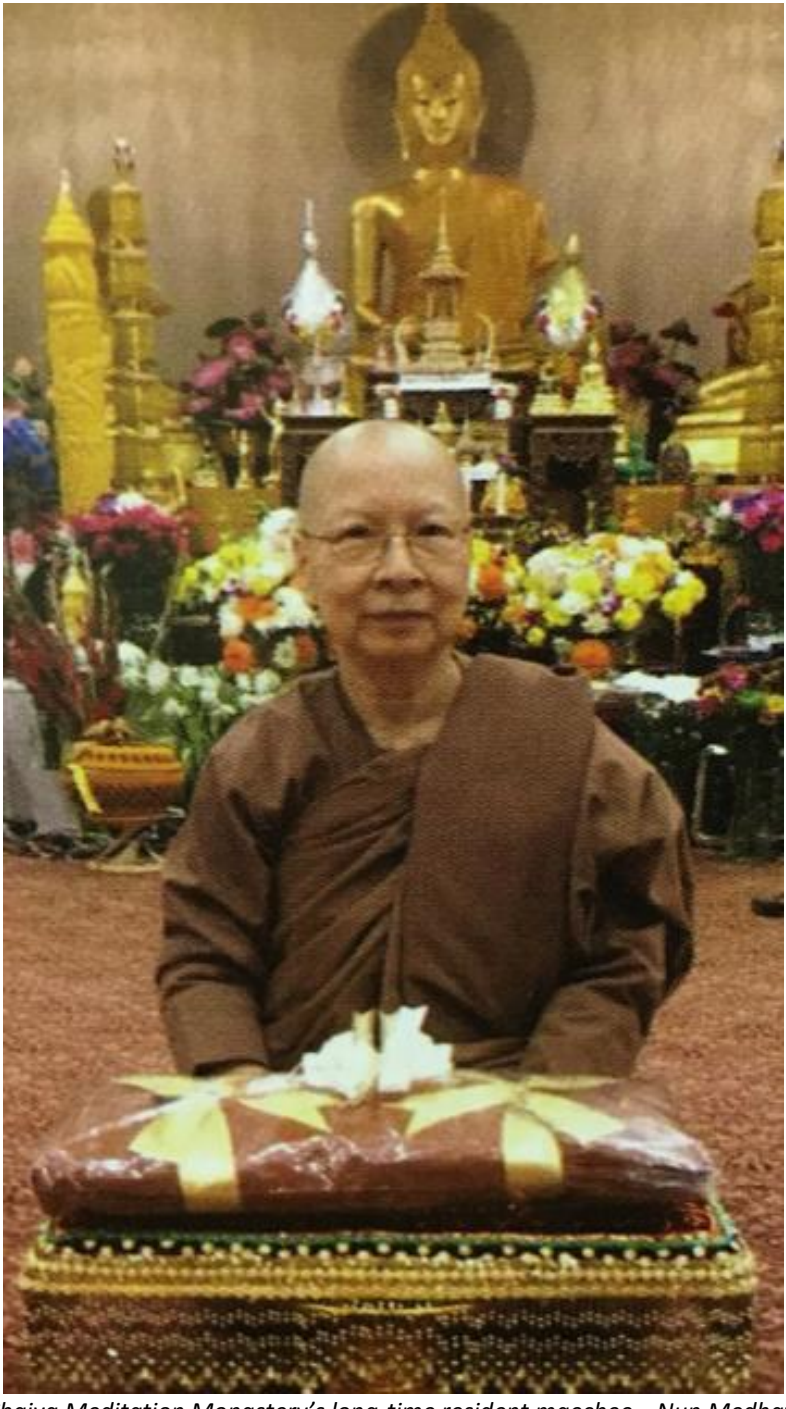


The world's first mercury Buddha statue—a gift from Mercury Sayādaw to Las Vegas Sayādaw in 1998.

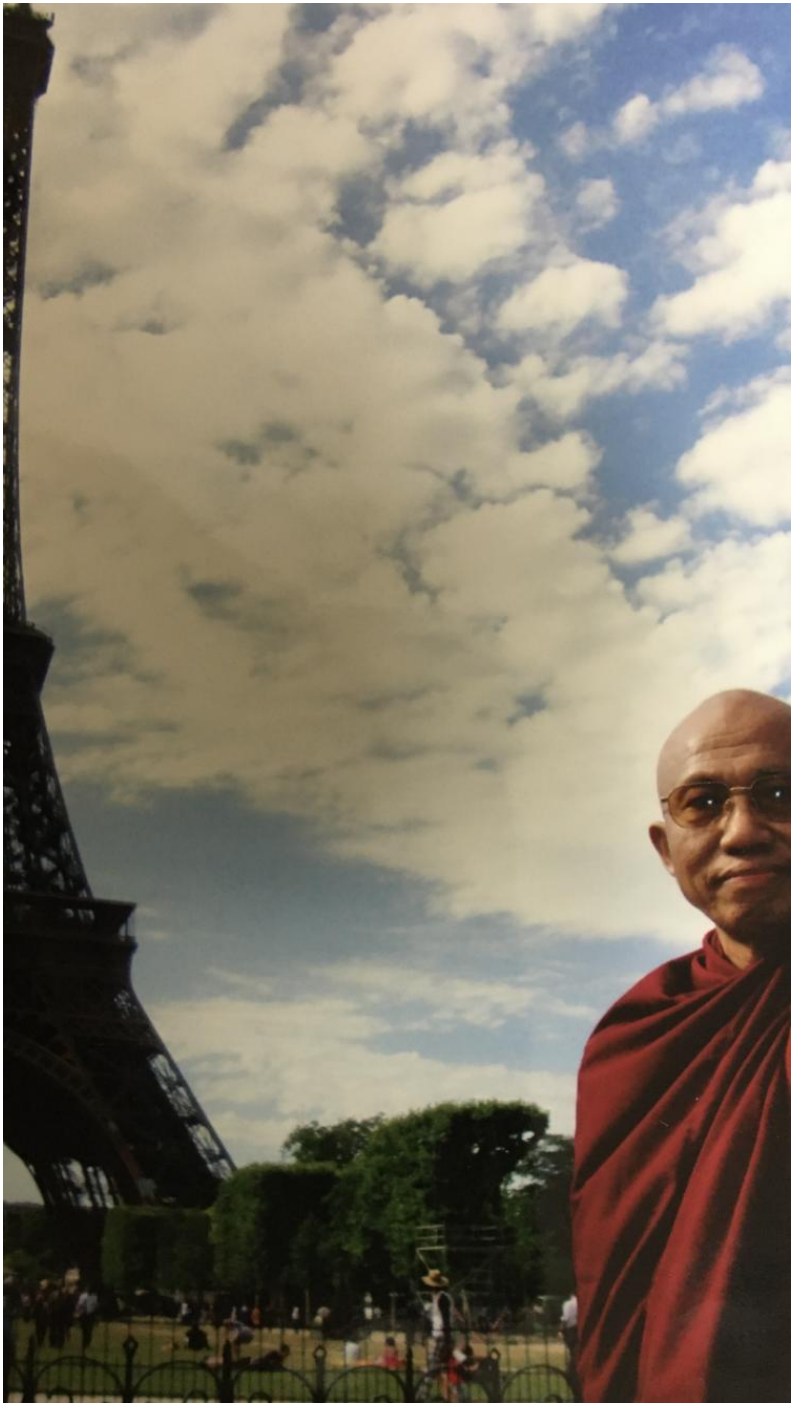
The statue—which was inspired by and also modeled after Myanmar's famous Pancalohalabhamuni Buddha statue—is on display at Chaiya Meditation Monastery.

The Buddha statue on the following page was acquired from a Yangon street market by Las Vegas Sayādaw after he noticed the remarkable similarity it had to the mercury Buddha statue.

The antique Buddha statue that Las Vegas Sayādaw acquired from a Yangon street market in 1998.



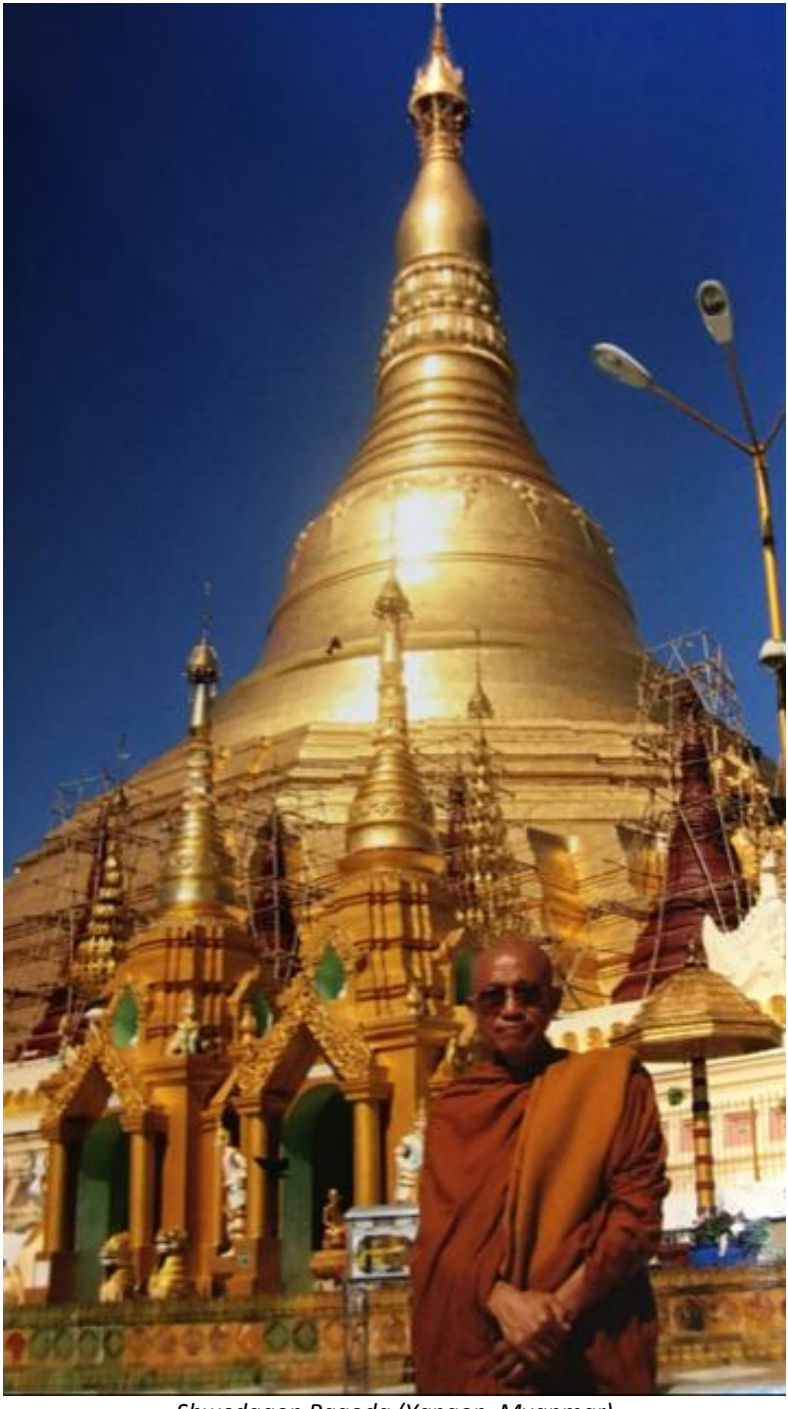
Chaiya Meditation Monastery's long-time resident maechee—Nun Medhavi



Eiffel Tower, Paris, France

Mahabodhi Temple (Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India)

Kyaiktiyo Pagoda (Mon State, Myanmar)



Shwedagon Pagoda (Yangon, Myanmar)

Glossary

Ajahn: (Pāli: *ācariya*) Thai word literally meaning 'teacher'.

Anattā: Literally: 'not-self'. The Buddha's foundational insight that there is no permanent agent or self that lies behind or within experience. *Anattā* is one of the three characteristics of existence—along with impermanence (*anicca*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*).

Anicca: Impermanence: one of the three characteristics of existence along with not-self (*anattā*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*).

Anumodanā: Appreciation; rejoicing.

Arūpa: Formless; incorporeal; non-substantial.

Arūpajhāna: The four formless (higher) *jhānas*. They include sixth *jhāna* (infinite space); seventh *jhāna* (infinite consciousness); eighth *jhāna* (infinite nothingness); and ninth *jhāna* (neither perception nor non-perception). These four levels of *jhāna* can also be characterized as the fifth through eighth (rather than the sixth through ninth) levels of *jhāna*. (See also *Rūpajhāna*.)

Arūpaloka: The formless world.

Āsāḷhā Pūjā: The commemoration of the Buddha's giving of his first discourse—*Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta*—shortly after his supreme enlightenment to the five ascetics with whom he had previously practiced meditation. While the discourse was being given, one of the five ascetics—Venerable Koṇḍañña—attained the first stage of enlightenment. As such, the day is also commemorated as the coming-together of the Triple Gem—the Buddha, his doctrine, and the order of noble ones. *Āsāḷhā Pūjā* is sometimes called *Dhamma* Day. It is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of *Āsāḷhā*, which is in June or July.

Asubha: Unpleasant; ugly.

Atta: Soul; oneself.

Baht: The currency of Thailand. Today, one *baht* is equal to approximately 0.032 U.S. dollar.

Bhante: A reverential term of address for Buddhist monks.

Bhikkhu: A fully ordained Buddhist monk; a male over the age of twenty who has taken full ordination to become a member of the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha*.

Bhikkhunī: A fully ordained Buddhist nun; a female who has taken full ordination to become a member of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*.

Bodhisatta: (Sanskrit: *bodhisattva*) A being striving for enlightenment. In the *Theravāda* tradition, this term is used almost exclusively to describe the Buddha from the moment that he made his vow to become a Buddha until his enlightenment.

Brahmavihārā: Sublime state of mind; a name collectively given to *mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*.

Buddha: Historically, this term refers to the prince Siddhattha Gotama, who lived in Nepal and Northern India about 2,600 years ago and attained enlightenment through his own striving and taught the path to others. He was not the first Buddha. A long line of Buddhas stretches back into the unimaginably distant past.

Buddha Day: See Vesak Day.

Buddhasāsana: The teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhist Lent: (Pāli: *vassa*; also called Rains Retreat) A period of monastic retreat instituted by the Buddha, in which monks must refrain from all but the most necessary journeys for the whole of the Indian monsoon season (from the full moon of July through the full moon of October).

Cetasika: See Fifty-two mental states.

Citta: The mind; heart; consciousness; state of consciousness.

Dāna: The meritorious act of giving. The Buddha said that *dāna* is the first practice to be undertaken by those who want to diminish the force of craving as part of their spiritual development.

Dependent Origination: The Buddha's analysis of conditionality,

Dependent Origination traces how ignorance leads to suffering and, in turn, how insight leads to its cessation.

Deva: Literally: 'shining one'—an inhabitant of one of the heavenly realms, sometimes translated as 'god' or 'angel'.

Dhamma: 1) The truth of the way things are, and the path leading to the realization of that truth. 2) The teachings of the Buddha based upon these natural laws and summarized in the Four Noble Truths. Alternatively, when presented in the lower case—*dhamma*—it refers to: 1) A phenomenon in and of itself. 2) A mental state.

Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta:
See *Āsāḷhā Pūjā*.

Dhammacariyā: Religious life; piety.

Dhammayut nikāya: Literally, 'the order bound with Dhamma' or 'the righteous order'. The more recent of the two major sects of the Thai monastic *Saṅgha*. The *Dhammayut Order* was established by King Mongkut in the 1830s, during his period in the monkhood prior to ascending the throne, and with the intention of being a regenerative force within the *Mahā* (*great* or *greater*) *nikāya*.

Dhutaṅga: (Thai: *tudong*) Literally, 'to wear away'. Voluntary ascetic practices, made allowable by the Buddha, that practitioners may undertake from time to time or as a long-term commitment in order to cultivate renunciation and contentment, and to stir up energy. Thirteen such practices are identified in the *Pāli Canon* Commentaries: 1) using only patched-up robes, 2) using only one set of three robes, 3) going for alms, 4) not-passing-by any donors on one's alms-round, 5) eating no more than one meal a day, 6) eating only from the alms-bowl, 7) refusing any food offered after the alms-round, 8) living in the forest, 9) living under a tree, 10) living under the open sky, 11) living in a cremation forest, 12) being content with whatever dwelling one has, and 13) not lying

down.

Dosa: Anger or aversion; the mind's shying away from an unpleasant experience. With *lobha* and *moha*, *dosa* is one of the three forces which keep the minds of beings in darkness.

Dukkha: The quality of unsatisfactoriness, suffering, inherent stress and dis-ease in all conditioned phenomena. One of the three characteristics of existence along with not-self (*anattā*) and impermanence (*anicca*).

Eight precepts: These precepts consist of refraining from: 1) killing, 2) stealing, 3) all sexual activity, 4) lying, 5) the use of intoxicants, 6) eating after midday, 7) entertainment, beautification and adornment, and 8) using a high or luxurious bed. These training rules are commonly adopted by lay Buddhists on Observance Days and are also referred to as the 'Eight *Upāsikā* (laywoman) / *Upāsaka* (layman) Precepts'.

Fifty-two mental states:

Also known as the 52 mental factors (*cetasikas*). They include: seven universal mental factors (contact, feeling, perception, volition, one-pointedness, life faculty, and attention); six occasional mental factors (application of thought, examining, decision, energy, rapture, and desire to act); fourteen unwholesome mental factors (delusion, lack of shame, disregard for consequence, restlessness, greed, wrong view, conceit, hatred, envy, miserliness, regret, sloth and torpor, and doubt); and twenty five beautiful mental factors (faith, mindfulness, shame at doing evil, regard for consequence, lack of greed, lack of hatred, neutrality of mind, tranquility of mental body, tranquility of consciousness, lightness of mental body, lightness of consciousness, softness of mental body, softness of consciousness, wieldiness of mental body, wieldiness of consciousness, proficiency of mental body, proficiency of consciousness, rectitude of

mental body, rectitude of consciousness, right speech, right action, right livelihood, compassion, sympathetic joy, and wisdom).

First Buddhist Council: A meeting of the Buddha's senior *arahant* disciples held shortly after the master's death (c. 483 BCE) for the purpose of preserving the Buddha's teachings of Dhamma and *Vinaya*.

Five Aggregates: (Pāli: *khandhapañcaka*) Literally, five 'heaps; groups'. The physical and mental components of experience, which act as the bases of attachment (*upādāna*) and thus an illusory sense of self, namely: 1) form (*rūpa*), 2) feeling (*vedanā*), 3) perception (*saññā*), 4) mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and 5) consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

Four elements: (Pāli: *mahā bhūtū*). The classes of physical phenomena; the types of sensations which can be experienced directly. They include: earth, or hardness and softness; water, or fluidity and cohesion; fire, or heat and cold; and air, or movement and such sensations as tautness, stiffness and piercing.

Four foundations of mindfulness:

(Pāli: *satipaṭṭhāna*) Four foundations for establishing mindfulness—body, feelings, mind and mind objects—viewed in and of themselves as they occur.

Four Noble Truths: The distinctive, foundational and all-encompassing teaching of the Buddha: 1) suffering (in all its physical and mental manifestations), 2) its origin (i.e. craving for sensuality, becoming, or not becoming), 3) its cessation, and 4) the path leading toward its cessation (the Noble Eightfold Path). Full comprehension of suffering, the abandonment of its cause, and the realization of its cessation through full development of the Noble Eightfold Path is equivalent to the attainment of *nibbāna*.

Guardian meditations: Loving kindness meditation; contemplation of the impurity of the body; contemplation of death; contemplation of the virtues of the Buddha.

Holy day: See Observance Day.

Hungry ghost: (Pāli: *peta*) One of a class of beings in the lower realms, sometimes capable of appearing to human beings.

Impurity of the body (meditation): (Pāli: *kāyagatā-sati-bhāvanā*) Mindfulness centered on the body; specifically, a meditation theme recommended by the Buddha for countering lust in which 32 parts of the body are investigated in terms of the *three characteristics* and their unattractive (*asubha*) nature. These parts are: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, spleen, heart, liver, membranes, kidneys, lungs, bowels, entrails, undigested food, excrement, brain, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, mucus, oil in the joints, and urine.

Insight knowledges: Truths about reality which are not accessible to ordinary consciousness. These meditative insights tend to occur in a specific order regardless of personality type or one's level of intelligence, and they deepen successively along with the concentration and purity of mind that result from proper practice of meditation. The insight knowledges include: 1) insight into mind and matter; 2) insight into cause and effect; 3) insights into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and absence of self; 4) insight into arising and passing away; 5) insight into path and not-path; 6) insight into dissolution; 7) insight into fear; 8) insight into disgust; 9) insight into the wish for liberation; 10) insight into equanimity regarding all objects; and 11) insight into *nibbāna*, the happiness of peace. The insight knowledges are sometimes characterized a bit differently: 1) knowledge of defining mind and matter; 2) knowledge of discerning causes; 3) knowledge of comprehension; 4) knowledge of rising and falling; 5) knowledge of falling only; 6) knowledge of fearfulness; 7) knowledge of faultiness; 8)

knowledge of disgust; 9) knowledge of the desire for freedom; 10) knowledge of re-comprehension; 11) knowledge of equanimity about formations; 12) knowledge of conformity; 13) knowledge of changed lineage; 14) knowledge of path; 15) knowledge of fruits; and 16) knowledge of reviewing, or knowledge of reflection.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. Eight (sometimes described as nine; see *arūpajhāna* and *rūpajhāna*) successively more refined states of strong concentration.

Kamma: Action that bears results; volitional action as expressed through body, speech, and mind; the results of action.

Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta: The Discourse on Goodwill.

Karunā: Compassion.

Kaṭhina: A ceremony, held in the fourth month of the rainy season (October, sometimes November), in which a *Saṅgha* of monks receives offerings of cloth from lay supporters, makes a robe from the cloth and offers it to one of its members considered to be a fitting recipient. In Thailand, the annual *Kaṭhina* ceremony has also become the major occasion for offering financial support to monasteries.

Khanti: Patience.

Kusala: Meritorious; virtuous; wholesome; skillful.

Kyat: The currency of Myanmar. Today, one U.S. dollar is equal to approximately 1,550 kyat.

Lobha: Greed; covetousness. The mind's grasping onto a pleasant or desirable experience. With *dosa* and *moha*, *lobha* is one of the three forces which keep the minds of beings in darkness.

Loving kindness: (Pāli: *mettā*) The wish that other beings should enjoy internal and external safety, mental and physical happiness, and ease of well-being.

Luang Por: Thai word literally meaning 'venerable father'. A term of address for senior monks that is both affectionate and respectful.

Luang Pu: Thai word literally meaning 'venerable paternal-

grandfather'. A term of address for elderly senior monks that is both affectionate and respectful.

Luang Pu Mun: (1870-1949) A member of the *Dhammayut nikāya* order of *Theravāda* Buddhism, Luang Pu Mun was the greatest Thai monk of his generation. He was the co-founder (with Luang Pu Sao) of the Thai Forest Tradition. He was well known for emphasizing strict adherence to the *Vinaya*, regular observance of the *dhutaṅgas*, and intensive meditation practice. Luang Pu Mun was widely considered to be an *arahant*.

Luang Pu Sao: (1861-1942) A Thai *Dhammayut nikāya* monk and the co-founder (with Luang Pu Mun) of the Thai Forest Tradition. He was Luang Pu Mun's teacher. He was believed to be an *arahant*.

Maechee: (Thai) A brown- or pink-robed nun (white-robed in Thai culture) who formally takes the eight precepts at her ordination. In some monasteries, *maechee* are expected to keep many of the same ascetic practices and monastic regulations as the monks, in order to maximize the supporting conditions for their practice.

Magga: A road or way; the path that leads to *nibbāna.*

Mahāyāna: Literally: 'the great vehicle'. One of the three major schools of Buddhism (the other two being *Theravāda* and *Vajrayana*). *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, which includes the traditions of Zen, Pure Land and Nichiren, emphasizes practicing the path of the *bodhisattva* which seeks the attainment of full Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is prevalent in many countries in Northern Asia, such as China, Japan and Korea.

Mahā nikāya: Literally, 'the greater order'. The older and larger of the two major orders of the Thai monastic *Saṅgha*.

Maṅgala Sutta: The Discourse on Blessings.

Mettā: Friendliness; good will; benevolence.

Middle Way, The: See Noble Eightfold Path.

Mindfulness: See *Sati*.

Moha:	Delusion. The inability of the mind to recognize an experience. This is especially seen when the experience is a neutral one. With *lobha* and *dosa*, *moha* is one of the three forces which keep the minds of beings in darkness.
Muditā:	Sympathy for other's welfare.
Nibbāna:	Enlightenment—the goal of Buddhist practice. The final liberation of the mind from all suffering; the elimination of all mental taints and defilements; escape from the round of rebirth.
Noble Eightfold Path:	The fourth of the Four Noble Truths, also known as the Eightfold Path, is the way of practice described by the Buddha leading to the cessation of suffering. It consists of: 1) Right View, 2) Right Intention, or Right Thinking; 3) Right Speech; 4) Right Action; 5) Right Livelihood; 6) Right Effort, 7) Right Mindfulness; and 8) Right Concentration.
Novice:	(Pāli: *sāmanera*) One who has formally undergone the Going Forth ceremony and thus avowed to live by the ten precepts. As full monks' ordination requires the candidate to be at least twenty years old, novice ordination has traditionally been the province of boys (at least 'old enough to scare crows') and teenagers. In some traditions, however, novice ordination is used as a probationary period before full ordination, irrespective of the age of the postulant.
Observance Day:	The half moon, full moon and dark moon days of the lunar calendar. Since the time of the Buddha, it has been customary for lay people to gather together at the local monastery on these days to chant, observe the eight precepts, and listen to the Dhamma.
Ordination:	The ceremony of acceptance or initiation into the *Saṅgha*.
Pagoda:	See *Stupa*.
Pāli:	The language in which the *Therāvada* Buddhist canon (*Tipiṭaka*) is preserved. As *Pāli* had no written script, '*Pāli*' texts preserved throughout the *Therāvada* world are generally written in the

native script of each country (e.g. in Sri Lanka, the '*Pāli*' texts are preserved in Sinhala script; in Thailand, they are in Thai script; in European countries, they are in Roman script; etc.). Most of the words in this glossary are of the *Pāli* language.

Paññā: Wisdom; discernment; insight. The third aspect of the Threefold Training, *paññā* consists in 'seeing things as they are', that is, observing the impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self nature of all conditioned phenomena. *Paññā* can also be described as insight into the Four Noble Truths or into Dependent Origination. Of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right View and Right Intention are aspects of *paññā*.

Pāramī: Perfections of character. A list of ten qualities believed to have been developed over many lifetimes by the *bodhisatta*. More broadly speaking, these are essential virtues for all spiritual practitioners to develop. They are listed in the Commentarial texts as: 1) generosity (*dāna*), 2) virtue (*sīla*), 3) renunciation (*nekkhamma*), 4) wisdom (*paññā*), 5) effort (*viriya*), 6) patience (*khanti*), 7) truthfulness (*sacca*), 8) determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), 9) loving kindness (*mettā*), and 10) equanimity (*upekkhā*).

Parinibbāna: The passing out of conditioned existence by a fully enlightened being at the time of physical death.

Pariyatti: The theoretical understanding of Dhamma obtained through listening, reading and studying. Ideally, it provides the foundation for putting the teachings into practice (*paṭipatti*), and penetrating their profound truth (*paṭivedha*).

Pāṭimokkha: The basic code of monastic discipline recited fortnightly in the *Pāli* original in monasteries with a quorum of four monks. The *Pāṭimokkha* consists of 227 training rules.

Paṭipatti: Putting the teachings of the Buddha into practice.

Pa-Auk Forest Monastery:
A meditation monastery founded in 1926 and

established in Mon State, Myanmar.

Peta: See Hungry Ghost.

Phala: A result or consequence; the moment of consciousness just after *magga*, which continues to perceive *nibbāna*, and during which the defilements are cooled.

Phra: Thai word meaning monk.

Pure Land Buddhism: A branch of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism widely practiced in East Asia. (See also *Mahāyāna*.)

Rāga: Lust; attachment.

Ratana Sutta: The Discourse on the Three Superb Jewels and Their Intrinsic Power.

Rūpa: Form; figure; image; a material composition.

Rūpajhāna: The form (lower) *jhānas*. These can be characterized as either a fourfold system or a fivefold system, depending on the way an individual abandons certain mental factors as they develop the levels of *jhāna*.

Rūpaloka: The world of form (fine-material world).

Rupee: The currency of India. Today, one *rupee* is equal to approximately 0.014 U.S. dollar.

Sabbe: All; every; entire.

Saddhā: Trust, confidence, faith.

Sādhu: Good; excellent; respectable.

Samādhi: One-pointedness of mind; concentration; mental stability. As the title of the second training of the Threefold Training, *samādhi* is an umbrella term covering the whole realm of effort for the purpose of abandoning the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome. Of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration are aspects of *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is the sixth factor of enlightenment.

Samatha: Tranquility, the state of lucid calm. '*Samatha* meditation' refers to those meditation techniques which focus on stilling and pacifying the mind rather than reflecting on and investigating phenomena (i.e. insight meditation, or *vipassanā*).

Saṅgha: The community of Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) and

nuns (*bhikkhunī*s). *Saṅgha* can refer either to the global institution of Buddhist monasticism or to individual monastic communities. In a higher sense, *Saṅgha* refers to the 'community' of enlightened disciples of the Buddha—lay and ordained—who have attained at least stream-entry (*sotāpanna*), the first of the transcendent paths culminating in *nibbāna*.

Saṅgharāja: A title given in many *Theravāda* Buddhist countries to a senior monk who has been appointed leader of the greater monastic community. In Thailand, this position—also called the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand—is generally appointed by the king. The institution of the *saṅgharāja* is no longer recognized in Myanmar.

Saṅkhāra: A conditioned thing.

Saññā: Perception; recognition.

Sāsana: Teaching; doctrine.

Sati: Mindfulness; recollection; bearing in mind. A mental factor inseparably associated with all *kammically* wholesome (*kusala*) states of consciousness. In its most developed form, Right Mindfulness is the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path and thus a requisite for the attainment of enlightenment.

Satipaṭṭhāna: See Four foundations of mindfulness.

Sayādaw: Burmese word meaning great teacher; a monk who teaches meditation, or an abbot of a monastery.

Seven Factors of Enlightenment:

Seven wholesome mental states listed as antidotes to the five hindrances and qualities to be developed in order to give rise to knowledge and liberation: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture or joy, tranquility, concentration, equanimity.

Seven Stages of Purification:

1) Purification of Virtue; 2) Purification of Mind; 3) Purification of View; 4) Purification of Overcoming Doubt; 5) Purification of Knowledge

and Vision of What is Path and Not-Path; 6) Purification of Knowledge and Vision of the Way; and 7) Purification of Knowledge and Vision. Each purity is needed to attain the next.

Sīla: Virtue, morality. The first aspect of the Threefold Training, *sīla* is the quality of ethical and moral purity that prevents unskillful actions. The term also includes the training precepts, recollection of which restrains performance of such unskillful actions. Of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood are aspects of *sīla*.

Stupa: A mound-like or hemispherical structure traditionally used to enshrine relics of the Buddha or those of his enlightened disciples. Also called a *chedi* (Thai) or pagoda.

Supernormal knowledge:

Six types of higher knowledge. The first five may be attained after mastery of at least the four *jhānas*. The sixth knowledge is supramundane and attainable only through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation. Although indicative of spiritual progress, the Buddha discouraged indulgence in the first five knowledges, as they could distract one from the higher goal of enlightenment. The six knowledges include: 1) 'higher powers' (such as walking on water or through walls, flying through the air, touching the sun or moon, creating mind-made bodies, projecting replicas of oneself, becoming invisible, and ascending to the highest level of heaven); 2) 'divine ear' (the ability to hear earthly and heavenly sounds near and far); 3) 'mind-penetrating knowledge' (the ability to know the thoughts and mental states of others); 4) 'remembering one's former abodes' (recalling one's past lives); 5) 'divine eye' (knowing others' *kammic* destinations); and 6) 'extinction of mental intoxicants' (the attainment of *arahantship*). These six knowledges can be

viewed as an elaboration of the three knowledges attained by the Buddha on the night of his awakening: 1) recollection of past lives, 2) divine eye, and 3) the attainment of enlightenment upon complete comprehension of the Four Noble Truths.

Supramundane knowledge: Knowledge of that which transcends the world; that is, the nine supramundane states: *nibbāna*, the four noble paths (*magga*) leading to *nibbāna*, and their corresponding fruits (*phala*) which experience the bliss of *nibbāna*.

Sutta: Literally: 'a thread'. A discourse or sermon attributed to the Buddha or one of his contemporary disciples. After the Buddha's death, the *suttas* were passed down in the *Pāli* language by means of oral tradition, and were eventually committed to the written form in Sri Lanka sometime before the Common Era. More than 10,000 *suttas* are collected in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, the main repository for such texts in the *Pāli Canon*. These discourses are widely regarded as the earliest record of the Buddha's teachings.

Thai Forest Tradition: The teachers and forest monasteries, primarily situated in Northeast Thailand, that trace their lineage to Luang Pu Mun and Luang Pu Sao. The tradition is characterized by a devotion to traditional meditation practices accompanied by a strict adherence to the *Vinaya* and the adoption of various *dhutaṅga* practices.

Than: A Thai word for "you" used to address someone, such as a monk, with respect.

Theravāda: Literally, 'the speech of the elders'. The dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos), *Theravāda* takes the *Pāli Canon* (*Tipiṭaka*) as its primary text and the *arahant* as its ideal and working goal of practice.

Threefold training: The cultivation of 1) morality (*sīla*), 2) concentration (*samādhi*), and 3) wisdom

(*paññā*). An abbreviated form of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Three characteristics (of existence): A foundational teaching of the Buddha; the insight that all conditioned phenomena are: 1) impermanent (*anicca*), 2) unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and 3) empty of self (*anattā*). Deep meditative contemplation of these characteristics can lead to *nibbāna*.

Three refuges: 1) The Buddha, 2) the Dhamma, and 3) the *Saṅgha*. Formal commitment to these refuges, or places of safety, is commonly expressed outwardly in the formula, 'I go for refuge to the Buddha … the Dhamma … the *Saṅgha*'. On an inner level, these refuges can be understood as follows: the Buddha refers to inner awakening, the Dhamma to the 'way things are', and the *Saṅgha* to the right practice leading to awakening.

Triple Gem: (Pāli: *tiratana*) An abbreviated, poetic designation for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the *Saṅgha* in their aspect of being jewel-like in extreme preciousness, value and beauty. (See also Three Refuges.)

Upādāna: Clinging. The grasping of the mind onto an object and refusing to let it go.

Upāsaka: A male lay-follower of the Buddha.

Upekkhā: Equanimity.

Vajrayana: Sanskrit word literally meaning: 'the diamond vehicle'. One of the three major schools of Buddhism (the other two being *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna*). The form of Buddhism primarily found in Bhutan, Tibet, and Mongolia.

Vassa: See Buddhist Lent.

Vedanā: A feeling or sensation.

Venerable Ānanda: The Buddha's personal attendant. He was renowned for his exceptional memory. The vast majority of the Buddha's discourses preserved today exist because of Venerable Ānanda's recollection of the master's words, which he

	shared at the First Buddhist Council three months after the Buddha's death.
Venerable Koṇḍañña:	See *Āsāḷhā Pūjā*.
Venerable Moggallāna:	One of the Buddha's two chief disciples. The other chief disciple was Venerable Sāriputta. Venerable Moggallāna was considered to be foremost in psychic powers among all the Buddha's disciples.
Venerable Sīvali:	One of the Buddha's *arahant* disciples, he is particularly venerated by the people of Myanmar. Venerable Sīvali was ordained by Venerable Sāriputta.
Vesak Day:	(Pāli: *Vesākha Pūjā*) The memorial of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away, celebrated on the full moon day of the fifth lunar month, *Vesākha*. Vesak Day is sometimes called Buddha Day.
Vihāra:	Literally: 'abode'. A dwelling place, particularly a monastic residence, i.e., a monastery.
Vinaya:	Literally, that which 'leads out' of suffering. Broadly, *Vinaya* refers to all the rules, regulations, observances and traditions designed to facilitate the practice of *Dhamma*. *Vinaya* finds its apotheosis in the monastic discipline and is most commonly used as a synonym for it.
Viññāṇa:	Consciousness.
Vipassanā:	Literally: 'clear seeing'. Insight into physical and mental phenomena as they arise and disappear, seeing them for what they actually are—in and of themselves—in terms of the three characteristics and in terms of suffering (*dukkha*), its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation.
Viriya:	The energy or effort expended in order to direct the mind continuously toward an object. *Viriya* is the third factor of enlightenment.
Yogi:	A person who practices meditation.

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