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**The Sound of the Breath:
Sunlun and Theinngu Meditation Traditions of Myanmar**

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Abstract

This article explores the popular Sunlun and Theinngu meditation traditions in Myanmar. The founders, Sunlun Sayadaw Ven. U Kavi (1878-1952) and Theinngu Sayadaw Ven. U Ukkaṭṭha (1913-1973), both led a lay life until in their mid-40s and only then took up meditation, going on to become highly respected meditation teachers. Their meditation techniques are similarly distinctive in employing rapid, strong and rhythmic breathing. They combined this with the contemplation of the intense, usually unpleasant, bodily sensations that are thus induced. I document their techniques and application in detail, highlighting their complexity and diversity. I draw contrasts between the use of *sati*, mindfulness, in their methods and the way it is used in the modern Mindfulness movement. Finally, I discuss the ways in which the practices and experiences of both masters had to be authorised to survive where other meditation traditions have been outlawed. Senior members of the Burmese Sangha catechised both masters separately, using Pāli canonical and post-canonical texts as a benchmark to verify the popular belief amongst Burmese people that they were *arahants*. I locate this testing within the context of the concerns, sense of duty and status experienced by Burmese lay people in relation to defending Buddhism from decline.

Key words:

Buddhist meditation; Sunlun; Theinngu; Burmese Vipassanā; Mindfulness of Breathing; *Asubha*; *vinicchaya*, *arahant*.

Introduction

Burmese meditation practices exist along a spectrum from those that are heavily theory-based and informed by Abhidhamma analysis of a Buddhist teacher, at one end, to those that prioritise experience over theory. The internationally famous Mogok meditation tradition, founded by Mogok Sayadaw Ven. U Vimala (1899-1962), is an example of the former, having some form of doctrine or understanding of causality as their starting point. Meditation practitioners within the Mogok tradition begin with the study of the law of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppada*) by listening to dhamma-talks given by Mogok meditation teachers. Here, I want to look at two meditation traditions dating from the mid-20th century that have received scant scholarly attention, both of which have practical approaches as their starting point, in that neither practitioner had doctrinal training before commencing their practice, but rather experimented with the effects of experience. These are the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, founded by Sunlun Sayadaw Ven. U Kavi (1878-1952) and Theinngu Sayadaw Ven. U Ukkaṭṭha (1913-1973) respectively. Both employed rapid, strong and rhythmic breathing as a meditation technique, focusing on intense, usually unpleasant, bodily sensations (*vedanā*)¹ that are induced by and accompanied with the rapid, strong breathing. For them, having theoretical knowledge of Buddhist doctrines was not necessary for practice and progress along the Buddhist path. Yet their hagiographies as well as their own accounts report that the direct knowledge of the Dhamma they gained through practice without prior study was then verified by representatives of highest levels of scriptural learning within the Burmese Sangha. It will be observed below that, despite their practical approach to meditation, reflecting their barely literate origins, the way that their life-stories and teachings are expressed is also redolent with the Abhidhamma terminology that in Theravada explains the workings of the body and mind, cosmology and the spiritual path, a point to which I shall return towards the end of this article.

Despite their modest backgrounds, both Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw went on to become monks widely regarded as enlightened and with a substantial following. Even back in 1976, Gustaaf Houtman recorded the presence of 143 meditation centres in the Sunlun tradition throughout Myanmar (Houtman

¹ For exploration of different aspects of *vedanā* in meditation practice and psychology, see the special issue of *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, volume 19, issue 1, which is called “‘Knowing how it feels’: The Definition, Practice and Psychology”.

1990, 292). The official number of Theinngu meditation centres to date is 32, the thirty second centre being founded in Aunglan by Aunglan Sayadaw Ven. Candimā (1952-). However, both figures underestimate the number of centres representing the Sunlun and Theinngu lineages, given that branches may develop from a given centre, as is the case with the Aunglan centre. For Ven. Candimā not only established the Aunglan centre, but also branch centres in Pyay and Yangon. Moreover, both the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions have decentralised organisational and management structures, allowing each satellite centre to operate independently. For instance, the Theinngu tradition has its headquarters in the founder's native village of Theinngu near Hmawbi, but these headquarters do not operate a centralised management to organise co-operation within the other centres that have sprung up within the tradition. This means some meditation centres in the Theinngu tradition such as the Vijjodaya Theinn² Meditation Centre in Pyay are not officially registered with the headquarters. This contrasts with the level of organisation found in other meditation traditions such as internationally renowned Mahasi and Mogok traditions, the headquarters of which play a crucial role in their ongoing growth, with 564 Mahasi meditation centres registered by 2011 and 663 Mogok meditation centres by 2012 in Myanmar alone (Nimala 2015, 149 and 234). Bearing in mind the lack of active organization of expansion in the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, the relatively high numbers of officially registered centres gives some indication of how important these two traditions are.

This article explores the life-stories and meditation of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw. It examines how both meditation masters are believed to have transformed their lives through their practice with little help from others. I am looking at both meditation masters together because their practices share a distinctive feature: the use of rapid, strong breathing to enhance core meditative qualities such as concentration (*samādhi*) and mindfulness (*sati*) to deal with and harness intense, usually unpleasant, bodily sensations and mental feelings (*vedanā*) as a way of developing spiritual insight.³ That both of them share this approach may

² Sometimes the word *Theinn* is used, rather than *Theinngu*, within the Theinngu meditation tradition.

³ Here, I use the expressions 'bodily sensations' and 'mental feelings' to refer to the Pāli word *vedanā*, usually translated as 'feeling' or 'sensation', because the meditation techniques and processes in the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions deal with both bodily sensations such as pain, aches, etc. and mental feelings such as anger, joy, etc. The *Visuddhimagga* (XIV 127-128) classifies five types of *vedanā* in

in origin reflect Theinngu Sayadaw's early contact with Sunlun practice through his wife. However, the two masters extend and apply this feature in different ways. I shall pay particular attention to the ways in which Theinngu Sayadaw engaged with a range of meditation subjects, such as the breath, bodily sensations and mental feelings, the impure aspects of the decomposing body (*asubha*) and the elementary constituents of the experienced world (*dhammas*), to highlight the complex processes and mechanisms involved in his practice. In the case of Theinngu Sayadaw, we can also see how closely his progress through his development of this practice correlates with his progression through the four stages of the path to enlightenment, namely stream-entrant (*sotāpanna*), once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*), non-returner (*anāgāmi*) and arhat (*arahant*).

Sources on Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw

To examine the life-stories and practices of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw, I consulted traditional biographical materials produced by disciples within the Sunlun and Theinngu lineages. The Burmese term for such biographies is *htei-rok-pat-tí*, which means 'biography of an elder (*thera*)' or simply "monk biography" (Houtman 1990, 334). As Houtman observes, *htei-rok-pat-tí* is used to convey that the biographical subject of the text is more sacred than subjects whose biographies are merely 'biography' (*at-htok-pat-ti*), i.e. the biography of a lay person. Such monk biographies focus on the quality of the biographical subject's sacredness and their place in cosmology (Houtman 1990, 333-4). Falling into the category of monk biography, the accounts of the lives of Sunlun Sayadaw and of Theinngu Sayadaw, while following the historical evidence for their lives fairly strictly, include traditional hagiographical elements such as how these two meditation masters were said to have reflected on their meditation achievements in relation to the Buddhist cosmos and how the gods (*deva*) provided their support to them. Such elements are important in revealing how these practices are understood within a Buddhist

terms of its nature—bodily pleasant sensation, bodily unpleasant sensation, mentally pleasant feeling, mentally unpleasant feeling and mentally neutral feeling. The first two can be experienced "as direct responses to physical contact", while the remaining three "can be in response to physical contact, but also to all our experiences in the world" (Samatha Trust 1996, 12).

cosmological framework and how they were authorised internally by the masters themselves and for their followers.

Another source I have been able to draw on is the preaching, or dhamma-talks, given by Theinngu Sayadaw himself between the early 1960s and the early 1970s. As far as I am aware, there is an audio recording of a dhamma-talk given by Sunlun Sayadaw, while there are at least ninety-six dhamma-talks by Theinngu Sayadaw, which were recorded and are now available online. These talks are a rich resource and it is these that have allowed me to give far more detail about how Theinngu Sayadaw processed his meditation experience in ways that allowed him to refine it as he progressed through various realisations, realisations that he correlated with different stages of spiritual attainment.

A third source I have drawn on is the works written by practitioners within the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, who were either direct disciples or follow the techniques they initiated. In addition to these sources, I draw on conversations and observations made in Myanmar over the past decade. Since April 2007, I have been practising meditation under the supervision of meditation teachers in the Theinngu tradition. I also gained some, though less extensive, experience in the Sunlun tradition, by joining several meditation sessions at a Sunlun Meditation Centre in Yangon in September 2011.

To contextualise the ways in which the teachings of both masters were catechised,⁴ we can draw on three types of sources. They are: (1) the works written by practitioners which sometimes include transcription of the catechisms that took place—e.g. Paññājota (2003, 149-164) includes the transcriptions of the dialogue between Theinngu Sayadaw and Ven. Osadha of Pakhàn Monastery in Hìnthadá; (2) the audio recordings of the catechisms such as those between Theinngu Sayadaw and members of the Sangha from Kyauk-thìn-bàw meditation tradition; and (3) the records of a monastic trial (*vinicchaya*) case that involved Theinngu Sayadaw and his teachings in the 1960s (see below).

Transformation: from uneducated householders to enlightened monks

⁴ Although ‘catechise’ and ‘catechism’ have a more technical meaning in learning Christian church doctrine, I use these terms in this article, rather than using the term ‘interview’. This is because I suspect there is an element of ‘catechism’ in the interactions between the learned monks and Theinngu Sayadaw to the extent that Theinngu Sayadaw learned Theravada technical terms through such interactions.

Before turning to the meditation practices of Sunlun and Theinngu Sayadaw's, I shall summarise the biographies, primarily as they have been recorded within their own teaching lineages. These sources tend to combine their life-stories, practice and teachings into a single narrative. For the sake of clarity I have extracted the details of practice to present later, yet their life-stories contribute to our understanding both of their distinctive teachings and of the ways in which those teachings needed to be verified for wider acceptance in Myanmar's culture of highly scholastic, scriptural authority, even though these two practitioners stemmed from relatively humble, quasi-illiterate backgrounds.

The Life of Sunlun Sayadaw

I shall draw on the following sources for my summary of Sunlun Sayadaw's life: Kornfield (2007), Sobhana (1995) and Vara (2010). These three sources are written from different perspectives: Kornfield (2007), originally published in 1977, explores Sunlun Sayadaw's life and teachings within the context of modern meditation teachers in South East Asia for western practitioners (see also under Sunlun technique below). The latter two present Sunlun Sayadaw's life and teachings from the perspective of the Sunlun meditation tradition. Sobhana was the disciple of Sunlun Sayadaw, who succeeded Sunlun Sayadaw as the abbot of Sunlun Gu Monastery in Myingyan. Vara is the abbot of the Sunlun Meditation Centre near Kaba-aye in Yangon.

Sunlun Sayadaw was born as Kyaw Din on 4 March 1878 in Sunlun village near Myingyan, approximately 57 miles southwest of Mandalay. The biography written by Sobhana (1995) emphasises his early unpromising reputation as a "dullard" and resulting poor education, despite having been sent to study with the monk Mìn-kyaùng Sayadaw in Myingyan. This serves to emphasise his lack of book learning by way of contrast to his future spiritual prowess. For his turn to meditation came while he was living an ordinary lay life, working as a subsistence farmer. In the early 20th century, under the agricultural and economic policies of the British towards their then colony, Myanmar (then Burma) suffered many periods of famine between 1920 and 1940 (Richell 2006, 213). The *Statistical Abstract Relating To British India from 1910-11 to 1919-20* (1922, 67) gives a figure of 505 pounds for the

expenditure on famine relief in 1919-20 in Burma. The resulting vagaries of existence for Burmese peasants at the time may well have set Sunlun Sayadaw on the spiritual path, for it was apparently in response to one of these, in 1919, that, on seeing the failure of others' crops, rather than feel relief at his own success, he reflected on the Burmese saying "when one's worldly possessions increase, one will die" (Sobhana 1995, 22). He feared dying without having done any meritorious act (*kútho* in Burmese)⁵ and having achieved any spiritual worth. For a Buddhist, having merit, i.e. the benefits of good acts, as one prepares for one's death and/or at the time of death is crucial because the state of one's rebirth to some extent depends on the amount of merit one has. In other words, one should have done wholesome acts such as religious and social giving (*dāna*), worshipping the Triple Gem and practising meditation, so that merit accrued from such good acts will lead to a good rebirth. Though married with four children to support, the future Sunlun Sayadaw therefore set about performing *dāna*, making offerings of food and other requisites to the Sangha, which is regarded as being the 'highest field of merit', i.e. most beneficial object of meritorious giving. In this manner, he ensured he made merit.

It was at one of his offering ceremonies that he heard of the meditation teachings of pioneering meditation master Ledi Sayadaw Ven. U Ñāṇa (1846-1923).⁶ Reassured by his informant, a clerk from a mill, that his lack of familiarity with sacred texts would present no bar to meditation, he began following the mill clerk's instructions on mindfulness of breathing. From this point on, he combined the advice he received from others with his own insights and enhanced his mindfulness of breathing practices, as I shall explain below, as well as developing mindfulness in every day life.

His biographies emphasise the importance of his experience in developing these practices, in contrast to his lack of formal education, and how his meditation experience led to him achieving the various stages of spiritual achievement that are precursor to enlightenment, *arahantship*. They include: (1) appearance in his mind's

⁵ For Burmese Buddhists, the Pāli word *kusala*, *kútho* in Burmese, 'wholesome' or 'skilful', refers to the concept of the benefits of good deeds, i.e. *puñña*, 'merit'. P. D. Premasiri (1976) has differentiated the usage of *kusala* and *puñña*, arguing that in earlier Buddhist texts *kusala* encompassed a broader spectrum of meaning than that of *puñña*, and that the later tradition tended to use them interchangeably, even synonymously. The usage of these two terms in contemporary Myanmar supports Premasiri's observation.

⁶ See Braun (2013) for how Ledi Sayadaw popularised insight meditation among Burmese laypeople in the late 19th century Myanmar.

eye of the ‘sign’ or ‘mental image’ (*nimitta*) of different colours, including red, golden, white and tawny (Sobhana 1995, 28 and 29); (2) gaining access to heavenly realms in his meditation (Sobhana 1995, 29); and (3) having clairvoyance (*dibba-cakkhu*), one of the six ‘higher knowledges’ (*abhiññā*) (Sobhana 1995, 30). According to the disciples of Sunlun Sayadaw, his attainment of each stage of liberation falls on the 13th day after every full moon (in the Burmese calendar) at 10 in the evening (Sobhana 1995, 31, 34 and 40; Vara 2010, 13), dating his attainment of *arahantship* to 9 November 1920 (Houtman 1990, 292). There is a belief in the tradition of practice that one remembers the date, time and place of one’s attainment of the stages of liberation. Yuki Sirimane’s (2016, 55-63) study of experiences of the stages of the Buddhist path in contemporary Sri Lanka also reports her informants’ claims that they remember the date, time and place of their attainment of the stages of liberation.

In the *Nippapañca-vagga* of the *Milindapañhā*, there is a section entitled *khīṇāsavabhāva-pañhā* in which the issue of a lay arahant is addressed. It says that if one is a lay person who has attained *arahantship*, one has to die or receive ordination as a *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhunī*, i.e. higher ordination, on the same day as gaining *arahantship*. Therefore, recognising his own progress on the spiritual path, Kyaw Din persuaded his initially reluctant wife⁷ to grant him permission to ordain, and became a novice monk on 1 November 1920, eight days before he attained the final stage of liberation, *arahantship*. The biographies emphasise the miraculous events that took place and the visions he saw, confirming his enlightenment. For instance, Sobhana (1995, 40-41) writes that minutes before Sunlun Sayadaw attained *arahantship*, five gods (*devas*), including Sakka, king of the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, riding on a flying chariot, appeared in his mind’s eye. He knew that they had come to protect him as he was about to achieve *arahantship*. Therefore, he continued with his own practice without being distracted by them. Once he had attained *arahantship*, he noticed that the gods disappeared. We are told that due to his attainment of *arahantship* he was able to see everything clearly from the highest

⁷ Sobhana’s hagiography of Sunlun Sayadaw portrays his wife, Daw Shwe Yee, in a negative light despite her later donation of the monastery to him. During the period of his practice, she tried to disrupt his meditation, once by removing the floor of their house, and on another occasion by setting the cattle loose. She did these so that he would get up from his meditation (Sobhana 1995, 32). In contrast, Theinngu Sayadaw’s hagiography describes how his third wife became instrumental in encouraging him to pursue the path of meditation. See below for full details.

point of existence (*bhavagga*) to the lowest point of existence, i.e. the Avīci Hell (Sobhana 199, 41).

A few months later, on 4 April 1921, he received higher ordination in the ordination hall (*sīmā*) of Yei-le Monastery, Meikhtila Town, upper Myanmar. He was now aged 44. The following year, 1922, he moved to a monastery near his village, donated to him by his former wife. At the time it was known as Sunlun Chauk Monastery, but later became known as Sunlun Gu Monastery. Sunlun Sayadaw taught meditation at this monastery until he died thirty years later, on 17 May 1952, at the age of 74 (Sobhana 1995, 223).

His achievement of *arahantship* became known among learned monks (Kornfield 2007, 88). Sobhana (1995) records nine occasions where Sunlun Sayadaw was questioned by different people, including scholar monks such as the Aggamahāpaṇḍita⁸ Taung-tha Sayadaw Ven. U Aggavaṃsa and Nyaung-lún Sayadaw U Medhāvī as well as Prime Minister U Nu, on a range of topics, such as his own practice (106-107), practice of the ten types of ‘visual objects’ (*kasiṇa*) (47 and 54), *nibbāna* (67-69), and the issue of suicide from the perspective of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) (130-131). Sobhana also describes how a learned monk, Nyaung-lún Sayadaw, was initially doubtful of his replies, but when his answers were checked against the Pāli canonical texts, Nyaung-lún Sayadaw found many important passages in the scriptures to support his statements (Sobhana 1995, 53-57). He was satisfied with Sunlun Sayadaw’s knowledge of Dhamma to the extent that he told his disciples about it and encouraged them to practise in the same way as Sunlun Sayadaw (Sobhana 1995, 57). Although it is a commonly accepted view among Buddhists in Myanmar that Sunlun Sayadaw was enlightened, Houtman (1990, 167) documents an informant’s claim that he was not. Notwithstanding this question, Sunlun Sayadaw had many followers, including some of the most learned monks in the country. I shall examine the details of how he developed his mindfulness of breathing practice in the section entitled ‘Sunlun Sayadaw’s meditation practice and experience’ below.

The Life of Theinngu Sayadaw

⁸ The honorary titles such as ‘Aggamahāpaṇḍita’, the ‘highest great scholar’, and ‘Abhidhajamahāraṭhaguru’, the ‘foremost teacher of the nation’, are conferred to scholar monks by the state.

I now turn to Theinngu Sayadaw's life-story. I shall draw on the following sources: Paññājota (2003), Òhn Khin (Undated), San Shìn (1972), Theravada Buddhist (1992), and Theinngu Sayadaw's own account of his biography. The first two authors certainly practised as senior disciples under Theinngu. Paññājota, as a lay person, wrote several books on the life and practice of Theinngu Sayadaw under the penname 'Maung Bho (Ákalkàw)'. While I have not yet tracked down the specific affiliation of the second two sources, they all four present Theinngu Sayadaw's life, practice and teachings from the perspective of the Theinngu meditation tradition.

Theinngu Sayadaw was born thirty five years after Sunlun Sayadaw and his own practice was in part inspired by him. He was born on 16 March 1913 in Hnàwkone village near Hmàwbi, approximately 30 miles north of Yangon. He was named Aung Tun. When he was young, he was sent to a monastery in his village for his education. Again, we find a contrast between early academic promise and later spiritual prowess. Paññājota (2003, 16) writes that he was not a good student, skipping classes whenever he could. He soon started hanging out with the wrong crowd, and he started smoking and drinking. His studies suffered as a result, and when he left formal education he could barely read (San Shìn 1972, 22-23; Paññājota 2003, 16-17). Although he was not interested in study, he was astute, sociable and good at sport (Paññājota 2003, 17-18).

Before he undertook the practice of meditation, Aung Tun was married four times. He married his first wife, Ma Hpwa Nyunt, at the age of 14 (Theravada Buddhist 1992, 3). Paññājota (2003, 22) writes that while Aung Tun was finding it hard to make ends meet for his family, he was also involved in gambling. He therefore started committing robberies, and soon his criminal acts caught up with him. Although he was not formally charged for the crimes because of lack of evidence, he was transferred to a nearby village called Hlèlànku and put under the surveillance of the village headman in 1932 for two years. By that time, he already had three children (Paññājota 2003, 22).

As soon as he was allowed to return to his family in 1934, he committed another robbery on the way home. His collaborators in this robbery gave evidence, and he was charged and sentenced to seven years of imprisonment (Paññājota 2003, 25). Aung Tun was moved to different prisons around the country, and when World

War II broke out, he was moved to Mandalay prison.⁹ In a general amnesty at the height of World War II in around 1940, all prisoners were released including Aung Tun (Paññājota 2003, 27). His journey home was delayed, however, when he was caught up in a battle just outside of Mandalay. By the time he arrived at his village, he found that his father had died, and his first wife and three children had left him (Paññājota 2003, 31).

Such difficult personal circumstances seemed to have pushed him further into the world of crime, for we are told that he continued to engage in all kinds of criminal activities not only around his village but also in Yangon. At the age of 28, he remarried and had a child, but both his wife and child died shortly after (Paññājota 2003, 32). He soon married for the third time to a Karen woman named Daw Si, who was from a nearby village (Paññājota 2003, 33).¹⁰ At the same time, Aung Tun had another wife in Yangon, who was called Daw Than Shein (ibid. 33). It was Daw Than Shein who became instrumental in Aung Tun's pursuit of meditation practice. She had been attending meditation retreats at a centre in Yangon.

Theinngu Sayadaw sometimes described in his dhamma-talks how he came across Sunlun Sayadaw's practice and achievement, and how that inspired him to undertake the practice of meditation, as follows.

When she [Daw Than Shein] came back from meditation, she bought Sunlun Sayadaw's biography from a book shop at the Shwedagon Pagoda. . . . She said, "This is the book [on] Sunlun. . . . Sunlun Sayadaw was said to be an *arahant*". . . . [I] flicked through the book, looking at the pictures [in it]. I came across [the words]: body, sensations, mind, and *dhammas*. When I finished reading about the four foundations of mindfulness, [I experienced] tingling sensations spreading across the whole body and then cessation [of those sensations]. . . . [I thought], "If he [Sunlun Sayadaw] was an *arahant*, I too can be an *arahant* with practice".

(San Shìn 1972, 34; Paññājota 2003, 44; translation mine)

⁹ Paññājota (2003, 27) writes that on the eve of World War II, prisoners across the country who were imprisoned for their involvement in various anti-British movements such as the Saya San Rebellion and Dobama Asiayone and for their criminal acts were moved to Mandalay prison.

¹⁰ Daw Si later practised meditation under the guidance of Theinngu Sayadaw and became a precept-nun (*thilashin*).

Despite having a budding interest in meditation, Aung Tun committed another robbery in late August 1959 (Paññājota 2003, 47). During the robbery, the owner of the house attacked Aung Tun with a knife, injuring his head, as a result of which he developed what in Buddhist terms is referred to as ‘spiritual shock’ (*saṃvega*). In his dhamma-talks, Theinngu Sayadaw often retold how *saṃvega* developed in him:

I have to thank him [the man who attacked him]. I could have died, if he had attacked me with a spear . . . , but I am not dead. He did this to me so that I would meditate.

(Ukkatṭha 1962, 25:52-26:12; translation mine)

Even before his injury was properly healed, he left his wives, Daw Si and Daw Than Shein, to undertake meditation practice, telling them that they should no longer depend on him and that they were free to remarry if they wanted to (Paññājota 2003, 48).

On 7 September 1959, Aung Tun, having observed the Nine Precepts,¹¹ started practising meditation in the ordination hall of the monastery in his village (Paññājota 2003, 51). Like Sunlun Sayadaw, he practised mindfulness of breathing, and tried to be mindful of both the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils and the awareness of the touch of breath (Paññājota 2003, 71). The rate of his in-breath and out-breath was very quick. According to Paññājota (2003, 51), it reached to approximately 120 times per minute. He did not change the rhythm of breath nor the place from which he breathed. Although he was breathing rapidly, he did not force the breathing, i.e. it was a natural, rapid breath. When he became sleepy or unfocused with a wandering mind, he increased the breathing rate. When he had a better understanding of the rate of breathing, he experimented with various bases of the breath: (1) shallow breath coming from upper part of the lungs or from the throat; (2) medium length breath coming from the chest; and (3) long breath coming from the navel (Paññājota 2003, 51).¹² He spent 16 hours a day practising in this manner, and the remaining hours worshipping the Buddha, eating and sleeping.

¹¹ In Myanmar, laypeople and some precept-nuns staying at a monastery or a meditation centre observe the Nine Precepts, which are the set of Eight Precepts plus the practice of loving-kindness (*mettā*) as the ninth precept.

¹² It should be noted that I have not come across other sources on the Theinngu tradition which mention such an experimentation with breathing by Theinngu Sayadaw.

Later, as Theinngu Sayadaw, Aung Tun would explain that he only achieved realisation of attaining the initial stages of liberation after he had already reached the third stage of liberation because at that point he reflected on his path and practice. As we shall see below, the first three stages of liberation came before his higher ordination, while he attained *arahantship* within twenty-one months of his initial practice, dating it to 20 May 1961 (Theravada Buddhist 1992, 6). As in the case of Sunlun Sayadaw, we find supernatural beings drawn on as witnesses to confirm his attainment. Theinngu Sayadaw said that gods, including those from the abode of the Brahmas, visited him, encouraging him to undertake higher ordination (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 2, 54:20-55:35). As in the case of Sunlun Sayadaw, many learned monks tested Theinngu Sayadaw's meditation practice and attainment, and checked his answers against Pāli canonical and commentarial texts. Eventually his practice and teachings were accepted by the most learned monks, including the Abhidhajamahāraṭhaguru Masoyein Sayadaw of Mandalay (Òhn Khin Undated, 17-18).

Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw's life-stories compared

Theinngu Sayadaw, like Sunlun Sayadaw, had two consecutive careers: both led a lay life until in their mid-40s then a religious career, resulting from a fear of death that prompted them to practise meditation. They later became meditation teachers and founders of two of the major meditation traditions of Myanmar. Though they were sent to the monasteries in their villages at a young age, so had a rudimentary background in Buddhist teachings, the biographies by their followers emphasise that they learned very little, and were barely literate. One difference between the lay life of Sunlun Sayadaw and that of Theinngu Sayadaw is that the former was a farmer, while the latter was a well known criminal with a prison record.¹³

As for their religious careers, prior to their meditation practice, neither had much if any theoretical knowledge of either meditation techniques or Buddhist scriptures. Neither had formal meditation teachers to guide them during their

¹³ Aung Tun was also accused of a robbery in 1959 and had to spend 45 days in Inn Sein prison. This was said to be after his attainment of the second stage of liberation (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 57:24-1:08:12).

practice. Yet with strong determination and continuous practice, both are believed to have achieved *arahantship*. The validity of their meditation practice and achievement is then said to have been confirmed by their answers to questions on Buddhist meditation and Buddhist teachings from monastic and lay literati. The implication is that they gained doctrinal knowledge of the Buddhist teachings, because of their attainment of *arahantship*, which they were able to express in ways that tallied with the intellectual understanding of erudite monks steeped in scriptural study. Thus we have a story of contrasts: two semi-literate men achieving enlightenment through their own initiative and experience, the validity confirmed first by gods and then through investigation by learned monks and lay scholars. The former verification is clearly important for them, in their own accounts, yet the latter verification, the checking against Pāli literature, is what allows their meditation achievements to be widely accepted among people in Myanmar, as we shall see below. Having summarised the biographies and how the validity of their experience was tested, I shall turn to the specifics of their meditation practices.

Sunlun Sayadaw's meditation practice and experience

Having summarised the biographies and how the validity of their experience was tested, I shall turn to the specifics of their meditation practices. Readers may notice a depersonalised way of expressing things. For example, practitioners within the Sunlun meditation tradition use impersonal expressions such as 'the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils' and 'touch-consciousness-mindfulness' (see below) to refer to the process of establishing mindfulness of the breath, rather than using pronouns 'my' and 'I'. To illustrate how this affects description of experience, we may look at another example: rather than describing his experience by saying, "he became fearful of the *asubha* nature of his body", Theinngu Sayadaw states, "the mind became fearful of the *asubha* nature of his body". This impersonalisation shows that Theinngu Sayadaw is distancing himself from 'me' and 'mine', watching the process rather than being attached to his own mind and body. My experience within the Theinngu tradition at the Vijjodaya Theinn Meditation Centre in Pyay is that this impersonalised usage is particularly prevalent

when talking about aspects of the mind, so I have retained it here when recounting Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw's experience.

Kyaw Din started practising mindfulness of breathing after his encounter with the mill clerk who told him about Ledi Sayadaw. He began by verbally noting "breathing in" and "breathing out" (Sobhana 1995, 27; Kornfield 2007, 88). One day a friend told him that such verbal noting of breathing in and out alone was not sufficient, and that he had to be aware of the touch of breath (Sobhana 1995, 27; Kornfield 2007, 88). The Burmese expression used by his friend, as described in Sobhana's biography of Sunlun Sayadaw, is *athí-lite*, which literally means 'to be accompanied by awareness'. In the context of meditation practice, I translate the Burmese word *athí* as 'awareness', and its connotation is similar to the expression "choiceless awareness" (Kornfield 2007, 12; Anālayo 2003, 58, f.n. 61) in the sense that one is aware of whatever arises without reacting with likes or dislikes. Non-reactive, detached awareness as one of the crucial characteristics of *sati*, usually translated as 'mindfulness', forms an important aspect in the teachings of modern meditation teachers and scholars (Anālayo 2003, 58; Gethin 2011).

The *Visuddhimagga* and the **Vimuttimagga* analyse the recollection of mindfulness in relation to its understanding through touch (see Kim in this volume). A practitioner grasps the meditation subject, i.e. breath, through touch, and awareness of touch is the initial requirement in order to establish sustained mindfulness (*sati*). This awareness of touch needs to be guarded and watched by mindfulness. This corresponds with how, for Kyaw Din, the practice of mindfulness of breathing entailed two steps initially: (1) to be aware of the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils, and (2) to guard and watch this awareness with mindfulness (Sobhana 1995, 27). Although he had no teacher to instruct him, he added a further step which would later become integral to his teaching method. He took the breath as a meditation object, and tried to be aware of not only the touch of the breath but also the sense-consciousness of the touch of the breath.

When Kyaw Din as Sunlun Sayadaw taught his meditation system, he explained the job of a practitioner as follows.

Touch and sense-consciousness — one must be rigorously mindful of these two. When there is touch, sense-consciousness arises.

When we guard and watch the sense-consciousness [of the object]
with mindfulness, our job is done.¹⁴

(Vara 2010, 14; translation mine)

I translate the Burmese word *htí-mhú* as ‘touch’, rather than ‘contact’. Both English terms ‘touch’ and ‘contact’ are appropriate translation of the Pāli word *phassa*, conveying the idea that there is a contact between sense organs and sense objects. Here, it is touch, not contact, because it relates to an analysis of which senses are involved in the understanding of the meditation (see Kim in this volume).

I translate the use of the Burmese word *thí-mhú* as ‘sense-consciousness’ to refer to consciousness that arises through the senses. For example, when the breath touches the entrance of the nostrils, consciousness of the touch of the breath arises. The term ‘sense-consciousness’ here does not refer to the Abhidhamma classification of the “two sets of fivefold sense consciousness” (*dvi-pañcaviññāṇa*), which are based on the sensitive matter of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body (Bodhi 2000, 41) and whose functions are simply to cognise their respective objects in “its bare immediacy and simplicity prior to all identificatory cognitive operations” (Bodhi 2000, 123). In contrast, the Burmese expression *thí-mhú* could be used in a broader sense, referring to the cognitive acts which identify the objects of sight, hearing, etc.

In addition to *htí-mhú* ‘touch’ and *thí-mhú* ‘sense-consciousness’, the expression used by Sunlun Sayadaw in his explanation of the job of a practitioner includes *thatí-kyát-kyát-pyu-pa*, which literally means ‘to make *sati* rigorously’ in relation to the meditation object and the mind, referring to guarding the mind in a repeated manner and to maintaining continuous observation of the meditation object. Another expression often used is *thatí-htà-pa*, which literally means ‘to place *sati*’, asking the practitioner to place *sati* on a meditation object, so that there is “presence of mind” (*upatthitā-sati*) (Gethin 2011, 270). We also find the expression *thatí-kat-pa*, which literally means ‘to stick *sati*’ to the object of awareness, requiring the practitioner to stay with the object of awareness so that there is “absence of floating” (*apilāpanatā*), i.e. the mind does not bob about “like a gourd floating on the surface of water” (Gethin 2011, 271). The mind of the practitioner with *sati* becomes steady with a minimum or absence of bobbing about. The capacity of the mind to

¹⁴ In Burmese, it is *htí-mhú thí-mhú thatí-kyát-kyát-pyú. Htí tót thí mae. Thí-táe-apàw-thatí-htàyin-alote-kate-sa-à-hpyín-pè-pathi*.

stay with the object of awareness for a sustained period of time is related to the quality of not being forgetful, which is captured in the expression *thatí-myae-thi*, which means ‘having sustained presence of mind’. These—i.e. *thatí-kyát-kyát-pyu-pa*, *thatí-htà-pa*, *thatí-kát-pa*—are several Burmese expressions describing what a practitioner should do with *sati* in their practice.

The Burmese expression, *htí-thí-thatí*, which literally means ‘touch-consciousness-mindfulness’, came to be used among the practitioners of the Sunlun method to refer to the process of establishing mindfulness of the breath (Vara 2010, 4). The guidance offered within the Sunlun system is that once one’s meditation practice becomes more established, the touch of the breath, the sense-consciousness of the touch of the breath and the mindfulness (*thatí*) of the two aspects of the practice, i.e. the touch (*htí*) and the sense-consciousness (*thí*), will coincide (Sobhana 1995, 29). In other words, a practitioner will become mindful of both the touch of the breath and the sense-consciousness of the touch of the breath as soon as they arise.

In addition to developing these three steps to mindfulness of breathing, the biographies emphasise how Kyaw Din tried to establish mindfulness not just during meditation but in everything he did (Sobhana 1995, 27; Kornfield 2007, 88). As he breathed, he tried to be aware of the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils, or the touch of the sound of chopping at the ear as he chopped corn cobs, or the touch of the ground as he walked. With more intensive, continuous practice, the bodily sensations were sometimes intensely unpleasant. Such an experience of unpleasant sensations did not deter him. As with other meditation objects, he tried to be mindful of the awareness of the unpleasant sensations. Moreover, he found that by continuously breathing he generated more energy, enabling him to develop more rigorous mindfulness (Sobhana 1995, 30). In this manner, he was able to observe the unpleasant sensations with no or little reaction (Kornfield 1996, 88). Although the strong, rhythmic breathing has come to be associated as the meditation technique of the Sunlun tradition, as we shall see below, Sunlun Sayadaw’s hagiographies contain very little information on his breathing technique.

Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation practice and experience

There are reports of Theinngu Sayadaw's meditation practice and attainments in the accounts of his life and other writings by his disciples. Theinngu Sayadaw himself sometimes described his meditation experience and attainments in his dhamma-talks and in discussions with learned monks. Drawing on these accounts, this section presents his meditation practice and experience, documenting the ways in which Theinngu Sayadaw explained his own path and how the faithful understand and relate to their teacher's meditation experience.

When Aung Tun started practising meditation in the ordination hall of the monastery in his village, he battled with intense, painful sensations during his first week of meditation practice. In spite of these, he continued with the strong, rapid breathing and did not change his posture. Sometimes the pain was so intolerable, he would fall to the floor, but even when he did this, he apparently maintained mindfulness of the painful sensations and only got up from the floor when they had completely disappeared (San Shìn 1972, 36). Sometimes he experimented with different rates of breathing in order to deal with the unpleasant sensations. He adjusted the rate of inhalation and exhalation according to the intensity of the sensations (Paññājota 2003, 52). That is, he used strong and rapid breathing to face gross, intense sensations, while weaker and slower breathing was used when sensations were subtle.

He noticed that as he struggled to cope with these intense sensations, the mind was dominated by the pain. When that happened, he tried to enhance mindfulness of the touch of the breath at the nostrils by increasing the rate of breathing, so that the mind was no longer preoccupied with the painful sensations (San Shìn 1972, 36). He soon learned that the mind does not stay at the nostrils for long; it becomes aware of the painful sensations (San Shìn 1972, 36), which is a more obvious meditation object than the breath. As his awareness moved between his painful bodily sensations and the touch of his breath at the nostrils, he noticed his concentration (*samādhi*) became stronger, and that with stronger concentration, the tolerance of painful sensations increased. He realised that when concentration and mindfulness have become more established, the mind is no longer shaken by the intense, painful sensations. As we shall explore below, strong, rapid breathing is used in both the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions in order to develop sustained mindfulness and concentration.

Reporting on this stage, and on the meditation experiences of both meditation masters thus far, I have personalised the manner of expression, writing “his awareness”, “his painful bodily sensations,” because without the personal pronoun it reads oddly in English. However, in Burmese it is unnatural to include this, and it also undermines the Buddhist approach, that these are non-personal processes, as explained above. From this point on, I shall therefore shift to writing in a more depersonalised fashion that more closely represents the Burmese manner of discussing this subject.

As Aung Tun continued with his practice, concentration became more established to the extent that he was able to mindfully observe the arising and disappearance of sensations without changing posture for three hours or more (San Shìn 1972, 38). According to his own later account of his practice, he began to perceive the continuous arising and dissolution of bodily and mental processes, such as the arising and dissolution of bodily sensations, hearing, knowing, etc. When he realised the arising and dissolution of things that are within oneself, he also saw the nature of impermanence in things that are outside of oneself (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 41:35-42:15). Once the knowledge of arising and dissolution arose in him, he noticed the nature of suffering in everything and its cause (44:00-46:00). He realised that suffering arises because of attachment,¹⁵ and that attachment arises because of perversion of perception (*saññā-vipallāsa*).¹⁶ He contemplated how he had formerly not realised this and held erroneous perceptions about the nature of suffering. He realised that he had not seen these sensations simply as sensations. He realised he had previously perceived his experience of bodily sensations such as heat, pain, and numbness as ‘I am hot’, ‘I am in pain’ and ‘I feel numbness’ (San Shìn 1972, 51). In this sense, he had mistaken the natural process of the body and mind as unique to him, personalising the unpleasant sensations. With the realisation of impermanence and suffering as well as their causes and effects, Aung Tun came to

¹⁵ He used a Burmese loanword from Pāli, *tha-mú-dá-yá*, which is *samudaya*, ‘origin’, in Pāli. In Burmese, the term *tha-mú-dá-yá-thít-sa*, i.e. *samudaya-sacca*, refers to the truth of the origin of suffering, the second Noble Truth. However, *tha-mú-dá-yá* on its own has come to mean ‘attachment’.

¹⁶ The *Vipallāsa-sutta* (AN 4.49) describes four perversions of perception (*saññā-vipallāsa*), of thought (*citta-vipallāsa*) and of view (*ditthi-vipallāsa*), which distort how the mind works and misapprehends what is impermanent as permanent, what is painful as pleasant, what is without a self as a self, and what is impure as pure. The *Visuddhimagga* (XXII, 47, 53, and 68) describes a stream-enterer as someone who has discarded these three levels of perversion. Mahasi Sayadaw in *A Discourse of the Sīlavanta-sutta* points out that although a stream-enterer is incapable of being deflected from the view of impermanence, he or she is not free from self-conceit derived from the view of the existence of ‘I’ (Bhikkhu Pesala 2013, 78).

see what we call ‘I’, ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘dog’, etc. are but a collection of the four elements (Paññājota 2003, 54). By the end of the first nine days of his practice, he is said to have gained an understanding that the arising and dissolution of both bodily and mental processes happen naturally, and that these processes occur because of the arising and dissolution of causes and of their effects (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 47:30-48:13; San Shìn 1972, 127). Later in his own account of his practice, Theinngu Sayadaw claimed that he attained the first stage of liberation on the ninth day of his practice (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 1:17:04).

Although Theinngu Sayadaw did not explain the stages of the development of his insight—such as his realisation of the knowledge of the arising and dissolution of things, the knowledge of the nature of suffering and the knowledge of the nature of impermanence—as the stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa*, ‘insight knowledges’, these stages of the development strike me as some of the stages of *vipassanāñāṇa*.¹⁷ As we shall see below, Aung Tun gained the realisations of such insight knowledges at each stage of the path, and these stages of insight knowledges express the underlying structure of the progress through the stages of the path.

According to Paññājota (2003, 72), a *nimitta*, ‘mental image’ (see contributions by Skilton and by Choompolpaisal in this volume), of white light appeared as mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*) became more established in Aung Tun. With more established concentration, the *nimitta* of *asubha*, ‘impure aspects of the body decomposing’, developed in him, seeing his own body decomposing. Theinngu Sayadaw’s (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 50:52-53:00) own account of his experience of *asubha* meditation can be summarised as follows: there appeared in his mind’s eye a *nimitta* of his own body, which became foamy and bubbling; a bloated stomach then appeared and the eyes began to bulge; smelly liquid and blood come out of the mouth; the bulging eyes popped out; the face became very large and foamy; colonies of maggots began to occupy the body; all the

¹⁷ The stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa* found in the Pāli canonical and commentarial texts vary in numbers: (1) the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* lists eight stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa*, (2) the *Visuddhimagga* gives nine stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa* (Ñāṇamoli 1991, 662ff.), and (3) the *Abhidhammaṭṭhāsāṅgaha* lists ten stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa* (Bodhi 2000, 345-347). The ten stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa* are: (1) knowledge of comprehension (*sammasanañāṇa*); (2) knowledge of rise and fall (*udayabbayañāṇa*); (3) knowledge of dissolution (*bhaṅgañāṇa*); (4) knowledge of fearfulness (*bhayañāṇa*); (5) knowledge of danger (*ādīnavañāṇa*); (6) knowledge of disenchantment (*nibbidāñāṇa*); (7) knowledge of desire for deliverance (*muñcitukamyatāñāṇa*); (8) knowledge of reflection (*paṭisankhāñāṇa*); (9) knowledge of equanimity towards formation (*sakhār’upekkhāñāṇa*); and (10) knowledge of conformity (*anulomañāṇa*) (Bodhi 2000, 345).

maggots and other foul-smelling liquids and blood then disappeared; and the body then started to burn in a scorching fire, turning the flesh into bones and then into ashes. The *nimitta* of *asubha* meditation is said to have become so strong and lasting that even when he was not meditating, there appeared in his mind's eye a *nimitta* not only of the decomposed bodies of his own and others, including those of his former wives and of animals, but also of inanimate things such as trees, Buddha images, etc. (Ukkaṭṭha 1962, 36:07; San Shìn 1972, 139-143; Paññājota 2003, 72). The effect of these *nimitta* was that they weakened his sensual desire (*kāma-rāga*).

For Aung Tun, *asubha* meditation is a crucial step in removing craving (*taṇhā*). As *asubha* meditation became more established, according to Theinngu Sayadaw, the mind not only became fearful of the *asubha* nature of the body, but no longer wanted to see and meditate on the impure, repulsive aspects of the body. Moreover, he soon developed the wish to discard the *asubha* meditation experience, and to find a way to not have it (San Shìn 1972, 144). Theinngu Sayadaw used the word *do-tha*, *dosa* in Pāli, which means 'hatred' or 'anger', to refer to the aversion to the *asubha* meditation and the desire to escape from it because these desires are rooted in anger (*dosa*). Therefore, while rooted in anger, a negative or unwholesome mental state, this can be an important transitional phase on the path. Thus, one becomes disenchanted with one's body (*rūpa*). In addition to disenchantment with one's body and those of others, *asubha* meditation leads to the realisation of what ordinary people take to be pleasant (*sukha*) as unpleasant (*dukkha*). For instance, when Aung Tun experienced the world through the sense organs, he experienced them as unpleasant bodily sensations and mental feelings (*dukkha-vedanā*) because he saw only their decaying and decomposing nature (San Shìn 1972, 147). Theinngu Sayadaw claimed that he achieved the second stage of liberation one month and three days after the start of his practice, in which he saw everything as decaying and repulsive, and experienced them as *dukkha-vedanā* (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 1:17:5-10; San Shìn 1972, 145-148).

Theinngu Sayadaw also describes how he overcame the desire not to meditate on the *asubha* nature of the body and moved onto another stage. As he continued to contemplate the impure aspects of the decaying body, he then came to realise that the pus and blood coming out from the body are water, the element with the characteristic of oozing; the scorching fire burning away the body is the

fire element, with the characteristic of heat; the bloated body parts and bulging eyes are the wind element, with the characteristic of distension; and the bones are the earth element, with the characteristic of hardness (San Shìn 1972, 165-166; Paññājota 2003, 88). Once the realisation of the four elements with regards to the *asubha* nature of the body arose in him, he contemplated the whole process of *asubha* meditation in terms of the arising and dissolution of the five aggregates (San Shìn 1972, 166-167). For example, when he saw in his mind's eye his own body decomposing, he reflected that it was the arising and disappearance of the aggregate of form (*rūpakkhandha*); when he experienced unpleasant feelings with regards to seeing his body decomposing, he contemplated that it is the arising and disappearance of the aggregate of feeling (*vedanākkhandha*); and when he saw the body decomposing and the mind then labeled it as 'decaying', 'disintegrating', etc., he contemplated that it was the arising and disappearance of the aggregate of perception (*saññākkhandha*).

Once the knowledge of the arising and disappearance of the five aggregates arose in him, he started to investigate the origin of the mind that does not want to see and meditate on the decomposing body. He came to realise that it arises because of perversion of perception (*saññā-vipallāsa*) with regards to the *asubha* nature of the body (San Shìn 1972, 167). How had an erroneous perception arisen in him? When the *nimitta* of *asubha* arose in him, he had perceived it as *asubha* and then labeled it as 'decaying', 'swelling', 'decomposing', etc. Such a perception is true at some level. Nonetheless, according to Theinngu Sayadaw, because of such labeling, clinging (*upādāna*) had arisen (San Shìn 1972, 168-169; Paññājota 2003, 110). The mind erroneously had perceived and clung onto the *nimitta* of *asubha* to be a reality, rather than seeing it as a mere *nimitta*. Because of clinging, the *asubha* meditation had become so strong and lasting for him (see above) that he had spent several months meditating upon it and therefore the desire not to meditate on the *asubha* nature of the body and the desire to escape from it had developed in him. Although these components of the practice — i.e. the practice of *asubha* meditation, the desire not to see the *asubha* nature of the body, and the desire to escape from it — are regarded as crucial steps in one's practice, the practitioners within the Theinngu tradition regard these steps as means to achieve higher stages of the path, a raft that will later be discarded, as in the famous raft simile of the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*

(MN 22) where the teaching or raft's purpose is to cross a river, not for the purpose of holding onto after the river is crossed.

As Aung Tun practised to overcome the *asubha* meditation, he noticed that seeing the body decomposing is the working of the aggregate of form, and that labeling it as 'decaying' is the working of the aggregate of perception. He observed that these processes happen naturally due to causes and effects: the arising of the *nimitta* of *asubha* is the cause, seeing it is the effect; because of seeing, the mind perceives it and labels it as *asubha*; because of labeling, the desire not to see the *asubha* nature of the body arises; and because of the desire, the mind clings to the *asubha* nature of the body; because of clinging, the whole process repeats itself (San Shìn 1972, 167-169; Paññājota 2003, 110). Once he gained this realisation of how causes and effects come about, instead of contemplating and perceiving it as *asubha*, he recognised the *asubha* meditation in terms of cause and effect. This means he observed the arising and disappearing of the causes and of effects with regards to the *asubha* nature of the body. According to Theinngu Sayadaw, this mere observation stops the cyclical process of cause and effect arising, as well as the arising of the desire to escape from the *asubha* meditation. In this manner, anger with regards to *asubha* meditation no longer arises. Moreover, he came to realise that the mind had constructed the mental image of *asubha*, which covers what actually is a complex and subtle matter or materiality (*rūpa*).

As Aung Tun continued with the contemplation of causes and effects, he came to see in his mind's eye the arising and dissolution of the *rūpa-kalāpa*, 'atomic units of matter' (San Shìn 1972, 169).¹⁸ Theinngu Sayadaw referred to his experience of seeing the arising and dissolution of the atomic units of matter in everything he did as the 'disintegration of the appearance of solidity' (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 1:19:21; San Shìn 1972, 169). Theinngu Sayadaw used a Burmese loanword from Pāli, *ghana-kyae*, which literally means 'disintegration of solidity', referring to his realisation of the complex nature of separate, individual constituents, overcoming the

¹⁸ The term *rūpa-kalāpa*, which is generally translated as 'material group' (Ñāṇamoli 1991, 836), is an Abhidhamma concept. It refers to a group of material *dhammas* that consists solely of the four great essentials—i.e. earth element, water element, fire element, air element, and four derivatives—i.e. colour, smell, taste, and nutritive essence. The material group made up of these eight material phenomena is known as 'inseparable matter' (*avinibbhogarūpa*) (Bodhi 2000, 246). Here, I use the phrase 'atomic units of matter' to refer to the *rūpa-kalāpa* because Theinngu Sayadaw sometimes used the term *paramāṇu*, which is translated as a 'particle' or 'atom', conveying the concept of subtle, minute nature of *rūpa*.

appearance of unity or solidity. I therefore translate *ghana-kyae* as the ‘disintegration of the appearance of solidity’. As Karunadasa (2011, 44)—writing on Theravādin theory of *dhamma*—highlights, “With the dissolution of the appearance of unity (*ghana-vinibbhoga*), the oneness disappears and the complex nature is disclosed”. In terms of Aung Tun’s meditation experience, it means that when he looks at a woman or a tree or even the Shwedagon Pagoda, entities which ordinary people would perceive as stable and solid, he sees them in his mind’s eye as the mere arising and disappearance of the atomic units of matter (San Shìn 1972, 171-172). For him, the appearance of a woman or tree or the Shwedagon Pagoda as discrete entities had disappeared, and the complex nature of their component parts, i.e. the *rūpa-kalāpa*, was disclosed. Theinngu Sayadaw explained that he was thus freed from concepts (*paññatti*) such as ‘woman’, ‘man’ and ‘beauty’. Being freed from such concepts, the attachment to and the craving to see them no longer arose in him. This in turn led to the abandonment of ‘sensuous desire’ (*kāmarāga*) (San Shìn 1972, 173).

According to Theinngu Sayadaw, he reviewed his practice and path when he gained the realisation of the disintegration of the appearance of unity, realising that he had reached the third in four stages of liberation, i.e. non-returner (San Shìn 1972, 176). We are told that in his meditation he also reviewed the past, present and future, as well as the different realms of the Buddhist cosmos.

When I looked at . . . the twenty heavens of the abode of the Brahmas, . . . the Avīci Hell, I can see everything. . . . I reviewed the past, [thinking] “Where did I come from?” What I saw was that because of the wish I made during the time of Padumuttara Buddha, I practised the Dhamma and reached this stage during the dispensation of this [Gotama] Buddha. . . . I looked into the future, [thinking] “Where will I go if I die now?” I saw twenty heavens of the abode of the Brahmas, [thinking], “It is a group of five heavens of the Pure Abodes”. . . . I saw the heaven where I will be reborn. It is the Akaṇiṭṭha Heaven, [where] the five factors of *jhāna* [‘meditative absorption’] are developed. . . . I saw my own body there [i.e. the Akaṇiṭṭha Heaven]. . . . Although the body of a brahma is very big, it is extremely delicate [to the extent that] one cannot physically touch it. It is also very bright. . . . Thus, the

mind of a noble person is said to have already inclined towards their destination of rebirth¹⁹ even before they die. Even before I die I knew that it is this place I will be reborn in. The noble people are never afraid of death. . . . When I looked at the present moment, there was form-sphere consciousness²⁰ and attachment to the aggregate of form [in me]. [Nonetheless], the mind at the present moment did not have *vitakka* [‘initial application’] and *vicāra* [‘investigation’]. With cessation, the mind had become fully present and calmed down. . . . I was aware that the mind no longer wanders.

(San Shìn 1972, 176-179; translation mine)

While Sunlun Sayadaw’s hagiography claims that he gained access to all the realms of the Buddhist cosmos from the highest to the lowest when he achieved *arahantship* (see above), Theinngu Sayadaw’s access to all realms is said here to have occurred when he achieved the third stage of liberation. This statement makes important claims about his status as well as confirming traditional Buddhist views about the cosmology and path. Padumuttara Buddha is the tenth of the twenty four Buddhas. Malalasekera (1938, 136-137) writes, “Many of the eminent disciples of Gotama Buddha are said to have first conceived their desires for their respective positions in the time of Padumuttara Buddha”. Therefore, through this statement Theinngu Sayadaw is claiming his status as an eminent disciple of a Buddha. The phrase ‘noble person’ (*ariyapuggala*) means a person who has attained at least the first of four stages of liberation, i.e. stream-entry (*sotāpatti*). Here, Theinngu Sayadaw is also claiming that he is such a noble person, who knows the realm in which his rebirth would take place after death and no longer fears death.

As Theinngu Sayadaw continued to observe the arising and dissolution of the atomic units of matter, fear arose in him. This time fear arose because he had seen how defilements such as delusion (*moha*) lead to renewed existence (*jāti*) (Shin 1972,

¹⁹ He used the Burmese expression *nan-nyant-hta*, which literally means ‘the mind is already inclined towards’. In the context of our discussion, it could mean that a noble person may often think about or contemplate the destination of their rebirth, and he/she may thus embody subtler states of consciousness.

²⁰ The 121 varieties of consciousness (*citta*) in the classical Theravada Abhidhamma are subdivided into the four levels of planes of existence—i.e. the sensuous sphere, the form sphere, the formless sphere, and the supramundane level—seen in both cosmological and psychological terms (Gethin 1997, 192-193; Bodhi 2000, 28). Form-sphere consciousness (*rūpāvacara-citta*) belongs to the form sphere and beings exist in the form world (*rūpa-loka*).

182). He then noticed material and mental states as being impermanent, and became aware of the nature of impermanence all the time. As with the *asubha* meditation, the desire not to see the arising and disappearance of material and mental states developed in him. Despite such a desire, he continued to experience it in his mind's eye. He thus came to see the nature of suffering and impersonality (San Shìn 1972, 182).

Theinngu Sayadaw explained that non-returners still have defilements (*kilesa*) with regards to form (*rūpa*) and formless (*arūpa*) (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:15:47-2:16:02). Theinngu Sayadaw used the expressions *rūpa-kilesa* and *arūpa-kilesa*, rather than *rūparāga*, 'passion for what is form', and *arūparāga*, 'passion for what is formless' (Thanissaro 2000), which are the terms found in the Pāli canonical texts such as the *Samyojana-sutta* (AN 10.13). *Rūparāga* and *arūparāga* are often understood as passion for rebirth in the Form World and the Formless World respectively, and are two of the ten fetters eradicated by an *arahant*. It should be noted that Theinngu Sayadaw, talking from the perspective of meditation practice, referred to *rūpa* and *arūpa* in terms of clinging to material and mental states, rather than the passion for rebirth in the Form and the Formless worlds. Although Theinngu Sayadaw related his meditative experience as a non-returner in both cosmological and psychological terms (see above), he emphasised psychological interpretations of Buddhist cosmology when he explained his practice to achieve the fourth and final stage of liberation.

Theinngu Sayadaw explained that the latent defilements (*anusayakilesa*) arise with regards to external bases (*bāhirāyatana*) and internal bases (*ajjhāyatana*). This correlates with the Theravada Abhidhamma analysis of the relationship between the external world and one's experience into the twelve 'bases' (*āyatana*) on which experience relies. The six sense organs, i.e. eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, are called internal bases (*ajjhāyatana*), and the objects of these, i.e. visible object, sound, odour, taste, tangible object, and cognisable object, are called external bases (*bāhirāyatana*). For Theinngu Sayadaw, he saw in his mind's eye the external bases such as visible object, sound, odour, taste, tangible object, and cognisable object as the arising and disappearance of atomic units of matter (*rūpa-kalāpa*). However, he did not realise that these atomic units of matter are material states which originate from the mind (*cittajarūpa*) (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:18:26-2:18:32; Ukkaṭṭha 1969, 1:15:50-

1:15:52). Not knowing the actuality, he clung to these material and mental states and contemplated them as being impermanent, subject to suffering and without a self. He realised that he was not yet free because he still perceived in his mind's eye the arising and disappearance of mental states (San Shìn 1972, 185). He therefore investigated the mental states that are associated with the internal bases such as the eye base, the ear base, etc. He reflected on his own mind, examining whether or not there are the mental states that wish to see, to hear, to kiss, to touch, to know good and bad, and to go here and there (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:19:30-2:20:15; San Shìn 1972, 185). He noticed that such wishes to see, to hear, etc. were absent from his mind (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:20:17-2:19:21). Although such mental states did not arise in him, he knew that he was not free from the latent defilements. Therefore, he alternated repeatedly between the observation of the three characteristics of material states, i.e. impermanence, suffering, and non-self, and the investigation of mental states such as the wish to see, to hear, to touch, etc. (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:18:15-2:22:55). Theinngu Sayadaw explained that this gradual, repetitive process of the contemplation and investigation of the material and mental states is a way of uprooting the latent defilements (Ukkaṭṭha 1969, 1:26:10-1:26:15).

As he continued to practise in this manner, a realisation appeared, as if someone had spoken into his ear:

What is “impermanence”? What is “suffering”? What is “non-self”?
You cling onto the material states [i.e. the *rūpa-kalāpa*] which arise due to the mind. . . . Because of the mind, you perceive the material states as “arising” and “dissolution”. You do not stop at simply seeing. You contemplate them as being impermanent, suffering and non-self. They [i.e. the three characteristics] are mere concepts.²¹

(Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:25:32-2:26:07; translation mine)

Theinngu Sayadaw explained that this realisation led him to the understanding that there was nothing left to observe. Whatever arose at each of the six sense-doors was no longer attractive to him nor bothered him. He simply saw, sensed and cognised (San Shìn 1972, 191). He thus concluded:

²¹ Theinngu Sayadaw used the Burmese expression *pyit-nyat*, which refers to the Pāli word *paññatti*, ‘name’ or ‘concept’ or ‘designation’. As Karunadasa (2010, 52) observes, although the three characteristics are known as universal characteristics of all *dhammas*, i.e. elementary components that make up the experienced world, they turn out to be conceptual constructions with no objective reality.

I take the material states that do not exist as being in existence, and misapprehend them as being impermanent. That is why mental states that label it as “impermanence”, “suffering”, and “non-self” arise in me. . . . “Impermanence” is a concept; “suffering” is a concept; “non-self” is a concept. . . . All defilements and cankers have dried up in me. No need to practise any more. I have reached the end of the path.

(San Shìn 1972, 191; translation mine)

Expressions such as ‘all defilements and cankers have dried up’ and ‘no need to practise any more’ are similar to standard descriptions of the *arahant*, which are found in many places in the Pāli canon. For example, the *Arahanta-sutta* (SN 22.110) describes an *arahant* as follows: “a monk in whom the cankers are destroyed, who has lived the life to perfection, done what had to be done, put down the burden, gained the highest goal, worn through the fetters of rebirth, and is liberated by perfect insight” (Walshe 2013). In this instance Theinngu Sayadaw did not claim explicitly of having achieved the state of *arahantship*, but it is implied here. On other occasions he made this claim explicit (see above).

Based on these accounts, Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation practice and path can be summarised in the following stages. The first stage is the removal of self-centred views through the realisation of impermanence and suffering with regards to unpleasant bodily sensations, overcoming the notion of ‘I’, ‘hand’, ‘leg’ etc., with regards to bodily sensations. The weakening of craving (*taṇhā*) and sensuous desire (*kāma-rāga*) through the realisation of the *nimitta* of the *asubha* nature of the body and *asubha* meditation is the second stage, overcoming the notions of ‘I’, ‘beauty’, ‘pure’, ‘happiness’ etc. with regards to one’s body and those of others. The third stage involves the realisation of the disintegration of the appearance of unity, which means seeing the complex nature of what are conventionally regarded as stable and solid entities such as ‘woman’, ‘tree’, ‘mountain’, ‘Buddha images’ etc., overcoming the notion of oneness and sensuous desire. At the fourth stage, he contemplated and investigated the latent defilements such as the attachment to subtler material states and mental states, abandoning the notion of impermanence, suffering and non-self. Moreover, at every stage of the path, the contemplation and realisation of (1)

impermanence, (2) suffering, (3) fearfulness, (4) causality, (5) perversion of perception (*saññā-vipallāsa*) with regards to concepts (*paññatti*), and (6) anger (*dosa*) seem to have played an important role. Mental qualities such as concentration (*samādhi*) and mindfulness (*sati*) also played an important role, especially in dealing with the unpleasant bodily sensation at the first stage. This does not mean that concentration and mindfulness become less important for the practice at higher stages of meditation attainments, for Theinngu Sayadaw often said that to achieve the second stage of liberation one needs to develop concentration twice as strong as that of the first stage of liberation (Paññājota 2003, 71), and that for the attainment of the third stage of liberation concentration needs to be twice more than that of the previous stage (Paññājota 2003, 101). According to his explanation, then, with each stage of transformation, the understanding and quality developed with regards to these factors becomes more and more refined.

When we look at the account of Theinngu Sayadaw's spiritual life on the whole, we can see two structural aspects to it. They are: (1) Theinngu Sayadaw's progress through his development of the meditation practice closely correlates with his progression through the four stages of the path to enlightenment; and (2) his specific meditative experiences described in this article are the stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa*, which are the underlying structure of the progress through the stages of the path. The correlation between Theinngu Sayadaw's meditative experiences and the stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa* is worth further exploration. We should note that these levels of *vipassanāñāṇa* are regularly included as *vipassanākammaṭṭhāna*, 'insight meditation subjects', in Siamese and other *boran kammathan* meditation texts (see Skilton in this volume).

Meditation techniques taught in the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions

Now that I have provided accounts of the meditation experiences of Sunlun and Theinngu Sayadaws, and how they related this to their spiritual achievements, I want to turn to the meditation techniques as taught at some Sunlun and Theinngu meditation centres in Myanmar. As the meditation centres of these two traditions have come more established, it seems that the meditation techniques taught there have become more systematic and formalized in the sense that the practitioners are

instructed to practise for a certain length of time—each sitting lasting between one hour and 30 minutes to three hours. Moreover, the practitioners are instructed to follow specific postures, ways of breathing and how they should deal with sensations, the wandering mind, etc. Such formalization does not mean that there is uniformity in terms of the meditation techniques and instruction because each meditation teacher, especially those from the less-centralised Theinngu tradition (see above), develops his or her own method and/or stages of practice and gives their own instructions to the practitioners. Some teachers provide tailor-made instructions to advanced practitioners according to their temperament. In this sense, even within each meditation tradition, there is a variety of meditation techniques and instructions. Therefore, what follows in this section describes only some examples from a diverse range of meditation techniques and methods within the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions.

The renowned American meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, who explored Theravada meditation in Thailand and Myanmar for several years in the late 1960s to early 1970s, included a sojourn of about three months meditating at a Sunlun meditation centre in Yangon in the 1970s. He included the Sunlun technique among his survey of meditation masters first published in 1977. He begins his description of it, starting with posture, as follows.

A suitable posture is to sit with legs crossed. The back should be straight. . . . The right hand should be held in the left hand. This is to facilitate the clenching of the fist as the meditator summons his strength to combat unpleasant sensation which may arise later. Do not mesh the fingers of the hands nor hold them lightly with each thumb against the other. . . . [The meditator should] assume a tight posture where the body provides a firm base, its circuit is closed and [so that] the meditator is alert.

(Kornfield 2007, 106)

Such tight, firm posture is recommended under the Sunlun meditation technique, ensuring the gathering of all of one's resources and hard work. Based on my personal experience with both Sunlun and Theinngu meditation traditions, I would say that the Sunlun technique tends to be more forceful in terms of the posture and the breathing. According to the Theinngu technique, the posture should not be too

tight or too loose. Although the back should be straight, one should not put force or energy into the back to keep it erect because the use of energy could create tension, which in turn restricts the flow of the inhalation and exhalation. However, it should not be too loose because a sluggish posture will not allow the smooth flow of the inhalation and exhalation, and will arouse sleepiness quickly. Both traditions recommend that once the posture has been selected and assumed, it should not be changed or altered in any way. It will have to be kept until the end of the session. Kornfield (2007, 107) writes that Sunlun Sayadaw said, “If cramped don’t move, if itchy don’t scratch, if fatigued don’t rest.” Such guidance was also given by Theinngu Sayadaw (Maung Bho 1987, *hka*). In both the Sunlun and Theinngu meditation traditions, posture is very important for the practice because it can have an impact on the breathing, which is an essential aspect in these meditation techniques.

One should follow a special breathing technique to gain momentum in strong, forceful and rapid breathing. Kornfield describes the Sunlun breathing technique as follows:

Commence by inhaling. It will be noticed that the breath touches the nostril tip or upper lip. Be keenly mindful of the touch of breath. With mindfulness vigilantly maintained, breathe strongly, firmly and rapidly. . . . Breathe in air attentively and fully as though water were being drawn into a syringe. Exhale sharply. Full and hard drawing-in of breath helps to establish concentration rapidly. . . . When these two [i.e. inhalation and exhalation] are balanced, the touch will be continuous. When they are balanced, the meditator will have reached the stage of smooth, effortless, self-compelled rhythmic breathing.

(Kornfield 2007, 107).

For students new to this breathing technique, it will take some practice to be able to breathe correctly. Fatigue may set in at the early stages of strong, forceful and rapid breathing because of either insufficient strength of inhalation or excessive blowing on exhalation. The remedy is to increase the strength of the inhalation. When the inhalation and exhalation strengths are balanced to a high level, not only will the fatigue disappear, but concentration will also be strengthened.

In the Theinngu tradition, the meditator is also instructed to breathe more rapidly, in this case at two or three times the normal rate of breathing. The length and the rate of inhalation and exhalation should be equal, and they should flow smoothly and continuously. It is important not to put undue pressure on the body by tensing the muscles or stiffening the back. Therefore, in contrast to the Sunlun tradition where the posture is prescribed, the meditator is encouraged to choose a comfortable sitting position of their own choice and check the posture carefully before and during every meditation session by scanning the body with the mind. One should be able to hear one's own breathing and the breathing sound should be rhythmic, which helps to overcome fatigue and wards off external noises. The meditator should be keenly mindful of every touch of the breath at the tip of the nostrils without naming 'inhalation' or 'exhalation'. Mindfulness should be rigorously applied to the present moment. A simile of manually sawing a piece of wood has often been used to describe this breathing technique. There is the simile of the saw used in the *Visuddhimagga*, which is taken from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, also applied to how mindfulness is established at the tip of the nostril or on the upper lip by focusing one's attention on the touch of the in-breaths and out-breaths (Ñāṇamoli 1991, 273-275). The simile of the saw used in Theinngu tradition seems to be an adaptation of the saw simile found in the above mentioned texts, showing a continuity within Theravada tradition. The breathing sound, if the breathing is done properly, is similar to the sound of sawing (Candimā 2005, 87-88; Kyaw 2009, 21).²² Therefore, there are some similarities between the breathing technique of the Sunlun tradition and that of Theinngu tradition.

Although the breathing technique is similar, the duration of the strong, forceful and rapid breathing differs. In the Theinngu tradition, the meditator will maintain this breathing throughout the whole two-hour, or sometimes three-hour, session. With the Sunlun technique, the strong, rapid breathing may be stopped after 45 minutes or an hour, and then the sensation should be observed for another 45 or 50 minutes. As we will see below, such a difference in the length of strong,

²² A senior nun, Sayagyi Daw Eka, from the Vijjodaya Theinn Meditation Centre in Pyay normally demonstrates the Theinngu breathing technique during meditation sessions. See <https://www.facebook.com/vizawdayatheinn/videos/1680647638856622/> (accessed on 20/09/2018) for a video recording of the breathing demonstrated by her at a retreat in Singapore.

rapid breathing means that the technique of observing sensations with mindfulness, i.e. *vedanānupassanā*, in these meditation traditions is also different.

In the Sunlun tradition, strong, rapid breathing should be stopped completely on the inhaled breath after about 45 minutes. Then, the practitioner should calm the body down and observe it rigorously. The mind will become aware of whatever sensation happens to be most dominant at this point, and one should be mindful of the awareness of that sensation. When observing the sensation, one should neither reflect “this is body and mind” nor consider “this is impermanence, this suffering, and this non-self” (Kornfield 2007, 109). One needs to know it only as it is. Sunlun Sayadaw said, “If the sensation is weak, know the fact of its weakness. If the sensation is strong, know the fact of its strength” (Kornfield 2007, 109). For him, all thinking, reflection, and consideration are conceptual.

As one has been sitting motionless for about an hour or more, unpleasant bodily sensations will arise, and the intensity of such unpleasant sensations may vary depending on the nature of the practitioner. The Sunlun technique of combating such intense, unpleasant sensations requires strong determination and unflinching energy. As the first step, one should watch the unpleasant sensation with bated breath (Tin Myint 2004, 51; Kornfield 2007, 112). By holding the breath as long as one can easily hold it, one’s attention is increased, enabling one to exercise greater awareness and more rigorous mindfulness to observe the unpleasant sensation. If the unpleasant sensation is too intense for proper attention while holding the breath, the meditator should stiffen her/himself against it (Tin Myint 2004, 51). By physically gathering oneself, one puts forth energy as one would in a physical struggle against a strong opponent. If such physical exertion does not work, then the meditator should directly observe the unpleasant sensation with a strong, firm mind. “With bated breath, tensed body and fortified mind, he [i.e. the meditator] should exert pressure against the pressure of the sensation until he is able to penetrate it, to dwell in it, watch it without thinking any thought connected with it, until finally the sensation is completely consumed or ended” (Kornfield 2007, 113). Thus, the Sunlun technique of observing sensations involves direct contact with the reality of the sensation, and requires great physical and mental strength to persevere when experiencing intense sensations.

While the Sunlun technique involves a direct observation of pleasant or unpleasant sensations, the Theinngu technique is rather indirect because the strong, rapid breathing, which is maintained throughout the session, can be adjusted to develop stronger concentration. The enhanced concentration can then be used as what I call a ‘buffer’ to observe unpleasant sensations. When they become very intense during the sitting, according to Theinngu Sayadaw, the practitioner needs to balance the bodily sensations (*vedanā*) with concentration (*samādhi*) by adjusting the breathing. Maung Bho (1987, *ca*), who practised under the guidance of Theinngu Sayadaw, writes that when a meditator experiences intense *vedanā*, the meditation teacher would guide the meditator to increase the breathing rate up to 100 times per minute from the normal rate of breathing of 17 or 18 times per minute. My understanding of how the faster breathing rate increases concentration (*samādhi*) is that with the faster breathing rate, the touch of breath at the nostrils becomes more noticeable and thus the awareness of the touch of the breath becomes more prominent. From the perspective of physiology, the faster breathing rate increases the inflow of air, increasing the volume of oxygen. This helps the mind to become more focused and alert. The guided meditation provided by a teacher in the Theinngu tradition is crucial to the practice, especially when the practitioner may experience a form of hyperventilation due to the strong, fast breathing. This kind of very fast breathing rate might be counter-indicated for elderly practitioners and practitioners who may have heart disease and asthma. Therefore, Candimā’s (2005, 50) guidance for those people is to breath only slightly faster than the normal rate of breathing and to adjust the breathing rate according to one’s health condition as well as one’s meditation experiences. In addition, meditation teachers in the Theinngu tradition emphasise that practitioners should not get up immediately after a two-hour sitting session because they may still experience the strong, intense bodily sensations, which could lead to dizziness and light-headedness. So, it is important that meditators check their bodily sensations have subsided before they get up from a sitting session.

According to Theinngu Sayadaw, it is crucial to balance *vedanā* with *samādhi* when the practitioner is struggling to deal with unpleasant sensations. Theinngu Sayadaw used the Burmese expression *baung-hkein-thi*, which literally means ‘balancing scales’, to refer to the above technique of adjusting one’s breathing in

accordance with the intensity of *vedanā* one experiences. “If there is an increase in *vedanā* by one unit, the development of *samādhi* must be increased by one unit” (Maung Bho 1987, *ca*). As the intensity of bodily sensations increases, the practitioner may wish to stop the practice, thinking ‘this is not working’, ‘it is painful’, ‘I am feeling dizzy’, etc. This is the time when the practitioner is encouraged to *baung-hkein*, i.e. to adjust their breathing so that *vedanā* is balanced with *samādhi* (Theravada Buddhist 1992, 17). With faster breathing and stronger *samādhi*, the practitioner comes to realise that the nature of the mind is such that it wants to run away from unpleasant sensations. The mind thus returns to the awareness of the touch of the breath at the nostril because the main meditation object, i.e. the in-breath and out-breath, is pleasant (*sukha*). However, the intensity of bodily sensations continues to increase, and the increased intensity of bodily sensations attracts the attention. The mind thus goes to the increasingly painful sensations. In this manner, the practitioner comes to understand that the mind goes back and forth naturally between painful bodily sensations (*dukkha-vedanā*) and pleasant sensations at the nostril (*sukha-vedanā*) (Paññājota 2002, 168). The image encapsulated in the expression *baung-hkein* is that of a pair of balance scales, which consists of a pivoted horizontal lever with a beam of equal length and a weighing pan suspended from each side. One increases or decreases things on the pair of balance scales in order to balance them. Like balancing the scales, the meditator adjusts the breathing rate so that *vedanā* and *samādhi* are balanced and harmonious. When the meditator has established harmony between *vedanā* and *samādhi*, they have also achieved mental equilibrium, which is referred to in Burmese as *baung-hkein-kite-thi*.

Mental equilibrium can be used to investigate the behaviour of the mind with regards to *vedanā* as follows. Once the practitioner has achieved mental equilibrium, the mind turns inward, clearly comprehending that the bodily and mental processes, such as the breathing, and the unpleasant bodily sensations and mental feelings (*vedanā*), happen naturally. In other words, one is able to distance oneself from these processes, observing each process in an impersonalised manner. Ven. Candimā, the abbot of Theinngu No. 32 Meditation Centre, often says that it is like watching a puppet show.²³ The spectator watches each character on the stage

²³ Personal communication with Aunglan Sayadaw Ven. Candimā on 05/09/2008.

playing their own role, but does not become entangled with the strings, staying separate and enjoying the show. Similarly, while the practitioner experiences the in-breath and out-breath, and a wide range of bodily sensations as well as their associated mental feelings such as happiness, frustration etc., they are no longer tangled and bound up with all those *vedanā*. Knowing and experiencing clearly how each component of the body and the mind functions, the practitioner no longer labels ‘my body is in pain’, ‘my legs are numb’, or ‘this is painful’, etc. We could consider the attainment of this mental equilibrium, i.e. the state of *baung-hkein-kite*, as an achievement of equanimity (*upekkha*) with regards to *vedanā* because the mind of the practitioner is neither pulled by pleasant sensation (*sukha-vedanā*) nor repelled by unpleasant sensation (*dukkha-vedanā*). According to Theinngu Sayadaw, wisdom (*paññā*) has arisen at the state of mental equilibrium, so that the practitioner has come “to see the true nature of the body and the mind” and “is merely aware of *vedanā* as *vedanā*” (Paññājota 2003, 172).

In the Sunlun meditation method, both new and old students are instructed to use a combination of mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) and mindfulness of sensation (*vedanānupassanā*) from the initial stages of their meditation practice until they have gained the final stage of the path, i.e. *arahantship* (Vara 2010). In the Theinngu method, while new practitioners are instructed to begin the practice with mindfulness of breath and of sensation, Theinngu Sayadaw and his successors often instruct advanced practitioners to use a combination of various meditation objects (*kammaṭṭhāna*) depending on their personal traits and experiences. Theinngu Sayadaw said, “With one type of medicine, you cannot be a doctor. For an elephant, [you have to] feed sugar cane. For a tiger, [you have to] feed meat” (Kyaw 2009, 21). Some of the meditation objects given to meditators include contemplation of: (1) the breath (*ānāpāna*), (2) the sensation/feeling (*vedanā*), (3) consciousness (*citta*), (4) the impure nature of the body (*asubha*), (5) the thirty-two parts of the body, and (6) the four great elements (*mahābhūta*). These meditation objects correspond with some of the 40 meditation objects (*kammaṭṭhāna*) listed in the *Samādhi* section of the *Visuddhimagga* (see Kim, and Skilton in this volume). Theinngu Sayadaw explained that his meditation path is based on *samatha* meditation and that it was through

“*yok-ka-ma-htàn*” (*rūpa-kammaṭṭhāna* in Pāli) (Ukkatṭha 1963, 0:20-0:25).²⁴ While Theinngu Sayadaw did not explicate what the *yok-ka-ma-htàn* refers to, he emphasised the *asubha* meditation and the meditation on the *rūpa-kalāpas* in his own practice (see above). Therefore, we can reasonably suggest that the *yok-ka-ma-htàn* refers to the meditation practices on the *asubha* nature of the body and the *rūpa-kalāpas*. The meditation practices taught in the Theinngu meditation tradition are linked with those associated with *samatha* in the *Visuddhimagga*, but they lead to insight outcomes traditionally associated with *vipassanā* methods (see Skilton in this volume). It seems to me that part of the debate about whether these meditation practices are *samatha* or *vipassanā* comes from the fact that the terms *samatha* and *vipassanā* are being used both to account for methods and for outcomes. As we shall see below, the lack of clarity regarding the use of these terms leads to the debates among Burmese practitioners on Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation system.

One of the distinctive features of the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions is that almost all of their meditation centres offer guided meditation sessions at which the teachers provide on the spot guidance to suit the meditators’ experience at that particular time. According to Ven. U Sīridhamma, the Abbot of Vijjodaya Theinn Meditation Centre in Pyay and a meditation master who practised with Theinngu Sayadaw, well-trained meditation teachers are able to give such close supervision because they have experienced these meditative stages and thus are able to relate to others’ experiences.²⁵

In sum, the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions employ a similar approach by using strong, forceful and rapid breathing to establish concentration and mindfulness. These mental qualities are then used to practise mindfulness of bodily sensations and mental feelings. Nevertheless, there are some differences in the breathing techniques and the method of observing sensations which I shall now highlight.

A Comparison of Sunlun and Theinngu Methods, contrasted with modern Mindfulness

²⁴ See Skilton in this volume for how the *rūpa-kammaṭṭhāna* is understood within the meditation tradition at Wat Ratchasittharam in Bangkok.

²⁵ Personal communication with Vijjodaya Sayadaw on 08/10/2011.

We have examined the ways in which both meditation masters employed rapid, strong and rhythmic breathing as their starting point, and how they combined it with the contemplation of bodily sensations and mental feelings, and the variety of meditation techniques developed by them and taught in their meditation traditions. We have also explored in detail how Theinngu Sayadaw engaged with different meditation subjects such as the breath, and bodily sensations and mental feelings (*vedanā*), and the impure aspects of the decomposing body (*asubha*) as well as how his understanding of body and mind was transformed through his practice, corresponding to stages of insight that he experienced.

Sunlun Sayadaw's method emphasises three elements, i.e. the touch of the breath, the sense-consciousness of the breath, and mindfulness (*sati*). In the Sunlun tradition, the practitioner should (1) be rigorously mindful of the touch of the breath and (2) guard and watch the sense-consciousness of the breath with mindfulness. This meditation method employs the broader functions of *sati* in the practice, rather than just being non-judgementally mindful of the present moment, the definition often used in modern Mindfulness literature. *Sati* in the Sunlun method can be considered as a general mental quality that the practitioner tries to develop as well as to use in their practice. For instance, the Sunlun method requires the practitioner to make continuous observation of the meditation object, i.e. the touch of the breath, and to stay with it, which would lead the mind of the practitioner with *sati* to become steady with a minimum of distraction or no 'bobbing about.' A successful practitioner would then be able to use *sati* to engage with the object of awareness such as the breath or bodily sensations. Moreover, the practitioner in the Sunlun tradition is asked to guard and watch the mind with *sati* in a sustained manner, highlighting the rather active, instrumental nature of *sati*.

In terms of how to deal with intense, unpleasant bodily sensations, the Sunlun method requires the practitioner to assess the level of pain or unpleasantness and to respond to the bodily sensations accordingly with bated breath or tensed body or fortified mind. In the Theinngu tradition, the practitioner also needs to assess the level of pain and to adjust the breathing rate accordingly. There are a couple of differences between the Sunlun way of dealing with unpleasant bodily sensations and that of Theinngu. Firstly, the Sunlun method involves direct observation of the sensations and thus direct contact with the

sensations themselves, which requires great physical and mental strength to persevere when experiencing intense sensations. The Theinngu method involves an indirect way of observing the sensations: one should increase the rate of the breathing, which would in turn enhance one's concentration (*samādhi*); stronger, more established concentration (*samādhi*) could be used to observe the sensations. Secondly, the Sunlun method places more emphasis on the function of *sati* in dealing with the unpleasant sensations. For instance, when experiencing intense sensations the practitioner is encouraged to use *sati* to observe and stay with them (Vara 2010, 27-28). As we have seen above, *samādhi* not only has an important function in dealing with unpleasant sensations in the Theinngu method, but also was a key part of Theinngu Sayadaw's practice. The meditation practice in these contexts is more than a non-judgemental, present-centred kind of observation. It is active, engaging with meditation experience in ways that lead to a progression of specifically Buddhist insights about the nature of reality.

Authority, Validation and Challenge

In this section, I want to look at the issue of authority, how the experiences and practices of both masters underwent different forms of authorisation and how this relates to private, public and state practice in Myanmar. As we shall see below, the context provides striking contrasts with the development and promulgation of Mindfulness in the West. Such authorisation in Myanmar comes in two forms: internal authority which convinces the founder and practitioners and—as a system becomes more popular and gains wider attention—external scrutiny and authorisation. Both are important to the growth and survival of meditation traditions within Myanmar. Although there is considerable variety within Burmese meditation practice, that variety—once it has gained a degree of popularity—must be verified against a common set of criteria.

We can look to the hagiographical literature for internal authority, i.e. the ways in which the meditation masters themselves and their followers embed in their narratives episodes that specifically establish the validity of the masters' teachings and experience. Drawing on Houtman's analysis of the place of monk hagiography in the context of Burmese biographical literature and my own reading

of the biographies of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw, I would suggest that the functions of ‘monk biography’ in Burmese Buddhism are manifold: (1) to invoke the reader’s or listener’s, faith in (*saddhā*) and reverence towards both the biographical subject and the Buddha’s religion (*sāsana*); (2) to establish the authenticity and legitimacy of the biographical subject as a sacred being with historical continuity back to the lineage of the Buddhas (see below); and (3) to educate the reader about the subject’s quality of sacredness, including the ‘practice’ or ‘training’ (*kyín-sin* in Burmese) as well as the meditative attainments.²⁶

In these sources, the internal verification initially comes in two ways. One type of verification is through the accounts of the gods’ affirmation and support and through affirming visions. These all reference traditional Buddhist understandings of such subjects as cosmology, the life-story of the Buddha himself and the relationship of the historical Buddha of our era to previous Buddhas. Another is through the correlation between stages of meditation and stages of spiritual attainment, confirmed through decisions in the master’s life, specifically the decision to take ordination, a necessary step for someone on the brink of *arahantship* who wishes to continue to live. Sirimane (2016), combining a textual approach with field research in contemporary Sri Lanka, explicates how meditative experiences of a noble person (*ariya-puggala*) and their supramundane attainments can be evaluated against the discourses from the first four *Nikāyas* of the Pāli canon. She also provides textual evidence that it is possible for lay people to attain stream-entry and continue in lay life until at least the stage of non-returner (*anāgāmi*) (ibid, 164-167). It was the Sayadaws themselves who laid claim to the attainment of different stages of the path. Such claims by monks themselves of having achieved the state of *arahantship* are unusual. They are exceptions to the rule (Houtman 1990, 283) and somewhat risky, since to make false claims of such attainments is to break the fourth *pārājika*, the four rules on breaking which a monk is no longer a monk, but can be forced to leave the Sangha. It is not completely clear to me from the available sources when or why they started to make claims of having achieved these attainments. Perhaps their unconventional method of breathing—i.e. the strong, fast, rhythmic breathing—and their lack of formal monastic education might have prompted the monastic and lay literati to test their meditation achievements, which

²⁶ See Houtman (1990, 326-337) for a detailed analysis of the place of monk hagiography in the context of Burmese biography.

in turn might have encouraged them to make public claims. In contrast to these accounts given by practitioners in the modern period, there is a common perception in Theravada—based on the narratives about the decline and disappearance of the Buddha’s *sāsana* found in the post-canonical texts and in the later Southeast Asian Buddhist literature such as the commentary on the *Anāgatavaṃsa*, ‘The Chronicle of the Future’, a text that circulated widely throughout the Theravada world in Pāli and vernacular recensions—that awakening is no longer possible in this corrupt age.

The life-stories address the issue of external legitimacy and authority by including accounts of how Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw, with no prior study and from humble, almost illiterate backgrounds, correctly answered questions on their practice and the attainments of supramundane fruits posed by monastic and lay literati. That these catechisms took place is well recorded. For instance, there are five hours of audio recording of the catechism that took place in 1963 between monks from the Kyauk-thìn-bàw meditation tradition—whose teachings were subjected to a *vinicchaya* case in 1981²⁷—and Theinngu Sayadaw, testing his meditation practice and achievements.²⁸

The question of why the Burmese monastic and lay literati felt it was necessary to test and verify the meditation achievements of these Sayadaws needs further explanation. In Myanmar, specific presentations and interpretations of the *Dhamma* and those of the *Vinaya*, ‘monastic discipline’, made by individual monks and/or laypeople were, and still are, put under microscopic public scrutiny, resulting in decades-long scholarly debates and monastic trial (*vinicchaya*) cases.

The most important and famous of these debates revolves around a text called the *Paramatthadīpanī*, a critique written by Ledi Sayadaw of the Sri Lankan commentaries of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*.²⁹ The c.11th-century *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* is the most authoritative, succinct account of the

²⁷ See Janaka and Crosby (2017, 217-219) for a summary of the *vinicchaya* case on Kyauk-thìn-bàw Sayadaw’s teachings.

²⁸ See Ukkatṭha (1963) for an example of the recording between the monks from Kyauk-thìn-bàw meditation tradition and Theinngu Sayadaw. Based on the available sources on the catechism, we cannot be sure whether or not it was the first Kyauk-thìn-bàw Sayadaw Ven. Kesava (1902-1967) who tested Theinngu Sayadaw. Kyauk-thìn-bàw Sayadaw Ven. Visuddha (1930/31-2003) that Janaka and Crosby (2017, 217) mention in their article was the second abbot of the Kyauk-thìn-bàw Monastery in Kyaukse, which is now known as Nyein-chàn-yà (Peace) Monastery.

²⁹ See Braun (2013, 46-76) for the detailed analysis of these debates. For examples of the burgeoning literature produced by such debate in other areas of Buddhist practice, see Nagasena Bhikkhu (2012, chapter 3).

Abhidhamma in the Theravada literary corpus and the 12th century exposition of its content, the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgahavibhāvinī-ṭīkā* was a mainstay of the Burmese monastic curriculum. This latter text was the primary object of Ledi Sayadaw's critique and while in the West Ledi Sayadaw is primarily known as one of the founding fathers of modern Vipassanā, he is famed in Myanmar also for his brilliance in *Abhidhamma* and for having withstood the widespread attempts to discredit his critique. This history provides some of the background for the process of public criticism of monastic doctrinal claims in Myanmar.

Another significant element is the existence in Myanmar of formal monastic trial cases, known as *vinicchaya*. While these have a long history within the Sangha itself, the form they have taken in modern Myanmar, with state involvement, can be traced to a series of reform measures regarding the Burmese Sangha and Burmese Buddhism introduced by Ne Win's government in the 1980s (Kyaw 2014, 109-110; Janaka and Crosby 2017, 200-205). In such *vinicchaya* cases, both sides, namely the defendant and the prosecutor, employ analytically their textual expertise in the Pāli canonical and commentarial literature in order to provide textual evidence in support of their respective arguments and views (Kyaw 2015, 418). Eleven of the seventeen trial cases that took place at national level between 1981 and 2011 concerned the authenticity and orthodoxy of teachings on meditation (Janaka and Crosby 2017). In these eleven cases, the Burmese Sangha authority judged that elements of the teachings and meditation practices, which were taught by the meditation teachers involved, were 'false doctrine' (*adhamma*). With the exception of two, the remaining nine meditation traditions were completely banned from teaching their interpretations of the Dhamma and their meditation practice.

In my research, I came across a copy of a letter dated 17 July 1968, apparently from Ven. Āciṇṇa (1896-1978) of Hkyauk-htat-gyì-hpayàgyì (literal translation: 'The Great Buddha with Six Levels') Monastery in Yangon. This letter says that Theinngu Sayadaw's teachings are no longer restricted by specific rules. Although the letter does not describe what the rules were, it does mention the name of the *vinicchaya* court—*Tha-tha-na Wípúlákari Maha-thein-tàw-gyì Anu-nya-tá wí-neík-tha-yá hkon-yòn*—that imposed the rules. According to this letter, these rules were imposed on 24 February 1966. The copy of this letter revealing that Theinngu

Sayadaw's teachings were subjected to a *vinicchaya* was reprinted in *Deik-hti-pyók Ta-nha-khyók (Removal of Views and Cessation of Craving)* by San Shìn published in 1972. The letter does not indicate the details of the accusations or the nature of the *vinicchaya* court involved in this case.

Given the dates, we know that this *vinicchaya* preceded the seventeen modern cases tried under the system set up under Ne Win. Those modern cases have all been published, but information on previous cases and courts is less easy to come by. Despite the fragmentary nature of information on trial cases prior to the 1980s, I found three pieces of information that might help us to have a better understanding of the *vinicchaya* concerning Theinngu Sayadaw's teachings and of the *vinicchaya* court mentioned in the letter. The first piece of information is this: Maung Maung's *The Buddha Trusted the Sangha*, published in 1981, reports that senior monks agreed to design a set of bills to regulate the Sangha, collectively called *wí-neik-tha-yá-ú-pa-de* in Burmese (*vinicchaya-upadesa* in Pāli), at a meeting in 1945 held at Hpayàgyì (literal translation: 'The Great Buddha') Monastery on Shwe-gone-taing Road in Yangon (132-133). Maung Maung writes that one of the monks involved in designing the bills was the Sayadaw from Hpayàgyì Monastery, though he does not provide the name of the Sayadaw. The second piece of information concerns finding who the Sayadaw from Hpayàgyì Monastery on Shwe-gone-taing Road could be. Based on my recent field research, we can reasonably suggest that it might be Ven. Koṇḍañña (1887-1957), who was the founder and the first abbot of Hpayàgyì Monastery. The Hpayàgyì Monastery is also known in its full name as Hkyauk-htat-gyì-hpayàgyì Monastery because a well-known, big Buddha image called 'The Great Buddha with Six Levels' is located in the compound of the monastery. According to the inscriptions of biographies of the abbots of Hkyauk-htat-gyì-hpayàgyì Monastery, Ven. Koṇḍañña was an officer in charge for the Department for the State Vinicchaya, and he also held a senior position on a working committee for the Sixth Buddhist Council held in 1954-56. The third piece of information provides the link between Ven. Āciṇṇa of Hkyauk-htat-gyì-hpayàgyì Monastery, who signed and sent the letter to Theinngu Sayadaw, and Ven. Koṇḍañña, who was probably involved in drafting the 1945 *vinicchaya* bills. In the set of inscriptions mentioned above, Ven. Āciṇṇa was recorded as the second abbot of Hkyauk-htat-gyì-hpayàgyì Monastery, who succeeded Ven. Koṇḍañña. Therefore, these pieces of information tell us that

the senior monks from the same monastery on Shwe-gone-taing Road might have been members of the prosecution team in the *vinicchaya* cases, and perhaps it might have been where trial cases prior the 1980s took place.³⁰

These *vinicchaya* cases and the praxis of public scrutiny in Myanmar of Buddhist teachings and practices, including meditation practice, could be considered perhaps as expressions of the heightened fear and anxiety among the Burmese Buddhists since the colonial period with regards to the decline and disappearance of the Buddha's religion (*sāsana*) and as continuous attempts to safeguard the Buddha's *sāsana* from what they perceived as threats—real or imagined, internal or external—to the survival of Buddhism in Myanmar.³¹ The trial cases of the Burmese meditation traditions as well as the testing of Sunlun Sayadaw's and Theinngu Sayadaw's practice and attainments paint a complex picture of the relationship between the tradition of learning and the tradition of meditation. In a number of the trial cases, as noted above, the Burmese Sangha authority—drawing on their textual expertise—decided that the interpretations and teachings of the Dhamma made by the meditation teachers concerned were false doctrines and posed dangers to the Buddha's *sāsana*, which led them to ban these meditation traditions. As for the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, experts on the Buddhist scriptures and doctrines confirmed that Sunlun Sayadaw's and Theinngu Sayadaw's attainments and teachings were in accordance with the Pāli literature, resulting in what Robert Sharf (1995, 270) calls a “symbiotic” relationship between monastic and lay literati and meditation masters.

We have seen how authenticity and legitimacy of meditation traditions in Myanmar, including the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, are tested and verified in the public domain involving monastic and lay literati, the practitioners in these traditions, and even gods. How can we understand such a public nature of the authentication of personal meditative experiences? Here, I should like to draw on observations I made and conversations I had with my respondents during fieldwork in Myanmar. My respondents often said that they are motivated to do meditation, and indeed other Buddhist practices such as doing charity (*dāna*) and keeping the

³⁰ The nature and frequency of monastic trial cases prior to the 1980s in Myanmar warrants further research.

³¹ See Carbine (2011), Braun (2013), Kyaw (2014) and Turner (2014) for detailed discussions of how multiple socio-political, religious and cultural factors have contributed to the Burmese Buddhist worldview of a continuous struggle to purify, preserve and propagate the Buddha's *sāsana*.

precepts, in order to deal with ‘worldly conditions’ (*loka-dhamma*), i.e. the vagaries that beset us in everyday life,³² and as a way of preparation for death and rebirth. My respondents also related how they have strong faith (*saddhā*) in certain meditation teachers and/or in a specific meditation approach. These are concerned with the personal qualities that they hope to develop through the Buddhist practices and the ways in which they relate to and understand the Buddhist tradition. In addition, it seems to me that my respondents feel a sense of duty to maintain the Buddha’s *sāsana*,³³ directly by learning Buddhist scriptures—including Abhidhamma—and meditating, or indirectly by supporting the Sangha and Buddhist institutions. This sense of duty and the related religious activities are embedded within the Burmese social structure in the sense that they are done collectively and there is almost always social status associated with such activities. These elements indicate that at least in modern Burmese Buddhism the personal aspects of the Buddhist practices and the meditative experiences are an integral part of public life.

This authorisation through the fire of literati scrutiny, the pervasive engagement with Buddhist doctrine and the defense of the *sāsana* by Burmese lay people as well as monks begs the question of the language used in the sources we have for the lives and teachings of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw. From an outsider’s perspective, two possibilities emerge. The first is that the existing vocabulary within the meditation culture is used to verbalise non-verbal experience, regardless of any variety that may or may not be present between experiences thus similarly verbalised. Sharf (1995, 231) points out that the key technical terms relating to Buddhist praxis such as ‘concentration’ (*samādhi*), ‘mindfulness’ (*sati*), and ‘stream-entry’ (*sotāpatti*) are interpreted phenomenologically to refer to discrete states of consciousness experienced by Buddhist practitioners in the course of their practice, and that the phenomenological approach to meditative experience should be understood in the wider context of social relations (268-270). The second possibility, which may not be entirely divorced from the former, is that the experiences and teachings of these

³² My respondents use a Burmese loanword *law-ka-dan-ta-ya*, referring to the Pāli compound *loka-dhamma*, ‘worldly conditions’. The *Paṭhamalokadhamma-sutta* (AN. 8.5) and the *Dutiyalokadhamma-sutta* (AN. 8.6) deal with the eight worldly conditions, i.e. gain, loss, repute, disrepute, praise, blame, happiness and misery.

³³ The notion of “doing the work of *sāsana*” (Carbine 2011, 3), what is called *tha-tha-na-pyú* in Burmese, has long been an important aspect of the Burmese Buddhist worldview and their Buddhist practices.

masters have had to be couched in such terms to withstand the climate of scrutiny in Myanmar, a degree of scrutiny that would be anathema to the modern Mindfulness movement. Ironically, although the latter emerged from Vipassanā lineages tracing back to Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw Ven. Narada (1869-1954) and Ledi Sayadaw of the late 19th century Burma, it relies precisely on being able to divorce meditation from doctrine in popularising Buddhist-derived meditation practices within secular culture.

From an insider's perspective, the striking use that I have observed here of Abhidhamma terms derived from Pāli and familiar primarily to literati to describe even the finest details of meditation and existential truths experienced by non-literate practitioners, is affirmation of the validity of those practitioners' experience. In other words, since the teachings of the Pāli canon and important commentarial works such as the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* are true and since the experiences and teachings of enlightened teachers must be true, the correlation between the content of the authoritative texts and the teaching of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw is the natural coincidence of truth. It confirms the spiritual status and valid teachings of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw for their respective teachers.

Despite the wide acceptance of Sunlun Sayadaw's and Theinngu Sayadaw's teachings and meditation practice both by their followers and through external testing including through a *vinicchaya* trial, there is an ongoing debate in Myanmar concerning whether or not their meditation methods are appropriate. One criticism is that strong, fast breathing and long hours of sitting sessions are a form of self-affliction (*attakilamathānuyoga*), self-affliction being rejected by the Buddha in narratives of his own spiritual journey. There is also debate about whether or not Theinngu Sayadaw's meditation practice—especially the *asubha* meditation and the emphasis on *samādhī*—is calming meditation (*samatha*), a debate that has drawn intense public interest. The context and nature of these debates as well as the ways in which the practitioners from these two meditation traditions have responded to such debates are beyond the scope of the current article. Nonetheless, I wish to point out how the *samatha-vipassanā* division is understood in Burmese Buddhism, and if and how Theinngu Sayadaw's meditation system differs from such a simple bifurcation. The *Visuddhimagga's* and the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha's* categorisations

of *samatha* and *vipassanā*—i.e. the 40 meditation practices such as the mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*), the *asubha* meditation, the contemplation of the thirty-two parts of the body, etc., and the development of the associated *jhānas* as *samatha* and the contemplation of the *dharmas* in terms of the three characteristics as *vipassanā*—are widely used as a benchmark to contrast between *samatha* and *vipassanā* among the Burmese meditation traditions. The Vipassanā movement since the late 19th century Burma has also led to the popular perception among laypeople in contemporary Myanmar that the practice of *vipassanā*—which emphasises direct practice and experience—is the emblem of Theravada Buddhist meditation. As we have seen above, the Burmese Vipassanā as a system of meditation practice has come to be known in the Western therapeutic context as the Mindfulness movement. In the context of these modern movements the now globalised practices of *vipassanā* and mindfulness are seen as the primary tool for transformation and for attainment of different stages of liberation. Crosby (2013, 14) writes, “Some go so far as to suggest that Vipassanā maintains that *samatha* is completely unnecessary, but *samatha* is used in a restricted fashion by some Vipassanā lineages, e.g. the Goenka system in the Ledi lineage”. For Theinngu Sayadaw, these distinctions are not so marked: practices using topics, such as breathing and *asubha*, traditionally classified as *samatha* nonetheless lead to liberating insight, and thus bridge or over-ride the rigid *samatha-vipassanā* divide found elsewhere in Burmese Buddhism (see Skilton in this volume). The common expectation of such a divide seems to lie behind a criticism of Theinngu Sayadaw reported by Òhn Khin (1970, 188). According to Òhn Khin, a learned monk from Nyaung-dòn, 70 km northwest of Yangon, criticised the breathing and the *asubha* meditations taught by Theinngu Sayadaw as *samatha* meditation and that Theinngu Sayadaw’s teachings go against the Buddha’s Dhamma. From an outsider’s perspective, the rationale behind the criticism is not clear because the use of the breathing and *asubha* meditations is well attested in the canonical texts such as the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* (MN 118) and the *Sañña-sutta* (AN 7.46) and the commentarial literature. From an insider’s perspective, two possible reasons emerged. Firstly, for Burmese Buddhists, the meditation practices associated with *samatha* are often done for power and protection, such as those found in the *weikza* practices.³⁴ These *samatha* practices are often treated with

³⁴ See Brac de la Perrière et. al. (2014) on the *wiekza* practices and cults in contemporary Myanmar.

suspicion, and have attracted public criticisms that such practices are for worldly powers, which goes against the Buddha's teaching, though there is a distinction within the *weikza* tradition between an emphasis on mundane and supramundane goals (Rozenberg, 2010, 53, cited in Crosby 2014, 159). Secondly, the meditation practices associated with *samatha* are judged against the highly validated *vipassanā* practices of the modern Vipassanā movement. Since the modern practices of *vipassanā* and mindfulness are regarded as the main, for some the only, path to achievement stages of liberation, it seems to me that any meditation system which is outside of, or at the margin of, the Vipassanā movement comes under fire.

As a final comment, I wish to highlight a couple of recent changes in terms of the growth of the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions within Myanmar and abroad. As we have seen above, the number of meditation centres in the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions was originally much lower than that of the Mahasi or Mogok traditions. Nonetheless, the congregations of certain Theinngu meditation centres such as Theinngu No. 32 Meditation Centre in Aunglan and Vijjodaya Theinn Meditation Centre in Pyay have been growing steadily over the past 15 years, drawing support from local communities as well as from successful business people across the country. Since 2013, their outreach has grown beyond Myanmar, attracting meditation practitioners from Burmese immigrant communities in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Australia, and western practitioners from the UK. The accessibility of the internet and the popularity of Facebook in Myanmar in recent years have contributed to the current global growth of these Theinngu meditation centres. However, the outreach of the Theinngu tradition to western practitioners is still limited. A contributing factor is that virtually nothing had been published in English on Theinngu Sayadaw's life and practice or on the Theinngu meditation methods. One of the aims of this article, therefore, is to fill this gap, a gap not only in scholarship but also in practitioner literature outside of Myanmar.

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